

ISABELLE GRACE

A Summer
Changes
Everything

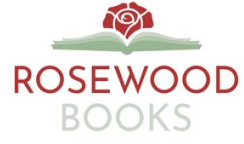
A
Hickory Ridge
Novel



A SUMMER CHANGES EVERYTHING

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ISABELLE GRACE



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CONTENTS

[Rosewood Books](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Rosewood Newsletter](#)

[We hope you enjoyed this book](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also By Isabelle Grace](#)

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*For everyone who's been given a second chance at love, this
one's for you.*

PROLOGUE

Contrary to popular belief, Reese Blackwood did *not* need a keeper.

Especially not one his mother lined up on his behalf. A woman he couldn't remember ever meeting and knew next to nothing about.

Okay. He did know her name—Shelby Corbett. He was also aware she was the niece of his father's secretary, Wanda Landry, who was also one of his mother's dearest friends. Oh, and she taught school, so she had the entire summer free.

A ringing endorsement for someone to take care of his two motherless little boys if he ever heard one.

Her limited qualifications didn't appear to concern his mother, however. Instead, Anna Blackwood was willing to forego the much-needed and well-deserved vacation she and his grandmother had been planning for months unless Reese agreed to allow Wanda's niece to look after the boys, and him by extension, in her absence.

Seemed his mother was more comfortable entrusting her grandsons' care to a virtual stranger than their own father.

Didn't say much for her confidence in his parental abilities, huh?

Granted, Reese hadn't exactly been in the running for father of the year since his wife died fourteen months ago. Not even close. That didn't mean he was incapable. Or didn't give a damn. Only that he sought the best for Alex and Zach.

And after losing Olivia, *his* best left a whole hell of a lot to be desired.

Once his mother stepped in to assume primary care of the boys, Reese found it much easier to slide further into the background of his children's lives by throwing himself into the never-ending and often grueling manual labor of running his family's thousand-acre horse and cattle farm.

Not that Reese didn't spend time with Alex and Zach. He did. But trying to eat at least one meal a day with his sons and attending as many school functions as possible was hardly enough. Particularly when he continued to rely on his mother more than he should to ensure his boys were fed, clothed, sent to school, and put to bed at a decent hour every day.

Reese had already decided he needed to make some changes. So, he planned to take advantage of his parents' and grandparents' long-overdue vacation by adjusting his work schedule to be more present as a father. Ultimately, Alex and Zach *were* his responsibility, and though everything ran like a well-oiled machine with his mother in charge, Reese realized the time had come to step up his game and manage his sons' care himself.

"We don't need anyone to come here and watch over us while you're away," Reese insisted for what felt like the millionth time in the last week. "We'll be fine."

The arch of his mother's infamous left eyebrow revealed how unconvinced she was. Reese couldn't count the number of times he and his three brothers had been on the receiving end of *the look*, as they aptly referred to their mother's silent conveyance she didn't believe a word coming out of their mouths.

Truth be told, she had an arsenal of facial expressions that spoke volumes. While some of her *looks* could be downright blistering, most were full of love and adoration for all four of her sons and three grandchildren.

At the moment, however, her *look* screamed pure doubt. "What time did you finally come in last night?"

Okay. She had him there. But with planting crops and repairing winter's damage, spring and summer added to the daily chores on a working farm. "I plan to adjust my schedule to come in earlier," Reese replied without answering her question.

"So, who'll be watching Alex and Zach when you are working?" she countered, her brow arched higher on her forehead. "And what will you feed them? Whatever you can pop in the microwave or have delivered? Face it, Reese, you're not exactly a culinary genius."

Ouch. Guess she wasn't pulling any punches today. Not that she ever did. "Nobody'll starve. We'll get by just fine."

"But you don't have to just *get by*. Shelby's already agreed to come help with Alex and Zach."

Yeah. But why? Reese didn't understand why this woman would agree to spend her summer with virtual strangers. Or why his mother was so hellbent on it.

When his parents and grandparents started planning their vacation, their foreman's sister was initially scheduled to come and help with the boys during her annual visit with her brother. Only that arrangement fell apart two weeks ago when Reba took a nasty fall and broke her leg in three places. Traveling was out, and even if Reba made the trip from San Antonio to Hickory Ridge, there was no way she could care for two young boys with more energy than any ten should possess.

His mother folded her arms across her chest. "Alex and Zach need supervision, Reese. They shouldn't spend their entire summer trailing behind you on the farm, either. Eventually, the novelty will wear off. They'll get bored. And when that happens, Lord knows what kind of havoc they'll wreak."

Wasn't that the truth? Only yesterday, they'd decided to find out if cats really did always land on their feet. After rounding up several barn cats, they took them to one of the uppermost haymows and were about to toss the first one out the sliding doors when their grandfather caught them.

And that incident happened when Reese was mucking out stalls in the stable less than a hundred feet away.

Despite keeping the boys within his sight, there was still no telling what trouble they'd find. He couldn't monitor them every second of the day and still get all his work done. Plus, keeping them safe was paramount with all the space, equipment, and animals on the farm.

"Hope and Tess offered to help." Maybe the mention of his sisters-in-law would convince his mother they'd be fine while she was away.

"Hope just had a baby, Reese. The last thing she needs to worry about is running roughshod over two rambunctious boys all summer," she replied referring to his brother Drew's wife and their newborn daughter, Samantha. "And Tess is up to her eyeballs with weddings to photograph before she leaves with Jack on his next book tour in July."

Well, hell.

"Okay. So, maybe having someone around during the day while I'm working *is* necessary. But no one needs to actually live here."

Her infamous brow arched again. "And what happens when the cattle get out in the middle of the night? Or rain is in the forecast, and you still have three fields of alfalfa to bale beforehand?"

Dammit. She had a point.

Again.

Though Reese could take the boys out with him in the evenings, if he got called out in the night, waking them up to drag them along made little sense considering they'd likely be more hindrance than help.

Sighing, Reese plowed his fingers through his hair. "If I don't agree to this, you're gonna refuse to go on your vacation, aren't you?"

"Yep."

He knew his mother would rather cut out her tongue than admit how desperately she needed this vacation. Though she rarely complained, taking care of a five- and a seven-year-old day after day was exhausting work. And counting the time she stepped in when Olivia became too ill to manage the boys alone, Anna had been the primary caretaker of her grandsons for nearly two years.

If that weren't reason enough to prioritize this vacation, his father's heart attack and subsequent quadruple bypass a little over two months ago certainly was. The myocardial infarction had been sudden, with no warning signs. Well, none, as everyone learned later, Eli felt compelled to share with his wife and sons.

A family lawyer, Eli Blackwood also enjoyed working on the farm. When Reese could barely put one foot in front of the other in his grief-stricken state, he'd relied heavily on his father's assistance to keep the horse and cattle operation running effectively.

With all the sacrifices his parents and grandparents had made and continued to make on his and the boys' behalf, Reese needed to do whatever possible not to derail their vacation plans. Even if that meant accepting assistance he didn't believe necessary from Wanda Landry's niece.

Or any other stranger, for that matter.

Besides, their flight departed in less than a week.

Reluctantly, Reese threw his hands up in surrender. "Okay, Mama. You win."

A smile instantly replaced the steely determination in her coffee-brown eyes. "I knew you'd see reason."

Like she'd given him any other choice. "I still firmly believe we'd be fine on our own." He didn't add that his concession stemmed more from guilt than reason.

"Of course you do." She patted his cheek. "But I wouldn't have a minute's peace worrying about what was happening here in my absence."

"You worry too much."

“It’s the job of mothers and grandmothers the world over.”
She refilled her coffee.

“I *should* be offended, you know.”

She eyed him over the mug’s rim. “Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because you obviously deem me incapable of assuming full responsibility for the care of my own children.”

“I’ve been blessed with three beautiful grandchildren, Reese. Since I have no doubt Hope will take excellent care of my granddaughter while I’m away, I also want to ensure both my grandsons will still be in one piece when I return.”

“That’s a bit overdramatic, don’t you think?”

She simply shrugged as if to say, *it is what it is*.

“Even sexist.”

“After living over half my life with a husband and four sons, I’d say I’m more of a realist than a sexist.” She arched her infamous brow again. “Wouldn’t you?”

When she put it that way? Yeah.

Dammit.

Still, Reese was convinced he could do better than he’d been doing. Since he doubted Shelby Corbett had agreed to a twenty-four seven commitment for the next six weeks, he would definitely adjust his and his farmhands’ schedule, allowing himself extra time to assume more responsibility for the boys’ care, thus providing Shelby time to herself.

Considering Alex and Zach’s endless energy supply, she’d appreciate any extra minutes in the day to rest, rejuvenate, and recharge.

“I realize I need to make some changes, Mama.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “By the time you come home, you might just be in for a surprise.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” she assured him with a gleam in her eyes that Reese found oddly unsettling.

CHAPTER ONE

“I can’t thank you enough for agreeing to do this, Shelby.”

Following Anna across the large yet inviting family room with its spectacular view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Shelby Corbett immediately felt at home. “I’m glad it worked out that I could help, Mrs. Blackwood.”

And she was. Helping others whenever, wherever, and however possible was important to Shelby. Had been since she was old enough to assist her mother with all the charitable events the Ladies of Bishop Creek back home in North Carolina sponsored. The same ladies who were the first to arrive on their doorstep when the news her father had been shot in the line of duty were delivered to them.

Shelby had been twelve. And their outpouring of love in so many ways had made quite an impression on her.

So, once her aunt explained the situation regarding widowed Reese Blackwood, his two motherless little boys, and how much Eli and Anna desperately needed this time away, Shelby couldn’t refuse.

Besides, as an elementary physical education teacher for the last ten years, how difficult could taking care of a five- and a seven-year-old for the summer be?

“Sarah, you remember Wanda’s niece, Shelby, don’t you?” Anna asked her mother-in-law.

With a warm smile, Sarah Blackwood nodded. “Of course.” She stepped forward and took Shelby’s hand. “As Anna said, we can’t begin to thank you enough. I don’t know

about our husbands, but Anna and I are really looking forward to this trip.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” Shelby replied. “I’m green with envy myself.”

According to Aunt Wanda, the trip was a chance-of-a-lifetime three-in-one, beginning with a four-week sightseeing package through the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France. When they reached Italy, they’d board a ship for a ten-day Mediterranean cruise. And after that, their trip would conclude touring Monaco, Spain, and Portugal.

“Let me show you around and get you acclimated to things before Reese and the boys return. It’ll be easier and much quieter that way.”

For the next thirty minutes, Anna gave Shelby a tour of the sprawling two-story farmhouse with its up-to-the-minute amenities and lived-in and homey feel. They were on the second floor before Anna mentioned her eldest son again. “Reese and the boys moved back here after my daughter-in-law passed. At first, Reese was too overwhelmed to handle Olivia’s death, his sons, and the farm on his own. Now, having them living here makes everything more convenient for all of us. But whenever Reese is ready to return to their home, we’ll figure out a way to make it work.”

Aunt Wanda had shared the story about Reese losing his wife to cancer a little over a year ago. They’d been together ten years and married for eight. The boys had only been four and six at the time. Shelby’s heart ached for all three of them.

“They’re lucky to have you,” she managed to reply.

Anna smiled, the gesture lighting her brown eyes. “Yeah. But that makes me feel even more guilty for leaving their stinking butts behind,” she confessed and led the way into a blush-colored bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall. “This will be your room.” She placed her hand on Shelby’s arm. “And listen to me when I tell you to take full advantage of any quiet and privacy whenever you can. Though I love my grandsons with all my heart, they can and will wear a body out fast.”

Shelby stepped into the sizeable room with its gleaming hardwood floors and queen-sized four-poster bed draped with a handmade pink, white, and rose quilt. A mirrored oak dresser, tall chest of drawers, and a bubblegum-pink velvet chaise completed the furnishings. In addition to the two windows deep enough for cushioned seats, there was a sizeable closet and full adjoining bath.

Everything was absolutely beautiful.

“When Reese gets here with the boys, I’ll have them bring your things up,” Anna promised as she led the way across the hall to a sky-blue room with twin captain’s beds and enough toys stashed on the shelves, stuffed in bins, and littered across the planked wooden floor to open a toy store.

“As you can see, this is Alex and Zach’s room. And I’m sorry to say, they got out of here this morning before I saw how big a mess it’s in.” Anna shook her dark head. “Don’t be afraid to make them toe the line, Shelby. They know what’s expected around here, and in case they try to pull the wool over your eyes, I’ve made you a detailed list downstairs.”

Obviously, this was not Anna Blackwood’s first rodeo.

Smiling, Shelby followed Anna through the Jack and Jill bathroom connecting the boys’ room with what Shelby assumed was their father’s. Nondescript, the space contained a king-sized bed covered with a black, gray, and white comforter, a pine dresser topped with a flat-screen TV, an old armchair, and an antique bureau. Nothing personalized—no photographs or books. Nothing to make the area stand out as belonging to one person over another.

The barren bedroom instantly tugged on Shelby’s heartstrings.

Back downstairs, Anna showed Shelby the remainder of the first floor. “Most of the emergency numbers and cell phones for all my boys are posted on the fridge. If you can’t find Reese, go down the list—Drew, Jack, Holden, Tess, Hope.”

Anna turned a full circle in the middle of the kitchen, her dark eyes narrowing as she tried to ensure she didn't forget anything. "I should have written down everything I wanted to be sure to tell you," she murmured, tapping her index finger against her lips. "Do you have any questions?"

"Are the boys allergic to anything? Or take any medications?"

"Only seasonal allergies." Anna pointed to a cabinet in the corner. "There's some children's Benadryl in there as well as other pain relievers and such, should you need anything. There's also a first-aid kit in the bathroom off the mudroom."

Reaching into a drawer, Anna pulled out a file. "Here's a charge card for you to use for food, supplies, and *anything* you and the boys might need. It's in the farm's name, and I've added you as a user, so you should be good to go. Everything else in here is informational stuff—whom to call if something breaks or stops working, doctors, insurance cards. Things like that."

"I think you've got it covered," Sarah assured Anna. "Don't you, Shelby?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure we'll be perfectly fine."

Just then, the screen door off the mudroom squeaked open. "Gram!" a voice hollered about a split-second before the door slapped shut. "Is she here yet?"

"Yeah, is she here yet?" another voice repeated as two dark-haired boys sprinted into the kitchen and skidded to a halt on the charcoal slate floor.

Instinctively, Anna curved her hands around the small shoulders of each grandson. "Yes, boys, she's here. But let's try not to scare her off in the first five minutes."

The taller of the two stepped forward. "I'm Alex," he introduced himself and held out a dirt-covered, slightly sticky hand.

"Good to meet you, Alex. I'm Shelby." Without hesitation, she smiled as they shook. He was as cute as could be with his tousled black hair and bright blue eyes that peered at her

through a face smeared with dirt, sweat, and heaven only knew what else.

Removing his hand, Alex hooked his thumb toward his brother. “This is—”

“I can tell her who I am myself,” the younger boy insisted, moving toward her. He was a smaller version of Alex, except his hair was a tad longer, and his face not quite as smudged. His eyes, however, were just as blue, and his dark lashes as long and thick. “I’m Zach,” he made his introduction, but before he extended his hand to her, he spit on his palm and rubbed it on his grass-stained jeans.

“Zachary David!” Anna admonished her grandson, clearly mortified.

Half in love with him already, Shelby couldn’t help but smile as she took Zach’s outstretched hand, spit and all. “Pleased to meet you, Zach. I’m—”

“Shelby,” he finished for her, cocking his head to the side. “Do you know how to make mac and cheese?”

“I sure do.”

“Awesome. ‘Cuz it’s my favorite.”

Shelby squatted to his level. “Then we already have something in common, because I’m rather partial to mac and cheese myself,” she admitted with a conspirator’s wink.

“My favorite is grilled cheese,” Alex piped up, not about to be left out, especially by his little brother.

“You’re kidding!” She widened her eyes and pointed to the center of her chest. “I love grilled cheese, too.”

Before any more questions could be asked and answered about their favorite food choices, a much taller, much larger version of Alex and Zach entered the kitchen. He removed his sweat-stained John Deere hat and raked his long, sun-browned fingers through his shaggy dark hair.

Oh. My. Goodness!

That was the only coherent thought Shelby could muster at the sight of Reese Blackwood. And what a sight he was to behold. Tall, with mile-wide shoulders, well-defined muscles everywhere she could see, and piercing lake-blue eyes that matched those of his sons to perfection.

“Reese, this is Shelby Corbett, Wanda Landry’s niece,” Anna began the introductions.

“That’s our dad,” Zach needlessly informed her.

“She knows *that*, doofus.” Alex rolled his eyes at his brother.

“Shut up, you ignoramus.”

“Stop,” Anna reprimanded them firmly and squeezed their shoulders to emphasize she meant business.

Shelby took a step forward and extended her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Blackwood.” She thanked the Lord her voice didn’t sound as breathless as she felt.

When his big work-roughened hand swallowed her smaller, paler one, a jolt of something akin to an electrical shock zipped up her arm. “Likewise.” His voice was low and deep. “And please call me Reese.”

Before she passed out from lack of oxygen, Shelby drew in a deep breath and nodded. “I’m Shelby.” *Well, of course you are, genius. His mother’s just introduced you by name. Jeesh.*

“I’ve given Shelby a tour of the house and shown her where everything is. Now that she’s met you and the boys, I guess that’s about it unless you have something you want to add or questions you want to ask her.”

“I’m sure we’ll figure things out,” Reese answered, his tone clipped, which gave Shelby the distinct impression he wasn’t thrilled about having her here.

Or anyone, for that matter.

“She’ll need help bringing her things in from the car. Boys, help your daddy,” Anna directed her grandsons. “I’ve put her in the guest room.”

“The pink one?” Zach asked, his nose crinkled in obvious distaste for the color.

Anna nodded. “Yes, the pink one.”

As everyone traipsed out to Shelby’s silver SUV, she opened the back hatch where she’d stowed two rolling suitcases, a backpack, a computer satchel, and one black garment bag. “I probably over-packed,” she said by way of apology to Reese.

If he considered the amount of luggage and paraphernalia she’d brought with her excessive, Reese didn’t comment. Nor did his facial features provide any insight to Shelby on the matter. Instead, he silently handed the boys the lighter bags and yanked out the two larger suitcases to carry himself.

“I can get the rest.” Shelby reached for the backpack and garment bag before pulling the hatch shut and following them toward the porch.

When she opened the squeaking screen door, Alex met her in the mudroom. “I’ll take those up for ya.”

With a smile, Shelby thanked him and relinquished the bags into his care. “So, are you having second thoughts yet?” Anna asked as soon as her grandson was out of earshot.

Shelby shook her head and widened her smile. “No, ma’am. I’m looking forward to it. I have a feeling your grandsons are gonna keep me quite busy having lots of fun this summer.”

“Well, you’re bound to be busy; no doubt about that,” Eli Blackwood, the grandfather of said boys, declared as he strolled into the kitchen, followed by a gigantic animal that looked more wolf-like than canine. Without pause, the sleek gray dog walked over to Shelby, gave her a few sniffs, and then looked up at her expectantly. “That’s Sadie.”

Reaching out, Shelby held her hand in front of Sadie’s nose before running her fingers along the top of her soft head. “Aren’t you a beauty,” she crooned.

“Hope you don’t mind having dogs around.”

“Not at all.” Shelby rubbed the sweet spot behind Sadie’s ears and earned a satisfied whimper of approval.

“She’s no trouble. In fact, most of the time, she just wanders around the farm. Kind of overseeing everything.”

Leaning down, Shelby rubbed her nose against Sadie’s. “So, you’re the one in charge around here, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Eli confirmed with a chuckle before turning to his wife. “So, Miss Anna, are you satisfied?”

Anna looked around the room and took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

From behind, Eli wrapped his arms around Anna’s waist and nuzzled her cheek. “Everything’s gonna be fine,” he assured her. His blue eyes, identical to Reese’s and his grandsons’, rose to meet with Shelby’s. “Tell her, Shelby. You’ve got everything under control.”

Shelby didn’t know if she’d go that far, but she was confident she could do enough to ensure Anna needn’t worry while on vacation. “I’ll take good care of your boys for you, Mrs. Blackwood. I promise.”

Anna nodded, her dark eyes puddling up. “I know. But I haven’t been away from them since—”

“Shh,” Eli soothed her. “You’ve been looking forward to this trip for months. Now, get your purse. Everything’s loaded. Mom and Pops are waiting in the car, and we have a plane to catch.”

As Anna gathered her over-the-shoulder bag, Reese and the boys bounded back down the stairs. Well, the boys bounded. Reese kind of ambled behind them in a rather sexy loose-hipped saunter, and Shelby’s belly did that clutch-and-tumble thing she hadn’t felt in longer than she could remember.

Interesting.

“C’mon, boys. Help Gram out to the car,” Eli prompted.

Not wanting to intrude, Shelby hung back as everyone headed out to see the travelers off.

“Feel free to call me anytime if you have any questions or need anything. My number is with the others,” Anna said, delaying her departure.

“I will.” Shelby knew Anna needed to be reassured as much as she thought Shelby did. “And I hope you’ll call now and then to let us know what a fabulous time you’re having.”

Nodding, Anna slung the bag over her shoulder. Before she could utter another word, Eli was back at the door. “Let’s go, Anna.”

“I’m coming,” she answered with a roll of her doe-brown eyes as she followed her husband out the door.

From the living room window, Shelby surreptitiously watched the farewell scene in the driveway. Last-minute directives were likely being issued, and lingering hugs were exchanged. When Anna moved to Reese, she placed her hands on his whisker-stubbed cheeks and looked him right in the eye, saying something that tugged his lips into a reluctant smile before he pulled her in for a hug.

Shelby’s eyes puddled. Then she found herself giggling as she watched Eli extricate Anna from Reese and usher her into the passenger seat of the luxury SUV. Within minutes, they were on their way, with Anna hanging out the window, waving and blowing kisses to her boys.

When she heard the screen door squeak open, then slam shut, Shelby turned, surprised to find only Reese coming back into the kitchen.

“They got off, I see,” Shelby said, for lack of anything better.

“For someone who’s been looking forward to this vacation for months, she sure had a helluva time leaving,” Reese replied as he tucked his hat into the back pocket of his well-worn Levi’s.

Must be a no hat-wearing in the house rule, Shelby decided, impressed that he still honored the tenet even in his mother’s absence. “Where are the boys?”

“In the backyard. I told ‘em not to go outside the fence unless they checked with you first.”

Shelby nodded. “Anything else you think I should know—since I’m sure they’ll want to test out the newbie. I don’t want to allow them to break any of the house rules right off the bat.”

“And they will test you.” He made no bones about the admission. “Mainly, they either stay in or around the house. They can ride their bikes up and down the lane, but they’re to always remain within eyesight and earshot of you. Since I could be anywhere on the farm, they know they’re not allowed past the stables without an adult.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

“They’ll undoubtedly push the boundaries, though.” He pulled a pitcher from the fridge and poured himself a tall glass of iced tea. “Want any?” he offered.

“No, thanks.”

He replaced the pitcher and drained the liquid in three gulps before placing the glass in the dishwasher. Never in her life had Shelby found the movement of any man’s Adam’s apple as he swallowed to be sexy. But in Reese Blackwood’s case, it most definitely was.

Dang.

“We’ve got several loads of alfalfa ready to cut, so if you’re sure you’ll be okay with Alex and Zach, I better get back to work.”

“Of course.” They were the reason she was there, after all.

“I have my cell if you need anything.” He paused. “My mother did give you the number, didn’t she?”

“She sure did.”

“Well, call if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll be back for supper. We usually eat around six.”

Shelby nodded. "I'll have it ready. Anything particular you'd like?"

Reese shook his head. "We're not picky. Whatever you make will be fine." He tugged the hat on his head as he turned for the mudroom. "Have the boys help. They can set the table or something," he suggested before disappearing.

As the screen door slammed shut, Shelby blew out the breath she'd been holding. When she'd agreed to spend her summer at Lone Oaks taking care of Alex and Zach while their father worked and their grandparents were on vacation, she'd had no idea how impossibly gorgeous said father would be.

Or how his broad shoulders tapered to a lean vee where his snug green tee-shirt was tucked into the waistband of his Levi's. Or how the faded denim molded itself like an old and dear friend to the muscles of his thighs and tightly rounded ass. Or how her blood would race, hot and wild, through her veins when he turned those incredible blue eyes in her direction.

Nope, she'd had no idea whatsoever.

But now she did, which alerted Shelby to proceed with caution. Otherwise, this was apt to be one long, hot summer in more ways than one.

Before heading back to work, Reese corralled the boys and reminded them to stay in the yard. "Shelby's in charge while I'm not here, so listen to what she says."

"You think she knows anything about living on a farm, Dad?" Alex wanted to know, his little head cocked to the side.

Reese met his oldest son's curious blue gaze. "I don't know, Bud." It was an honest answer since what he knew

about Shelby Corbett could fit on the head of a pin with room to spare.

When his mother had informed him about finding the perfect replacement for Reba, Reese wasn't sure precisely what he'd expected. But it definitely wasn't the doe-eyed pixie he'd left standing in his kitchen.

Besides being Wanda Landry's niece, the only other info his mother had shared about Shelby was her employment status as an elementary PE teacher. From that, Reese pictured a tall, athletically built woman with short brown hair and sharp eyes guarded behind protective sports glasses. Someone with a no-nonsense attitude who, like any teacher worth their salt, was caring but would also be tough when the situation necessitated it. Someone capable of handling two boisterous young boys with an endless supply of energy, imagination, and mischievousness.

Shelby Corbett might be a teacher, but she sure as hell didn't bear one iota of resemblance to any Reese ever had in school. First, she was no bigger than a minute. If he were to hazard a guess, he'd put her at about five foot five and weighing no more than a hundred twenty pounds soaking wet.

Not that she was skinny as a rail. Quite the contrary. In fact, Reese couldn't help but notice some interesting swells and curves in all the right places on her petite yet compact frame.

She also wore no glasses to hide her warm whiskey-brown eyes. And as far as Reese could tell by the braid that fell to the middle of her back, Shelby's hair was about the same color as his best chestnut mare.

Only Shelby's had some golden woven throughout the darker strands.

Yeah, she was quite an attractive woman. Particularly when she flashed that megawatt smile, revealing a straight line of pearly whites and deep dimples in both cheeks. From their brief encounter, Reese also noted Shelby hadn't bothered with any makeup on her pretty face and a clean, powdery scent wrapped around him when they'd shaken hands. Kind of like

the boys used to smell after their baths and Olivia had slathered their skin with baby lotion.

Shelby was *nothing* like Reese expected. That he'd noticed more about her than he had with any other woman in the last year was somewhat disconcerting. On top of that, Reese also worried she wasn't up to handling Alex and Zach.

Would she be able to keep up with his boys? Rein them in when they tested the boundaries and plowed full steam ahead without considering the risks or consequences of their escapades?

Like wrestling. Climbing trees. Fearlessly exploring everything in their midst. Or just being precocious little boys full of spit and vinegar.

Not that the boys were hell on wheels. They were simply action personified. Never still. Their minds racing a mile a minute as they conjured up their next adventure. And despite loving them more than life itself, Reese couldn't deny Alex and Zach could easily try the patience of Job.

This led him to believe Shelby might not be up to the challenge his boys presented.

Bearing that in mind, Reese decided to remain close to the house for the rest of the day in case his assumptions proved correct. The last thing he needed was to come back and find her tied to a tree with the boys nowhere to be found.

To be on eye level with both boys, Reese took a knee in front of them. "I expect the two of you to be on your best behavior."

"Why can't we just come with you, Dad?" Zach asked.

"Because I have a lot to get done this afternoon." As usual, the guilt stabbed at him for putting work before the boys. But Lone Oaks couldn't run itself. If he allowed Alex and Zach to tag along, he'd spend most of his time ensuring they weren't getting into harm's way rather than handling the chores requiring his attention.

Though he planned to stay close today, Reese couldn't stay nearby every day. Nor could they always accompany him.

Sometimes, the work would be too dangerous. And like his mother said, the boys would become bored quickly. Which meant, like it or not, he needed someone to supervise Alex and Zach, especially during the day.

Best he found out sooner rather than later if Shelby Corbett was up to the task before he ventured too far away from the main house.

“Can we see if Shelby wants to play?”

“You can ask her. But if she says no, don’t pester her.”

“Aw, Dad. We aren’t pesterers.”

Reese ruffled his eldest son’s dark hair. “Yeah. Right.” Not wanting Zach to feel left out, he gave him a noogie. “Please be good, boys.”

“We will, Dad,” they chorused as Reese rose to his feet and headed for the barns.

As soon as he turned his back, he had no doubt Alex and Zach sprinted for the house, armed with a laundry list of activities to explore for the rest of the afternoon. He sure hoped Shelby Corbett was up to the task.

If not, at least today, he’d be close enough to hear when she cried *uncle*.

CHAPTER TWO

Shelby had her head stuck in the freezer, trying to narrow down options for dinner, when the screen door squeaked open and slammed shut.

“Shell-bee!” Alex and Zach hollered in unison.

“Right here.” She peered around the freezer’s door.

“We’re bored.”

Ah, the mantra of children the world over.

Grabbing a roast, Shelby closed the freezer and turned toward her blue-eyed charges. It was remarkable how the color of their eyes identically matched each other’s as well as their father’s. Just like Reese’s mirrored Eli’s.

Quite the gene pool the Blackwood males had going, that was for sure.

“Awesome, because your room needs to be cleaned.” Shelby chose her mother’s response whenever she ever even hinted at being bored. Plus, the sooner she established some parameters, the better for everyone. Reese included, since Shelby got the distinct impression from their conversation that he had serious doubts she could take care of Alex and Zach.

Both sets of eyes widened. Clearly, cleaning their rooms was not the answer they’d been expecting. “Aw, Shelby. We can do that later. We wanna do somethin’ fun now,” Alex said.

Edging past them, Shelby unwrapped the roast, shoved it into the microwave over the stove, and hit defrost. “So, what constitutes fun around here?”

Zach's eyes narrowed. "Huh?"

Shelby smiled and leaned her hip against the counter. "What is there to do for fun around here?" she rephrased the question.

Both their little faces lit up. But Alex answered first. "Tons of stuff."

"Like?" Shelby prompted.

"Like fishing, playing football, baseball, and basketball, four-wheeling, swimming, riding bikes—"

"And horses," Zach added his two cents. "We can play all sorts of stuff in the yard, go hiking, and sometimes, we ride out to the fields with Dad to make hay or fix a fence. There's so much to do we can't remember it all."

"Then how can you be bored?"

Alex rolled his eyes in the universal put-upon gesture children seem to master at an early age. "'Cuz Dad says we can't leave the yard without your permission, and most all the fun stuff isn't in the back yard."

Shelby peered out the window into the fenced-in area behind the house. "Looks like a lot to do out there to me. I see a treehouse, swing set, and sandbox." She turned back to the boys. "Wasn't swimming one of the things you rattled off? Because I don't see a pool."

"We don't have a pool," Zach confirmed.

"So, where do you swim?"

"In the lake or the creek, silly."

Right. Willow Run Creek and Lake Sheridan. During the few weeks each summer that Shelby spent with her aunt and uncle, they often took her swimming or fishing in both spots. "Well, since I'm not that familiar with the layout of the property yet, and I haven't had a chance to talk with your father about exactly what he's comfortable allowing us to do on our own, we'd better settle on something we can do near the house today."

If they were disappointed, neither let it show.

At least, not yet, anyway.

“Do you like baseball?” Alex asked.

“Sure.”

“We could practice hitting and throwing the ball.”

Sure, Shelby could do that. “Okay.”

“You can just watch us if you want.”

Shelby narrowed her gaze. “You mean I can’t play?”

“*You can play baseball?*” Alex’s incredulous tone matched the wide-eyed surprise in his and his brother’s eyes.

“Yeah,” Zach piped up. “Cuz Gram can’t throw worth squat.”

“And she can’t hit a ball to save her life,” Alex added. “But Aunt Tess can throw hummers.”

Poor Gram, but kudos to Aunt Tess. Shelby tried to remember which brother Tess was married to—Jack or Drew. She was pretty sure it was Jack.

“So, you can *really* play ball?”

Though Shelby was confident she’d earn bonus points if she ticked off her list of achievements during her high school and college softball years, she refrained. Right now, all Alex and Zach wanted was to toss and hit the ball.

“Yep. I can *really* play ball.”

“Can you pitch?” Alex asked.

She had six no-hitters to her credit, but nobody cared about that anymore. “I can get it across the plate,” she assured them.

“Wow!” Alex exclaimed. “You can use Dad’s glove. I’ll get it. Zach, you grab the bats and balls.”

A blur of movement followed as Alex and Zach ran upstairs to fetch the necessary equipment for hitting, catching, and throwing. Once the boys completed their mission, Shelby removed the roast from the microwave and placed it in a

Dutch oven. She quickly peeled and sliced an onion, layering the pieces on top of the meat before adding water, salt, pepper, a dash of garlic, and Worcestershire sauce.

She secured the lid on the roaster, set the oven temp, and placed the pan in the middle of the second rack. In about an hour, she'd need to peel potatoes to give them enough cooking time to be ready by six. She might even have time to throw together a dish of macaroni and cheese.

It was Zach's favorite, after all.

Shelby closed the oven door at the same time the boys skidded to a halt in the kitchen. "You ready?" they asked, again in unison.

Nodding, Shelby held up one finger. Best to set the parameters beforehand, so there were no surprises to bring unnecessary discord later. "One thing. In about an hour, I need to come in and peel potatoes. So, sixty minutes of playing ball, and if you come in nicely while I take care of a few things for dinner, there might be some ice cream in it for you."

"Before dinner?" Zach asked in near disbelief.

Uh-oh. Wonder if that was against house rules. She sure hoped not.

"Just a little." Shelby figured that should be okay this once. "Not enough to spoil your appetite, though."

"*Nothing* spoils his appetite." Alex rolled his eyes in true big brother fashion and jerked a thumb in Zach's direction. "Gram says he has a hollow leg."

"Good. Because if there's time, I might make some mac and cheese to go with the roast and potatoes."

"For real?" Zach drew out the word, his blue eyes rounded.

She ruffled his hair. "For real. Now, let's go see if you two can hit my curveball."

For the first thirty minutes, Shelby pitched to both boys. Apparently, someone had taught Alex about his batting stance and how to hold the bat with his door-knocking knuckles lined in a row. He kept his eyes on the ball, and at least eighty

percent of the time, the bat connected with the pitch, sending several hits over the wooden fence separating the yard from a field of what appeared to be corn poking through the soil.

Zach had good form as well, but Shelby could tell he was still learning the fundamentals of the game. Like keeping his eye on the ball. Although he connected with her standard pitches a few times, Shelby made sure to toss a few where he'd have no trouble getting a hit.

By the time the boys tired of batting, Shelby's arm stung as well. It had been a long time since she'd pitched for a solid half-hour. Even when they played softball or baseball in her classes at school, she didn't do all the pitching. The students needed practice with that skill as much as with hitting and fielding.

Shelby took her turn with the bat for the second thirty minutes, knocking out some pop-up flies and grounders for the brothers to field. While they practiced, she fired questions at them about where the play would be when runners were on different bases after the ball was hit. And what positions would cover for others in various situations on the field.

When their agreed-upon sixty minutes was up, all three had worked up a decent sweat. The boys didn't argue, nor did they try to wheedle just a few more minutes from her. As they started across the lawn without their gloves, bats, or balls, Shelby abruptly stopped in front of them and planted her hands firmly on her hips.

“Aren't you forgetting something?”

Alex narrowed his eyes for a few seconds of consideration, then shook his head. “Nope. Remember, you said if we came in like you said, we could have ice cream,” he reminded her.

One brow raised as she inclined her head to the area behind them where their baseball equipment littered the yard, she said, “First, you guys have a little clean-up and put-away to do.”

“But we're coming back out.”

“Maybe. But that doesn’t mean you’ll play ball again. Best to gather things and put them where they belong before we go inside, so you don’t forget.”

With a heavy sigh, both boys hunched their shoulders, turned, and lumbered back to pick up their paraphernalia. When they reached the mudroom, Shelby suspected they planned to dump everything in the corner or on the floor. She cleared her throat loudly and shook her head.

“You mean we gotta take this stuff all the way upstairs?” Zach wailed.

“Yes.” Shelby nodded. “And not only to your room but where it goes in your room. If you take a few minutes now to put things away, the task won’t be overwhelming later.”

“You sound like Gram.”

“She sounds like a smart woman.”

Groaning, the so-overtaxed Blackwood brothers trudged through the kitchen and stomped up the stairs.

Shelby did her best to suppress a giggle. Seemed Alex and Zach had expected her to be a pushover. She didn’t know if it had to do with her being younger than their Gram or because today was her first day on the job, but Shelby got the distinct impression they didn’t think she operated on the same level as their grandmother.

Granted, Shelby didn’t doubt she’d make countless blunders in the next six weeks. Like let them get away with things Anna Blackwood would never allow. Or their father, for that matter. But Shelby had worked successfully with children the same age as Alex and Zach for ten years, so she understood the importance of consistency.

Which reminded her of the ice cream she promised them. She grabbed the bowls, dipped two scoops in each, and set both on the table in the breakfast nook before she began peeling potatoes.

By five-fifteen, the roast was finished cooking, the macaroni and cheese was baking, and Shelby gathered the ingredients to make gravy. Once the boys devoured their ice

cream, they went back outside to play in the yard for another hour before coming in to watch a few of their favorite TV shows.

Before she started the gravy, Shelby went into the family room where Alex and Zach were sprawled on the couches watching a show about dinosaurs. “Okay, boys, time to clean up for dinner.”

“You mean take a bath?” Zach’s eyes widened. “‘Cuz we don’t take a bath until right before bedtime.”

Shelby shook her head. “Not a bath, but you do need to wash your hands and faces before we eat. Plus, I need your help setting the table.”

“Do we haveta?” they chorused, their cute little faces pained.

“Yes, you *haveta*,” Shelby answered, mimicking their facial expressions and vocal tones.

With a great deal of reluctance, they both rolled off the couch and headed toward the stairs, their socked feet falling heavily on the wooden floor.

“Boys.”

They stopped at the first step and turned back.

“Yeah?”

“Your shoes.” Shelby inclined her head toward the scuffed-up Nikes they’d kicked off before climbing on the sofa.

Rolling their eyes and heaving identical heavy sighs, they tromped back to retrieve their sneakers before stomping upstairs to take care of their hands and faces.

Grinning, Shelby returned to the kitchen to make the gravy, which was not one of her specialties. Oh, it’d be edible, but it would also have lumps, and be either a little too thick or a lot too thin.

She was stirring the ingredients in the cast-iron skillet when Alex and Zach reappeared, their hands and faces

scrubbed clean. It even looked like they might have wet their hair and combed it into place.

Her heart swelled at the extra effort.

“Looking sharp,” she complimented with a wink and a round of high fives. “Now, do you usually eat in the dining room or here in the kitchen?”

“When it’s just us, Gram, and Gramps, we eat in here. But if everybody comes, we haveta eat in the dining room,” Alex answered.

“Yeah. No way we could all fit at the kitchen table.”

With only the four of them, Shelby figured the table in the breakfast nook sufficed. “Okay, Alex, you take the plates. Zach, you get the silverware.”

They were placing the folded napkins in the center of each plate when Reese walked into the kitchen. His hair was dented from his hat, alfalfa leaves clung to the denim of his form-fitting Levi’s, and another layer of stubble shadowed his jaw.

Shelby had never seen a sexier man in her life.

Good grief, girl. Get a grip. The man is not only still grieving the love of his life, but for the next six weeks, he’s also signing your paychecks.

Copy that.

“Dad!” The boys flew past her toward their father.

Reese wasn’t sure what to expect when he returned for dinner. And though Shelby hadn’t cried uncle in the five hours since he’d been gone, he still braced himself for the worst. Yet instead of a war zone, he walked into a kitchen swirling with mouthwatering aromas and his sons amicably setting the table.

Damn!

Before he formulated any further thoughts, the boys noticed his arrival and rushed him. “Dad!”

“Hey, guys,” he returned their greeting.

“We’re helping Shelby,” Zach informed him.

“I can see that.”

Just then, Shelby stretched to reach a serving bowl from an overhead cabinet. The movement pulled her shorts a little higher on her well-toned honey-kissed thighs. And for a few seconds, Reese forgot to breathe.

“Did you know Shelby can play baseball?”

Thankfully, Alex’s question jump-started Reese’s respiratory system before she caught him staring. “Um. No. I didn’t,” he managed to reply, surprised by the news himself. Somehow, he couldn’t picture Shelby swinging a bat.

“Well, she can. And not like a girl, either.”

High praise, indeed, from his seven-year-old.

“She can throw, hit, *and* catch,” Zach added, clearly impressed with Shelby’s abilities.

Apparently, Reese had underestimated Shelby Corbett. Not only were his boys on their best behavior, but they were also helping without complaint. Hell, they weren’t even arguing with or sniping at each other.

And they were clean. As was the kitchen except for the pots and pans Shelby used for cooking before transferring the food into serving dishes. “You appear to have many talents,” Reese observed as she passed him carrying a bowl of gravy.

“I guess we’re all good at something.” Shelby shrugged as if it were no biggie. “Food’s ready, so if you need to do anything before we eat...”

“Yeah, like wash your hands and face,” Zach clarified, holding his palms out for inspection. “Cuz we had to.”

Impressed, Reese nodded. “Guess I’d better get mine washed, too, huh?” He turned his attention to Shelby. “Do I have time to change clothes? I know I’m a smelly, grimy mess.”

“Sure.” She went back to retrieve the platter of roast beef and potatoes. “Whatever you need to do.”

“But hurry, okay, Dad? Because Shelby made mac and cheese, and you know that’s my favorite.”

Reese smoothed a hand over Zach’s hair. “Okay, Bud. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

And he was. Within five minutes, Reese had stripped down to his boxer briefs, washed his face and hands, and wished he had enough time to shower and shave. Instead, he pulled on clean jeans and a gray tee-shirt, ran a comb through his mess of hair, stuffed his feet into a pair of blue Nikes, and returned to the kitchen.

If anyone asked him when was the last time he’d arrived on time for dinner, Reese couldn’t have given an exact answer. Too long, for sure, which was all the more reason he needed to make a better effort from this point forward. And not only because he’d promised his mother but because his boys deserved more of his time and attention than he’d given them lately.

Besides, he’d missed out on too much already.

Yeah, he showed up for the important things. Parent-teacher conferences, musical concerts, kindergarten graduations, and other special events. But he could easily make time to do far more with his sons. Like, play ball with them as Shelby had evidently done within an hour of her arrival at Lone Oaks.

That tidbit of information still had him reeling.

And embarrassed.

Or was that guilt?

Probably a combination of all three.

“Are you going back out to work after we eat?” Alex asked while Shelby helped Zach fill his plate.

Reese shook his head. “No. Boone’s going to handle the evening rounds tonight,” he answered, referring to the foreman who’d been at Lone Oaks for over twenty years. The man

whose sister was supposed to be here taking care of Alex and Zach for the next six weeks instead of the brown-eyed beauty seated across from him.

“Then what are *you* gonna do?” This time Zach posed the question.

“I’m not sure.” Reese drizzled gravy over his roast beef and potatoes. “Do either of you have any ideas?”

“We could go four-wheeling,” Alex suggested, hope lighting his eyes as a grin dimpled his cheeks.

Zach nodded. “Yeah. Can we?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Yippee!”

“Yay!”

“But you need to eat your dinner first,” Reese stipulated.

Nodding, both boys began shoveling food into their mouths as fast as they could without choking.

“Slow down,” Reese prompted and dug into his own food. The meal was delicious, and since it felt like an eternity between dinner and the two bologna sandwiches he’d gobbled down around noon, the roast beef with all the trimmings, including Zach’s favorite mac and cheese, definitely hit the spot.

Yes, Shelby Corbett was certainly full of surprises. No doubt about it.

But Reese wasn’t sure that was such a good thing. Especially where he was concerned.

She’s just doing what your mother hired her to do. Don’t complicate things.

Yeah. Only Reese had a feeling that would be a hell of a lot easier said than done.

“Can we go now? Puh-leese?” both boys pounced.

Reese caught the smile Shelby tried to hide at Alex and Zach’s eagerness to go four-wheeling. “Don’t you think we

should help with the dishes?”

Both boys heaved a beleaguered sigh as if he'd suggested they scour the bathroom with a toothbrush. “Daaadd!”

Rising, Shelby looked at Reese. “They have been exceptionally well-behaved all day, doing everything I asked with no fuss. So, if you guys want to head out and go four-wheeling, I can take care of things in here.”

“See, Dad? Shelby doesn't mind.”

Reese wasn't sure if Shelby minded or not, but he had a sneaking suspicion she might relish the idea of enjoying a bit of peace and quiet while he took Alex and Zach outside for a while. He couldn't blame her. “Well, the least you can do is thank her for dinner.”

“Thanks for dinner, Shelby,” Alex quickly complied as he edged toward the mudroom.

“Yeah. Thanks. Everything was amazing. ‘Specially the mac and cheese,” Zach added, following his brother.

“Everything *was* delicious,” Reese reiterated. “Thank you.”

With another one of those brilliant smiles that knocked the air clear out of his lungs, Shelby nodded. “Glad you enjoyed it.”

Reese forced himself to breathe. “I'm not sure how long we'll be out on the four-wheelers. And since I'm sure you need a little time to get settled, I'll take care of the bedtime routine for the boys when we're finished.”

“Sounds great.” She carried the empty plates to the sink. “But if you have time later, I would like to go over some things about the boys and their care. Make sure we're on the same page.”

“Sure. They're usually asleep by nine.” He was pretty sure that was their bedtime. “We can talk then.”

Shelby ran water in the sink and squirted in the blue dish detergent. “Perfect.”

“Dad!”

A grin dimpled Shelby’s cheeks, and heat shot through Reese like an arrow. *Damn!* What was it about this woman that knocked the wind clear out of him? And got him all hot and bothered as if he were some naïve schoolboy. Reese wasn’t sure, but it was definitely something to examine more closely.

Later, though. For now, he needed to focus his full attention on riding ATVs with Alex and Zach, not on Shelby Corbett’s breathtaking smile.

Once she restored the kitchen to order, Shelby took inventory of the pantry and freezers to plan the meals for the next day. She settled on eggs and biscuits with sausage gravy for breakfast, Alex’s favorite grilled cheese with fresh fruit for lunch, and lasagna, salad, and garlic bread for dinner. If she had time, she might even whip up a cheesecake for dessert.

Everyone liked cheesecake, right?

For some crazy reason, the thought of cheesecake brought Reese to mind.

Why?

Shelby didn’t have a clue.

Well, unless it had something to do with cheesecake sounding like beefcake and Reese fitting that description to a T.

No matter the reason, Shelby still chastised herself for daring to entertain such thoughts about the man who was essentially her employer for the next month and a half. But what red-blooded woman could help herself, for Pete’s sake? Reese Blackwood was off-the-charts gorgeous with his brooding, rugged good looks, and in-your-face sex appeal.

That he did nothing to exploit his overwhelming sexuality only magnified his appeal.

Of course, Shelby harbored no illusion she was the first or only female to find the man attractive. There was something about him that rang all her bells. Maybe the sharp angles of his handsome face or the ever-present stubble darkening the hardened curve of his jaw. Or the way his hair was either smushed from wearing his hat all day or disheveled from plowing his long, tanned fingers through the thick brown waves.

Something Shelby wouldn't mind doing herself.

But his eyes mesmerized Shelby the most. Piercing in their intensity yet shadowed with heartbreaking sadness, Reese's eyes were the windows to his soul. Which was clearly still in tatters from the devastating loss of his wife.

Death, no matter when or how, was hard, but to lose someone so young, with her whole life ahead of her, had to be even more gut-wrenching. A hell all its own. And Shelby couldn't begin to fathom that kind of crushing loss.

Nor did she ever want to.

Climbing the stairs, Shelby entered her bedroom for the next six weeks and began unpacking. It took about an hour to transfer her clothing from her luggage to the dresser and closet, arrange her toiletries in the adjoining bath, and set up her laptop. Later, she'd ask Reese for the Wi-Fi password, so she could check emails and surf the internet for new ideas to utilize in her classes come fall.

She was stashing her empty suitcases and bags in the closet when the screen door slammed shut. "Shell-bee! Guess what?" one of the boys yelled as he bounded up the steps.

Shelby went in the direction of the voice and met Zach in the hallway. "What's up?"

"I got to drive the four-wheeler. All by myself." His eyes were as big as pie plates. "Dad let me. I hadda promise I wouldn't go too fast, and I'd listen to what he told me, so I'd be safe, but I did it!" His face was so animated, his blue eyes so bright. "I really did it!"

Shelby wanted to hug the daylights out of him. “Wow! That’s awesome.” And it was.

Zach grabbed hold of her hand. “C’mon. Alex is taking a turn now, but Dad said I could have one more. So you gotta come see.”

Yeah, she did. “Okay,” she agreed and let him pull her forward.

When they stepped onto the porch, Shelby saw two four-wheelers about halfway down the lane. Both riders wore helmets, but one appeared much smaller than the other. By the time they reached the edge of the yard where the long driveway continued past the main house toward the barns and corrals, Reese and Alex turned around and came back.

“You wanna ride?” Zach asked. “‘Cuz you can if you want. I know Dad’ll let you.”

Shelby’s heart melted at the earnestness of his words and facial expression. “Not tonight, but sometime while I’m here. Okay?”

“You sure? It’s tons of fun.”

No way would Shelby dare rain on Zach’s parade by confessing she’d grown up riding four-wheelers in North Carolina and at Landry’s Meadow while visiting her aunt and uncle. “I’m sure. Tonight, I’m excited to watch you guys have fun.”

“Okay,” Zach relented, bouncing from one foot to the other as his father and brother approached and braked to a halt in front of them.

Father and son pulled off their helmets simultaneously. “Looks like Zach requested an audience,” Reese commented with a slight tilt to his usually unsmiling mouth.

And what an amazing mouth it was, too. Not overly full or thin, but just right. “It’s not every day a young man gets to ride a four-wheeler all by himself for the first time,” Shelby managed to reply.

Vibrating with excitement, Zach had already raced over to the smaller ATV to trade places with his brother.

“Make sure the strap is tight,” Reese reminded him.

With a solemn nod, Zach did as instructed before hopping on the four-wheeler and gunning the throttle. Reese re-fastened his helmet, and at a much slower pace, father and son turned their ATVs around and rode the length of the lane side by side.

“He’s been waiting for this day his whole life,” Alex stated by her side.

“I bet.”

“You ever ridden a four-wheeler?”

She nodded. “A few times.”

“My mom didn’t like to ride,” he said pensively.

Shelby’s heart cracked a little more. Poor guy. Had he wanted his mom to ride? Been disappointed when she didn’t? Or did he just accept it as something that simply was?

Shelby didn’t know and didn’t think it was her place to ask. Sometimes, no response was better in such circumstances.

“Sometimes, Gram’ll ride with Gramps,” Alex added as an afterthought. “But Grandma Sarah *never* gets on one.” His eyes widened so round with the word *never*, they almost swallowed his entire face.

“It’s not something everyone enjoys,” Shelby rationalized.

Reese and Zach pulled to a stop in front of them. “Didja see me?” Zach shouted over the engine.

Smiling brightly, Shelby nodded and gave him a thumbs up.

“We’re gonna put everything away. Then we’ll be in,” Reese said.

Nodding again, Shelby gave a salute to let him know she got the message.

“I’m gonna help,” Alex announced before he pulled on his helmet and hopped on the seat behind his little brother.

Amazing how an hour and a half of four-wheeling created such joy. Then again, Shelby figured Reese’s presence elevated the boys’ exhilaration more than the ride itself. Particularly since Shelby got the distinct impression Reese typically returned to farm work after dinner rather than riding four-wheelers with his boys.

Or doing anything else with them, for that matter.

But if he and his wife engaged in activities with Alex and Zach in the evenings before she passed, removing himself was likely one of Reese’s coping mechanisms. The memories would be agonizing enough, but coupled with Olivia’s glaring absence from their lives, the devastation must tear him completely apart.

No wonder he’d withdrawn and thrown himself into his work after she died. Getting through each day had to be easier when working the farm instead of holing up in the house he’d shared with the love of his life. Where they’d started their family. And where he’d be continually reminded of everything he’d lost.

Perhaps this evening would serve as the catalyst necessary for Reese to re-engage with Alex and Zach more consistently. For all three of them, Shelby sure hoped so.

CHAPTER THREE

As Reese descended the stairs, the grandfather clock chimed for the tenth time. Only an hour past the boys' usual bedtime, which, considering his sons' reluctance to call it a day, wasn't too bad for his first night.

Still, both had come prepared to give him a run for his money by employing everything in their little-boy arsenal to wrangle a way out of the less appealing parts of their bedtime routine. Impressed, Reese listened to their well-thought-out alternate suggestions before reminding them he was fully aware they took baths and brushed their teeth each night before getting tucked into bed for at least one story.

Though obviously disappointed with their inability to pull one over on their old man, they were undeterred from prolonging lights out as long as possible. This, Reese realized after both insisted they weren't even tired and plucked five books off the shelf for him to read.

Despite their claim, Reese hadn't made it to page five of the first book before they were sound asleep. All that energy vibrating through them less than five minutes earlier was quelled by simply lying still for a few consecutive seconds.

His mother was right. They slept just as hard as they played, which was never less than full steam ahead at a hundred miles an hour. No wonder they fell asleep so quickly. Their little bodies needed to rest and recharge for the next adventure-filled day.

Adventures Reese needed to enjoy with his sons. Like tonight. Spending time on the ATVs with Alex and Zach, plus getting them ready for bed, should be as much a part of his daily routine as getting up for work every morning.

Before she died, Olivia warned him about spending too much time working on the farm. That these were moments in the boys' lives he didn't want to miss. *You pay men good money to operate the farm, Reese Blackwood. Let them. You don't want any regrets,* Olivia had warned more than once.

As usual, she'd been right. Reese didn't want regrets, but he sure as hell had them.

With Alex and Zach.

With her.

God, so many with her.

Why hadn't he listened to what she said? Paid better attention. Made more of an effort to spend more time with her and the boys. Been a better husband and father.

If only he knew then what he knew now. Maybe he would have made different choices.

Or maybe not. After losing Olivia, he certainly hadn't. Instead of spending every possible minute with Alex and Zach, Reese withdrew further, both physically and emotionally. He threw himself into his work and spent more time away from his boys than he did with them.

Most of the time, anyway.

Guess some lessons were more difficult to learn than others.

Reese had promised himself and his mother that he would make some changes. Tonight, he'd made a conscious effort to do so by arriving to dinner on time and four-wheeling with Alex and Zach afterward. From their non-stop chatter during bath time, they'd both had an absolute blast.

Truth be told? So had he.

Hell, Reese had enjoyed the whole bath-and-bedtime routine, too. Which only made him question why he'd avoided the evening ritual so much. Why he was often late for dinner when he could be goofing around with his boys while they ate. And why he chose work over reading bedtime stories and tucking his sons in at night.

Because Olivia isn't here to share it.

Losing Olivia had devastated him to the point that withdrawing from life had been easier than participating. If he weren't at the dinner table, he wouldn't miss sitting across from Olivia, listening to her and the boys share the happenings of their day, and even chiming in with a few comments of his own.

Evenings had been their time together as a family. When Olivia passed, she'd taken that with her. All the activities they enjoyed. The movies they watched. The games they played. The nighttime rituals they established.

Before tonight, the few times he tried to continue their routines had been unbearable without Olivia. Once the boys fell asleep, he was alone. No more cuddling with his wife on the sofa. No more discussions about their respective days. No planning for upcoming events. No teasing or flirting.

No making love.

Everything they shared was gone.

Forever.

But tonight hasn't been so bad, has it?

No, surprisingly, it hadn't. When Reese returned to the house for dinner, he'd been so consumed with dread he had to force himself to put one booted foot in front of the other. But once he'd sat down at the table, his anxiety decreased. His heart didn't weigh as heavily. And his soul didn't feel as hollow. In fact, until starting their bedtime story, Olivia hadn't entered Reese's mind at all.

Guilt sliced through him. How could he not think about Olivia every minute of every day? She was the absolute love of his life—the mother of his children. Just looking at Alex

and Zach should *always* remind him of her, their life together, and how desperately empty his life was without her.

Only tonight, it hadn't. No, tonight, the ache wasn't as profound. The vise grip on his chest had lessened. And the memories of what would never be again waned. For the first time since Olivia's terminal diagnosis, Reese felt lighter. As if the weight of his grief lifted enough for him to breathe more freely.

But why? How?

Shelby.

Reese immediately dismissed the notion as pure ridiculousness. He'd only met the woman ten hours ago and had spent less than sixty minutes in her company. In that short span, how in the hell could *she* be the reason his memories hadn't paralyzed him tonight?

Okay. Yes, she was a diversion. Something new in their world. That, coupled with the absence of his parents and the change in his evening routine, redirected his focus and quieted his usual flood of memories.

But not entirely, because for the last several minutes, Olivia had been back, taking her place front and center in his thoughts as well as his heart. Only tonight, his anguish didn't seem as intense.

"Didja get the boys settled in for the night?" Shelby asked, entering the kitchen behind him.

A little zip of visceral awareness trembled through him. Reese forced himself to ignore it. "Yeah. They were out like a light as soon as their heads hit the pillows."

Shelby grabbed a mug, filled it with water, and popped it in the microwave. "I'm making some hot tea. You want anything?"

"No. I'm good." Reese pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. "You said you had some things you wanted to talk to me about," he reminded her, hoping this conversation would be short, sweet, and painless.

“Right.” The microwave pinged, and Shelby retrieved her cup, dropping a tea bag into the mug of water. Facing him, she leaned a hip against the counter and propped the pink-tipped toes of one foot atop the other. “Today, when we were trying to decide on an activity, the boys informed me about all the fun things to do around here. Like fishing, horseback riding, hiking, and swimming in the lake or creek.”

Pausing, Shelby smiled, and Reese’s stomach dropped to his feet.

Dammit!

“Since your mother and I didn’t discuss any of that, I thought I should check with you to see what parameters you prefer we stay within. Or anything you’d rather we not do.”

Unsure of his voice’s status, Reese cleared his throat before answering. “I appreciate you checking with me.” At least she had the wherewithal to seek his guidance without flying by the seat of her pants.

“Of course.”

“Is any of what Alex and Zach mentioned outside your comfort zone?”

Shelby shook her head. “Not really. I consider myself adventurous, so I’m game for just about anything. I’m also certified in CPR and first aid, plus I give swimming lessons through the American Red Cross at the park and rec back home. I’ve also been riding horses since I could walk. And as I’m sure your mother mentioned to you, I’ve been teaching elementary physical education for the last ten years.”

And she can play baseball and cook like a pro.

Yeah, Shelby had quite a resume to go with her firm, compact body and killer smile. Reese cleared his throat again. “Sounds like Alex and Zach are in very competent hands.” Once again, he realized how much he truly had underestimated her capabilities in handling his sons.

“I prefer to lay all the cards on the table right off the bat. Tends to help things go more smoothly in the long run.”

Reese nodded. He got that.

“And I’ll definitely let you know what we plan to do in advance. That way, if you do have any objections or concerns, you can let me know.”

“Sounds great.” And it did. Especially since her list of qualifications combined with her elementary education background confirmed Shelby could easily hold her own against Alex and Zach. Yes, for such a little thing, Shelby Corbett was apparently a lot tougher than she looked.

“There’s just one other thing. What time do you normally leave the house in the mornings?”

Hmm. Not a question Reese expected her to ask. “I’m usually up by five and at the barn by six.” He narrowed his gaze. “Why?”

“I took up running about five years ago, and I run first thing in the morning. Since I don’t want to leave the boys in the house unsupervised, I hoped to go before you left for the day.”

Running. So that was how she stayed so trim and fit. “How long is your run?”

“Forty-five minutes to an hour. If I’m out the door by four, I should be back and have breakfast ready for you by five-thirty. You can eat before leaving at six.”

Was she serious? “That’s ridiculous.”

Shelby flinched at the harshness in his tone.

“Sorry,” Reese apologized, softening his voice. “I didn’t mean morning exercise was ridiculous, but rather the idea of you getting up to run before the sun even rises.”

“But...”

Reese shook his head. “No buts. Since I’m perfectly capable of working my mother’s fancy coffeemaker and pouring cereal into a bowl, I don’t expect you to fix my breakfast. So, you have no reason to be up and running at four in the morning.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Besides, I’m not punching a time clock, so you don’t need to rush your run either.”

“Okay.”

“Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

“No. That should do it.”

“Then, I have some paperwork I need to tend to.” Reese stood and pushed his chair under the table. “See you in the morning.”

“Good night,” Shelby replied with another one of her dazzling smiles.

Warmth curled low and deep within Reese. Her smile called to him. Drew him in. Welcomed him to the point he didn’t want to disappear into his office, where at least a month’s worth of paperwork awaited. Instead, he wanted to remain in his mother’s kitchen with Shelby Corbett.

When guilt again reared its ugly head, Reese tried not to let it overwhelm him. What he felt was a typical male reaction to a pretty woman’s incredible smile. Nothing more. So he didn’t need to freak out about it.

At least, that’s what Reese decided to keep telling himself.

Reese woke up the following morning intending to keep his focus where it belonged—on his boys and the farm and away from Shelby. Unless, of course, Alex and Zach were involved. Or anything to do with the house. Anything but on *her* and the unexpected and unwanted feelings she brought to life within him.

Aside from being a single working father, *he* was not the primary reason Shelby was at Lone Oaks for the summer. Her job was to take care of the boys when he couldn’t and make sure they didn’t starve to death. That was all.

Period.

And then Shelby walked into the kitchen from the mudroom and blew his strategy clear to hell.

Dammit!

Given her spandex running shorts, hot pink racerback tank top, and the perspiration clinging to her flushed skin, Shelby had just finished her morning run. For a petite woman, she sure as hell filled out her workout gear exceptionally well, Reese noted, drinking in every inch of her sexy little body.

Her arms and legs were well-defined, her stomach pancake flat, and her ass so tight and round, Reese bet he could bounce a quarter off its surface. He almost dug into his pocket for a coin to test his theory.

Get a grip.

Last night, he'd chalked up his reaction to Shelby as a normal male response to an attractive female. But seeing her in her running attire with beads of sweat glistening on her exposed flesh ignited something more intense inside him than a simple attraction.

"Good morning," Shelby greeted before taking a long pull from the plastic water bottle.

Unsure whether he was capable of coherent speech, Reese inclined his head toward her and picked up his coffee mug. He took a tentative sip before attempting to speak. "Mornin'," he finally managed to reply as the hot liquid burned a path from his tongue straight to his stomach.

"It's already heating up out there."

Probably not as much as it is in here right now, Reese decided, unable to take his eyes off her. He pulled in a deep breath and forced himself to move. "I should get to work then."

"Will you be coming back for breakfast later?"

"Um...depends." He transferred his coffee from the mug to a travel cup. Right now, Reese doubted his heart could take returning to the house any time soon. Especially if she hadn't

changed her clothes. “If I do, I’ll grab something to eat. So don’t plan anything extra for me.”

“It’s no trouble.” Shelby swiped at some droplets of sweat trickling down her neck into the valley between her breasts.

Sweet Baby Jesus.

Reese forced air into his lungs to keep from passing out. “I’ll just plan on coming back for lunch.” It would take that long to bring his libido back under control. Right now, though, he needed to get the hell out of the kitchen before he spontaneously combusted.

Or devoured her on the spot.

Since that was *not* an option, Reese tugged on his hat, grabbed his coffee, and headed for the door, purposely avoiding Shelby’s gaze as he brushed by her. “I have my cell should you have any issues.”

“Okay. But I’m sure we’ll be fine. Have a good day.”

Well, it certainly hadn’t started according to plan. That was for damn sure.

As Reese made his way to the stable, he couldn’t shake the effect Shelby continued to have on him. Dammit, he wasn’t some wet-behind-the-ears teenager who’d never seen a woman in spandex before. He was a grown-ass man and had seen his fair share of attractive women wearing far less than Shelby wore this morning.

If that were the case, why did his heart threaten to pound right out of his chest when she walked into the kitchen after her morning run? And his temperature climb to a fevered pitch and his jeans tighten considerably behind his button fly?

Because she’s a beautiful woman with a smokin’ hot body, and you haven’t had sex in...well, a very long time.

Still, Reese couldn’t remember ever having such a visceral reaction to the mere sight of a woman. Not when he was a horny teenager. Or even when he’d seen Olivia for the first time at college.

Guilt slammed into him like an out-of-control locomotive. What kind of man allowed himself to get all hot and bothered over a woman he'd known less than twenty-four hours? Particularly when he couldn't recall his own wife eliciting quite the same profound effect.

Of course, Olivia had turned him on. She was both sweet and sexy in a shy, reserved manner. Their love life had been more than satisfying. Reese remembered many days when he'd sneak back to the house in the afternoon to be alone with her. And the countless mornings he had to force himself from the comfort of her arms and go to work.

Their marriage had been strong. Rock-solid. Built on so much more than physical attraction. For Reese, Olivia was the total package. The part that made him whole. And her death left a huge, gaping hole in his heart.

Hell, in his entire being.

Though Shelby was a beautiful woman in her own right, she wasn't Olivia. So, these feelings he kept experiencing in her presence were nothing more than an automatic physiological response. Likely due in large part to how long it had been since Reese had scratched that particular itch.

With anything more than his hand, anyway.

Reese had no intention of acting on the urges Shelby awakened inside him. The only reason she was at Lone Oaks at all was to take care of Alex and Zach, prepare their meals, and keep the house in some semblance of order. A job she was getting paid to do. Which meant that thinking of her as anything other than an employee blurred the lines.

Besides, finding Shelby attractive made Reese feel like he was cheating on his wife. Olivia deserved better from him, as did his boys.

That was something he needed to remember at all costs.

End of story.

Yet, four hours later, Shelby remained at the forefront of his thoughts. He remembered how flushed she'd been from her

run. Wondered if her sweat-slicked skin was as soft as it appeared. Imagined how she'd respond if he touched her.

Which was *not* going to happen. Not today. Not ever, Reese assured himself as he led Sundance from his stall to the back corral. He secured the gate and unsnapped the lead line from the stallion's halter.

"That's one damn fine-looking horse."

Reese dumped oats into the feed sack before glancing in his youngest brother's direction. "Yep. That he is."

"You sure are surrounding yourself with all kinds of beautiful things these days," Holden observed, a devilish twinkle gleaming in his blue eyes. "'Cuz that is one hot filly you've got living with you in the main house."

Reese shot Holden a blistering look. "She's not *living* with me," he corrected. "She's here to take care of the boys."

"Doesn't make her any less hard on the eyes, though."

Reese thumbed the bill of his hat back and narrowed his gaze on his brother. "Did you stop at the house?"

"No."

"Then how do you know anything about her?"

"Because I damn near tore out an entire fence row when I passed her running this morning."

Shelby, in form-fitting spandex, flashed through Reese's mind. He swallowed hard at the memory, doubting anyone could keep their eyes on the road at the sight of Shelby Corbett on her morning run. Or any other time, for that matter. Didn't mean Holden needed to show up and goad him about it, though.

But when did Holden ever miss an opportunity to get a rise out of his brothers? Sometimes, yanking their chain seemed to be his life's work.

"Why don't you go ahead and say what you came out here to say, Holden? Save us both some time."

"Hmm. Seems I hit a nerve."

Reese propped his hands on his jean-clad hips. “No. I just don’t have time for your bullshit.”

“But I bet you’ve had time to notice more about your house guest than her babysitting abilities.”

To say the least, Reese thought but didn’t dare say aloud. “I’m not blind. But like I said, she’s *here* to look after the boys.”

“And you.”

“I don’t *need* looking after.”

“Be that as it may, you sure don’t mind looking *at her*, do you?” Holden countered, a grin dancing in his Blackwood blues. “Which is a good thing, in case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Boone said that last night you went to supper at the normal time and didn’t come back out to work afterward. Said you went four-wheeling with the boys.”

Boone needed to keep his damn mouth shut. “I promised Mama I would work on spending more time with Alex and Zach.”

“And since the nanny is taking care of *them*, you’ll also be spending time in her company. Win-win for both you and the boys.” Holden’s grin widened further.

Reese drew in a deep breath to keep from throat-punching his brother. “She’s not a nanny. She’s Wanda Landry’s niece and is only here because, after Reba broke her leg, Mama refused to go on vacation unless I agreed to let someone stay here with the boys. Apparently, Shelby visits her aunt every year during her summer break from teaching. So, they asked if she’d be interested in helping out.”

“And even though she doesn’t know you from Adam, she agreed?”

“Her aunt *does* work for our father,” Reese reminded Holden. “She’s also our mother’s best friend.”

“Awfully coincidental, don’t you think?”

“She is getting paid to be here,” Reese pointed out.

“Oh, I’m not insinuating *she* has ulterior motives. But *our mother* did set this up.”

Exasperation with a side of irritation, frustration, and annoyance washed over Reese. “She wouldn’t.” He frowned. “Would she?”

“Not initially, but once Reba couldn’t come, I imagine she and Wanda got to talking, and the pieces fell into place.” Holden flashed his best shit-eating grin. “You lucky bastard.”

Son of a bitch. How had he not connected the dots? And why in hell couldn’t his mother leave well enough alone? Or allowed him to sink or swim while taking care of *his* sons. Why did she always have to throw shit in the game with her matchmaking?

Just one more thing for him to deal with for the next six weeks. As if he didn’t have enough on his plate.

And to top everything off, Holden had to be the person pointing everything out. Reese would never live this down.

“Don’t you have someone’s house to build?” Reese asked.

“C’mon, Reese. This could be a helluva lot worse.”

Unconvinced, Reese arched his right brow.

“She is a damn fine-looking woman,” Holden continued.

No argument there. But what difference did it make? He wasn’t looking for a woman, especially not one whose time in Hickory Ridge was limited. Besides, all that concerned Reese was being a better father to his boys.

“And it’s okay that you noticed,” Holden added when Reese didn’t respond.

Reese rolled his neck to relieve the pressure building at the base of his skull. Time to bring this conversation to a close. “I’ve got a shit ton of work to do, Holden, so unless you’re here to help, I’ll see you later,” he tossed over his shoulder as he headed in the opposite direction.

“She wouldn’t mind, you know.”

Ice froze the blood in his veins, and he halted in his tracks. Slowly, he turned back to face his brother. “What?”

“Olivia,” Holden clarified unnecessarily. “She wouldn’t have minded you being attracted to another woman.”

Anger boiled inside him. “I’m not having this conversation with you,” Reese ground out through clenched teeth.

Holden pushed himself away from the corral and bridged the gap between them. “She wouldn’t want you to be alone for the rest of your life, Reese.”

“I’m not alone. I have Alex and Zach.” And a whole family who doesn’t think I can handle my own damned life.

“You know what I mean.”

“For God’s sake, Holden. The woman has been here less than twenty-four hours. Do you expect me to jump her damn bones on her second fucking day?”

“No. All I’m saying is it’s okay for you to find another woman attractive and to even act on that attraction if you want to. Because Olivia wouldn’t mind.”

“Well, maybe *I* would.”

A daring gleam surfaced in Holden’s eyes. “Then I guess there’s no reason I can’t drop by the house and check out Wanda’s hot niece up close and personal.”

Something dark and fierce flashed inside Reese at the thought of his ladies’ man brother making a move on Shelby. His jaw tightened. “Don’t even think about it.”

Holden cocked his head to the side. “Lots of men on this farm, big brother. Doubt you can keep them all away from her for the entire summer.” A slow, knowing grin eased into Holden’s whisker-stubbed cheeks.

“She’s here to watch over Alex and Zach,” he repeated for what felt like the millionth time for both his brother and himself. “Not to have a summer fling.”

“I’m not sure that’s something you can control.”

“I can make my expectations clear. To both Shelby and the men.”

“But surely, she’ll have some time off while here. You can’t control that.” Holden’s grin deepened. “Unless it involved you, of course.”

Reese had never wanted to punch his baby brother’s pretty face more than he did at that moment. “Get the hell out of here, Holden,” Reese advised through clenched teeth, seething at the sound of Holden’s chuckle as he stomped toward the machinery barn.

Bastard.

Slamming the side door open, Reese kicked at some trash littering the floor. He didn’t need this aggravation. Not today. Not ever. And damn his mother for her part in all this.

Wanda Landry, too.

Since he was on a roll, damn Boone’s sister for falling and breaking her damn leg too. Not only was Reba perfect for the job, but she already knew the boys from her previous visits. She also had years of hands-on experience, having raised Boone and their siblings after their mother had passed. She could have easily cooked, cleaned, and handled the boys in her sleep.

Plus, at sixty, Reba wouldn’t have been a distraction, sucker-punching him every time she smiled. And she definitely wouldn’t have had a starring role in his dreams last night, prompting him to wake up in a cold sweat and sporting impressive wood this morning.

Reese hit the side of the tractor with the heel of his hand. Dammit to hell. He didn’t need this shit. Not after vowing to make a concerted effort to be more present and active in Alex and Zach’s lives. Which now, as Holden took immense satisfaction in pointing out, also meant spending more time around Shelby.

Maybe he did need to make a trip into the city to release the pent-up sexual tension currently tying him in knots.

Yeah, that was what he needed to do. Have meaningless sex with a faceless stranger who made it her business to take care of a man's baser needs and expected nothing more than her fee at the end of the evening.

Despite never having done anything like that in his life, Reese figured it might behoove him to seriously consider the option if he had any hope of surviving the summer living under the same roof as Shelby Corbett and her mega-watt smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What do you want to do today?” Zach asked, using the back of his hand to wipe away his milk mustache.

Shelby turned from the sink to look at the dark-haired five-year-old. “Aside from deciding what to fix for lunch and supper, I haven’t given it much thought.” But she figured Zach had all sorts of ideas. “What do you think we should do?”

“Well,” he drew out the word. “I thought we could go fishin’.” He tilted his head, narrowing his Blackwood blues. “You ever been fishin’ before, Shelby?”

Only about ten thousand times, she thought but didn’t say. “A few times.”

“Can you bait a hook?” Alex piped up.

“Yeah. I can bait a hook.” Shelby rinsed the skillet and stuck it in the wooden drainer.

“With *worms*?” Skepticism laced Zach’s question.

“Among other things,” Shelby answered as she gathered the rest of the breakfast dishes to wash.

“So, can we, then?” Zach asked. “Go fishin’?”

It was nine o’clock. By the time they got ready, gathered all the fishing gear, and set up at the lake, it’d be close to ten. Considering children Alex and Zach’s age had the attention span of a gnat, Shelby doubted their focus on fishing would last more than an hour. That would give her plenty of time to return and have lunch on the table for Reese by noon.

If he showed up.

After the way he couldn't leave the house fast enough this morning, Shelby wasn't sure he would. Not that she could blame him, especially if he were experiencing any of the same physical reactions to her as she was to him.

But Shelby wasn't at Lone Oaks to find the recently widowed Reese Blackwood attractive. She was there to take care of his sons. Besides, after her last relationship debacle, the last thing she needed was to develop feelings for an emotionally unavailable man.

"Well?" Zach prompted, reminding Shelby of his unanswered question.

"Sure. If we get a move on right now."

Double squeals of delight erupted from the boys as they pushed off their chairs and bounded up the stairs. In their absence, Shelby finished the dishes and returned the kitchen to order. She was tying her buff-colored hiking boots when Alex and Zach skidded back into the kitchen, wearing dark tee-shirts and jean shorts.

"Did you make your beds?"

The slump of their tiny shoulders answered her question. "Can't we do it when we come back?"

Shelby shook her head. "Responsibilities before pleasure."

"But..."

"No buts. If you want to go fishing, you need to take care of your chores first."

Alex and Zach trudged back up the stairs with matching sighs of frustration. "We might as well brush our teeth while we're up here," she heard Alex mumble to his brother. "Or she'll send us back up to do that, too."

Biting back a smile, Shelby busied herself, filling some jugs with water and grabbing a few snacks. She was zipping the collapsible cooler she'd found in the mudroom when the boys reappeared. "Beds made?"

“Yes, ma’am,” they answered in unison.

“We even brushed our teeth,” Zach added, smiling with exaggeration for Shelby to see for herself.

“Good job!” Shelby praised them with a round of high fives. “Guess we’re ready to go.” She grabbed the cooler. “Where are the fishing poles?”

“In the shed.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were unloading their supplies in the best fishing spot on the lake, according to Alex and Zach. Since her aunt lived about five miles west of Lone Oaks and her fishing expeditions had only been in the areas of the lake that bordered Landry’s Meadow, Shelby had to take the boys’ word for it.

Once they unpacked and set up, Alex and Zach got to work baiting their hooks. Shelby waited until they cast their lines in the water before tending to her own. By the time she dropped her line, Alex had reeled in his first catch.

Quite the pro, he pulled the hook from the mouth of the wiggling trout. “We usually throw ‘em back,” he informed Shelby before giving the fish a toss back into the lake.

For the next hour, they repeated the cycle of baiting their hooks, casting their lines, and reeling in their catches, only to release the fish back into their natural habitat after Shelby took a picture of each boy and his bounty. Before they quit for the day, Zach insisted Shelby needed her photo taken with one of the catfish she’d snared and expertly snapped the picture on her phone.

Shelby enjoyed her morning with the boys. It had been so long since she’d been fishing she’d forgotten how relaxing the pastime could be. Sharing it with Alex and Zach had made the outing all the more pleasurable.

When they arrived at the house, they returned their poles to the shed and went inside for lunch.

After washing her hands, Shelby set the oven to broil and placed the bread on a cookie sheet. She was buttering the

slices when the screen door creaked open only to slap shut a second later.

Shelby glanced up to see Reese pulling the green hat from his head as he entered the kitchen. With a nod in her direction, he tossed his cap back into the mudroom and ran his long, tanned fingers through his hair in an attempt to smooth it into place, but the gesture only disheveled it more.

Her stomach nose-dived, fluttering wildly. The visceral reaction was becoming more and more noticeable whenever she was in Reese's presence. Instead of letting it concern her, Shelby accepted she was having a legitimate female reaction to an extremely handsome man.

"Sorry, I'm a little behind with lunch," she apologized. "We went fishing this morning and lost track of time."

"*You* took the boys fishing?" A trace of disbelief framed each word.

Unwrapping the cheese slices, Shelby placed them on the bread. "I guess they actually took me since it was their idea."

"And you didn't mind?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Why would I mind?" She slid the baking sheet onto the first rack under the broiler, leaving the door open a crack.

Reese lifted his massive shoulders in a shrug. "Most women aren't too fond of fishing."

"Guess I'm not like most women," she replied and reached into one of the overhead cabinets for plates.

No. She damn sure wasn't like most women.

Nor, given her size, was she anything like he expected.

First, Reese hadn't believed in her ability to manage the boys. Not only had she handled them with ease within the first hour of her arrival, but she had also played baseball with them,

impressing Alex and Zach with her pitching, throwing, and hitting skills.

Second, she'd cooked them a pot roast dinner with all the trimmings that rivaled his mother's. Not that he ever planned to admit that out loud.

And third, she'd taken the boys fishing since breakfast. No woman in his family went fishing. Neither his mother, grandmother, nor Olivia cared much for sports of any kind. Sure, they'd suffered through as spectators, but Reese couldn't recall a time when any of them pitched a baseball or baited a hook.

Which made Shelby's willingness to do so quite a surprise.

Before Reese could inquire as to the whereabouts of the boys, they raced into the room. "I won!" Zach declared, loud and proud.

"Only because you were halfway down the stairs before I even left the bathroom," Alex defended his loss with a roll of his eyes.

On her way back to the oven, Shelby stopped in front of the boys. "Let's see."

Alex and Zach lifted their hands for inspection. Not only did she look at both sides, but she also bent to sniff them. "No trace of worm guts or fish stink. Great job, men."

Beaming proudly, they each high-fived Shelby and then each other. As they scampered to their places at the table, Shelby pulled the sandwiches from the oven, flipped them over, and put them back to brown on the other side.

Shelby grabbed glasses, filling two with milk and two with iced tea. She also pulled a fruit plate from the fridge. She set everything on the table and met Reese's gaze. "Sandwiches are almost ready. Do you need to wash up?"

Reese glanced down at his grease and dirt-covered hands. "Looks like I might."

"Then you better get 'er done," Zach advised with a grin.

Nodding, Reese headed to the half-bath in the mudroom, where he washed off the grit and grime. Shelby had transferred the grilled cheese to a plate when he returned to the kitchen a few minutes later.

Once she set the platter on the table, she turned and ran right into him. “Sorry.” She started to skirt around him.

“Aren’t you gonna inspect Dad’s hands?” Alex wanted to know.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Shelby answered.

“Why not? You inspected ours.”

“Well, your daddy is a grown man, who I expect knows how to wash his hands properly before eating.” Shelby looked at Reese. “Right?”

“I should,” he agreed yet found himself holding his hands up between them. “But maybe you should check to be sure.”

Shelby gave his palms a cursory glance. “They look awesome.”

“You didn’t smell ‘em,” Alex pointed out.

“He wasn’t handling worms and smelly fish all morning,” she countered.

“But he probably had them stuck in poop or something,” Zach said, and both he and his brother collapsed into a fit of giggles.

With a shake of her head, Shelby leaned forward and gave his hands a quick whiff. “Nothing but soap.” She stepped aside and motioned toward his place at the table. “You’re good to go.”

Reese bit back a grin and took his seat. Though the boys threw her a curve by insisting he submit to the same hand inspection they had, Shelby didn’t miss a beat.

Too bad Reese couldn’t say the same for himself. With Shelby standing close enough to touch, his body tightened when she focused her attention on his hands. Her wildflower scent wrapped around him like a glove, and it took every

ounce of willpower he possessed not to lean toward her and inhale deeply.

Fortunately, she walked away before he made a complete fool of himself.

By the time Shelby returned with the napkins, everyone had filled their plates and dug in. Barely two minutes passed before Alex wanted to know what they would do that afternoon.

“Right now, you’re going to finish eating,” Reese informed them.

“We went fishin’ this morning,” Zach stated. “And guess what? Shelby can fish just as good as us. She wasn’t scared to touch the worms or the fish or nothing.”

Reese washed down his first sandwich with a huge gulp of iced tea. “Impressive.” And it was.

“Yep. She can play baseball *and* fish. Last night, she said she’d even ridden four-wheelers before. I bet you can do anything, can’t you?” Zach’s eyes were wide with admiration and affection.

A blush stole across her cheeks. “No. There are lots of things I can’t do.”

“Name one,” Alex challenged.

“I can’t sing.”

“I meant fun things like playin’ ball and ridin’ four-wheelers and horses.”

“You ride horses?” Reese found himself asking.

“I do.” Shelby nodded. “In fact, it’s one of my favorite things to do.”

Though Lone Oaks was a farm split between raising cattle and horses, if he were ever forced to choose between the two, Reese would always choose the horses. Olivia hadn’t been fond of either animal. He’d often begged her to ride with him, promising to give her the gentlest mare in the stable or even put her on the horse with him.

She'd still refused.

Sometimes Reese wondered what had attracted them to each other in the first place. Most of what he enjoyed doing, she didn't. And vice versa. She didn't care for horses, didn't like to get dirty, and often chose to stay indoors rather than venture outside.

Reese always chalked their connection as a clear case of opposites attracting. Since he'd been a goner for her from the instant they met, what else could it be? His feelings for Olivia had been reciprocated. And their love blossomed into something beautiful and sacred. Something so strong and fierce, Reese believed it would sustain them forever.

Then she'd gotten sick, and his world had shattered into a million pieces.

And now?

Now, he was sitting across the table from a woman who shared his interests, handled his boys like a pro, and elicited feelings within him he never expected to have again.

Feelings he should never have for anyone other than his wife.

"We could go riding after lunch," Alex suggested, turning his full attention to his father. "Can we, Dad?"

Reese shook his head. "Not today, Bud."

"Why not?"

"Because I've got work to do out in the fields."

"Shelby can take us."

"I think it best if I go along the first time." *And why is that?*

"How about we all go tonight after supper?" Zach pled with his little hands clasped together against his chest.

Reese glanced up at Shelby. He didn't want to presume anything. After all, he had told her the day before he would take care of the boys in the evenings. She may have already

made other plans, like visiting with her Aunt Wanda. Or video chatting with someone back home.

Like her boyfriend.

Nah. Reese doubted Shelby was involved with someone in North Carolina. For one, his mother would have known and at least alerted Holden so that he wouldn't put the moves on her. Two, Reese couldn't imagine why any woman would want to be separated from her significant other for six weeks. And three, no man in his right mind would ever agree to let his girlfriend travel four hundred miles away to babysit another man's children for the summer.

He sure as hell wouldn't.

"Well, can we?" Zach prompted.

Reese shook off those thoughts. "Shelby may have other plans for this evening," Reese replied, providing her an out if she wanted one.

Zach turned toward Shelby. "Do you have other plans?"

Surprisingly, Reese found himself hoping she didn't. She did say horseback riding was one of her favorite pastimes. And she could always visit her aunt or video chat later.

Right?

"No. I don't."

Relief washed over Reese.

Dammit.

"So, do you wanna come with us?" Alex posed the question.

"Sure. I'd love to go riding." Shelby flashed another one of her brilliant smiles, and Reese's chest tightened, along with other more southern areas of his anatomy.

"Yay!" Zach squealed and fist-bumped his older brother. "So, what are we going to do after lunch?"

What Reese wouldn't give to have their endless supply of energy. "You've got a backyard full of things to occupy your

time. You don't need to be entertained every minute of the day."

"But Dad..."

Reese raised a brow and did his best to bestow one of his mother's trademark *looks* on his sons. Since neither of them made any fuss, he considered his imitation a success. But despite seeing them settle down, Reese wasn't naïve enough to believe their little minds weren't busy conjuring up a million things they could do this afternoon that would also include Shelby.

Once all the sandwiches were eaten and only three pieces of cantaloupe remained on the fruit platter, the grandfather clock chimed once. Reese wiped his mouth, laid the napkin in the middle of his plate, and pushed himself away from the table. "Guess that's my cue to get back to work." He stood. "Thanks for lunch."

"My pleasure." Shelby began gathering the dishes. "Does six still work for supper?"

Reese nodded as the boys scampered from the kitchen. Like last night, he was reluctant to leave. His fingers itched to tuck a loose piece of her hair back into the folds of the braid down the middle of her back.

Hell, who was he kidding? Because what he really wanted to do was back Shelby up against the counter and kiss her until neither one of them could breathe.

"Is something wrong?" Shelby asked as his mind wandered to places it had no business going.

Shit. He must have been leering at her like some wretched old geezer or hormone-driven teenager. "No," he managed with a shake of his head.

Shelby squirted dishwashing liquid into the sink and turned on the tap. "Okay. Just checking." She slid the dishes into the sudsy water.

"I know the boys kind of put you on the spot about joining us for horseback riding after supper. If you'd rather not, I understand."

“Would *you* rather I not go?” Shelby’s whiskey-brown eyes emphasized the question.

Oh, he wanted Shelby to go all right. In fact, he wouldn’t be opposed to a ride for just the two of them. Especially since he couldn’t remember the last time he’d allowed himself to take a nice leisurely ride over the land he loved. To share the experience with a beautiful woman, well, that would equate to the icing on his favorite cake.

But none of those thoughts put him in the running for father of the year. Not by a long shot. Plus, Alex and Zach were really looking forward to the outing. And they wanted Shelby to come too.

“If you want to come with us, I’m happy to have you alone.”

“Really?”

Heat rose from his neck to his cheeks. “I meant along. Sorry.”

Smiling, Shelby slung the dishtowel over her shoulder and turned around to face him.

“Are you sure? Because I get the distinct impression I make you uncomfortable.”

What the hell? “What makes you think that?”

“Well, you must admit this is a rather odd situation.”

“What? Going riding after supper?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of two unattached thirty-something people of the opposite sex, who just met a day ago, living under the same roof for the summer.”

Oh. *That.*

Reese cleared his throat. “You’re nothing like Boone’s sister.”

Shelby narrowed her gaze. “Who’s Boone?”

“My foreman. His sister, Reba, was supposed to be the one helping with the boys while my parents and grandparents went

on vacation. But she broke her leg and couldn't travel. She's at least sixty and would make about three of you." Why did he add that last part? It was like he'd never talked to a woman before.

Shelby smiled, and Reese's heartbeat kicked up several notches. "I see."

"Yeah, I imagine you do."

She leaned a slim hip against the counter. "If it makes you feel any better, I have no intention of making things difficult for you, Reese. I'm just here to help with the boys. So, if you'd rather I didn't go riding with you guys, I completely understand."

The thought of Shelby not going with them bothered Reese a hell of a lot more than his growing attraction for her did. Instinctively, he took a step toward her and surrendered to the burning need to tuck in the loose piece of hair brushing her cheek. His fingers lingered a second longer than necessary on the underside of her ear. "And if I want you to go?"

Her eyes locked with his. "Then I'll look forward to it."

Yeah. So would he. "We should eat a little earlier. Say around five? That'll give us extra daylight for riding."

Shelby nodded. "I can make that work."

"Good."

And for the first time in longer than he could remember, Reese couldn't wait until suppertime.

CHAPTER FIVE

Anticipation hummed through Shelby for the rest of the afternoon. Nothing disruptive. Just a vague sensation buzzing beneath the surface yet distracting enough to notice. Particularly every time she found herself checking the time.

Ridiculous, right?

Still, if she'd looked at the clock once in the last four hours, she'd looked a hundred times, willing the hands to move closer to five with each glance. Then berating herself when she realized her growing impatience with the time moving at a snail's pace was less about going horseback riding for the first time in a long time and more about joining Reese and the boys for this evening's after-supper outing.

Again, ridiculous, right?

Not to mention a recipe for disaster considering the four of them were likely to engage in countless other activities during the next six weeks. Activities designed for Reese to spend more time with his sons. To rebuild and strengthen their relationship, not add complications into the mix.

For any of them.

Yeah, all the more reason for Shelby to keep her focus where it belonged—on Alex and Zach.

So, when Reese returned to the house by five o'clock, Shelby valiantly did her best to ignore the little thrill that zipped through her entire body as she set the food on the table.

While they ate, their conversation revolved around what the boys had done that afternoon, the ride they couldn't wait to go on, and other horseback riding adventures they'd had in the past.

Once everyone finished, Shelby shooed them all out to the barn to saddle their mounts while she cleaned up the dishes. Having changed into jeans and boots earlier, she only needed to load the dishwasher, scrub the few pans she'd dirtied, wipe off the table, and put the leftovers in the fridge.

And to remind herself she was only along to enjoy the evening ride with the Blackwood boys. Nothing more.

When Shelby arrived at the stable, she found Alex and Zach already astride two paint ponies outside the big sliding barn doors, where Reese led out a beautiful palomino gelding alongside a sleek chestnut mare.

"You're just in time." Reese handed Shelby the reins to the mare. "This is Lucy."

"Hey there, pretty lady," Shelby crooned, sliding her hand down the white blaze in the center of the horse's face. Lucy rewarded her with a friendly whinny. Yeah, riding this beauty was what she needed to focus on.

"She likes you," Zach informed her.

"I hope so." Lifting the reins over Lucy's head, Shelby quickly swung herself into the saddle. Being back on a horse felt great. Smiling, she tucked her feet into the stirrups and strapped on the riding helmet Reese handed her.

In one fluid motion that set off a delicious ripple of the well-defined muscles of his arms and back, Reese mounted the palomino. "This is Zeus."

The gelding was about two hands taller than her pony, and though Lucy was a perfect specimen of horseflesh, Zeus was absolute magnificence.

Much like the man on his back.

"He's beautiful."

“That he is.” Reese clicked his tongue, prompting the gelding to move away from the stable. Shelby and the boys fell in line behind to follow their leader.

Once they cleared the corrals and paddocks, they entered a wide-open field that stretched as far as the eye could see. “Can we go now, Dad?”

“Just remember the rules.”

“We will,” both boys chorused, nudging their ponies into an all-out gallop over the rolling pasture.

“So you’re okay with them riding ahead on their own?” Shelby asked, not in judgment but to ascertain the parameters if she and the boys set off for a ride on their own.

Reese nodded. “They’ve been riding since before they could walk. But they never ride alone. An adult must be with them. And they know the rules to follow.”

“Which are?”

“They must stay together and always have their two-way radios on them.”

Reese crossed his large hands atop the saddle horn and leaned forward. “You can’t see it from here, but this pasture borders the creek on one side about half a mile ahead. The boys know they are never to go past the water. Until you get the feel of the area, you might not want to go farther than that either.”

His cobalt gaze swung back to her. “You won’t need it today, but you should also carry a two-way since there are pockets of no cell service all over the farm. Plus, the boys will only have their radios.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Wish I could tell you it’s something I came up with, but like most everything else around here, it was my mother’s brainchild.”

Shelby smiled. “Mothers do have a way of thinking of almost everything.”

“Mine sure does. Hence, the reason *you’re* here.”

“What do you mean?” Though she knew the injury his foreman’s sister had sustained had precluded her from coming to take care of the boys, Shelby got the feeling he meant more than that.

Reese nudged Zeus in the ribs with the heel of his boot, and the gelding began walking. Lucy followed suit, falling in step with the bigger horse. “When Boone’s sister couldn’t come for the summer, I assured my mother we’d be fine on our own. That I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself and the boys. That we didn’t need anyone to stay with us the entire time she was away.” He cast a sidelong glance in Shelby’s direction. “Obviously, she disagreed. Even went so far as to say she wouldn’t go if I refused to let you come.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, yes, I am.”

“So, you mean to tell me your mother was okay with a virtual stranger coming into her home to take care of her grandsons rather than leaving them with you? Their father?” Shelby wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, that makes sense,” she chided with a roll of her eyes.

“Mama doesn’t consider you a stranger.”

“Only because I’m her best friend’s niece.”

“And your aunt is also my father’s secretary.”

In all the years Shelby visited her Aunt Wanda and Uncle Caleb, she had never met Reese before yesterday. Sure, she’d heard about him and his brothers. Had even seen a few pictures. But whenever she tagged along with her aunt to Lone Oaks, the brothers were either working, away at school, or otherwise engaged. Plus, her visits rarely lasted more than a couple of weeks.

“But you and I have never met, which means, for all intents and purposes, *we are* strangers.”

“Totally irrelevant. My mother’s satisfaction with you as Reba’s replacement was all that mattered.”

“To you?”

“No. *To her.*”

“And you just agreed?” Shelby’s voice rose in disbelief.

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

Yes, she was. But she was also under the impression Reese had agreed to the arrangements. “You didn’t have any objections?”

“Like you said, you *are* my mother’s best friend’s niece.”

“And that was enough for you?”

A glimmer of what could pass for the beginning of a grin twinkled in Reese’s blue eyes. “Well, that and the fact that she’d have canceled her vacation if I’d refused.”

“You’re kidding.” He had to be.

“No.” Reese shook his head. “I think she was afraid that if someone whose primary responsibility was to take care of the boys wasn’t here, they might get hurt or not be fed properly or be carried off by a pack of wolves or something.”

“You would never have let anything like that happen.” Even in the short time she’d spent in his company, Shelby had no doubts about that.

“I’d like to agree, but I haven’t exactly been the father Alex and Zach deserve since my wife died. I kinda checked out on everything but working the farm. If my mother hadn’t stepped in and assumed the boys’ care, it’s hard to tell where Alex, Zach, and I would be right now.”

Shelby’s heart broke for this man. And his sons. “That’s what families are supposed to do, though. You’re lucky yours is so caring and supportive.”

“You’re right.” Reese shifted those compelling blue eyes in her direction again. “And since I need to prove to my mother *I am* responsible enough to ensure the health and well-being of her grandsons while she’s away, I better make sure you’re as good on horseback as you say.”

She narrowed her gaze. “What do my horseback riding skills have to do with you being a responsible father?”

“Well, you are here to take care of Alex and Zach, so as part of my parental duties, I should ensure you really know what you’re doing.”

“You have doubts?”

“Better to be safe than sorry before agreeing to let you take the boys riding on your own, don’t you agree?”

Though she realized he was teasing her, Shelby accepted his challenge. “All right. What do I have to do to prove my capabilities to you?”

“Race me to the creek.”

“Okay. But remember, you asked for it.” Grinning, Shelby dug her heels into Lucy’s side, and the mare broke into an all-out gallop, leaving Reese and Zeus in the dust.

Literally.

As Lucy’s hooves ate up the lush, green pasture, Reese sat motionless in his saddle, impressed and thoroughly awed by the majestic synchronicity between Shelby and the gleaming chestnut mare. She was a natural rider. Confident and totally in control of both herself and the thoroughbred beneath her.

Together, they were poetry in motion. Every movement in tandem. As if they were one. Both smooth and effortless. A perfect symphony of class and grace.

Impatient and upset about being left behind, Zeus tossed his head, dancing in place and chomping at the bit.

“Okay, boy.” Reese loosened his hold on the reins and clicked his tongue. That was all the palomino needed to take flight, his hooves barely touching the ground as he raced across the field to catch Lucy and Shelby.

Not that they had a snowball's chance in hell of accomplishing that feat. Shelby and the mare had gotten too much of a head start while Reese had been content to simply sit and watch.

Clearly, Shelby had not exaggerated her horseback riding abilities. Not at all. From what Reese had just witnessed, Shelby was as comfortable around horses as she was in her own skin. If the immediate kinship she formed with Lucy wasn't proof, the ease with which she accepted his challenge by taking off hell bent for leather astride the sleek mare certainly was.

Guess the boys were right. There didn't seem to be much Shelby Corbett couldn't do. Everything appeared to come as naturally to her as breathing—from playing ball and fishing to horseback riding and cooking their favorite meals. So far, she'd impressed him to the point he couldn't help himself from wondering what else the petite beauty might be good at.

Easy there, he cautioned himself. Shelby was at Lone Oaks to care for Alex and Zach, not scratch some itch he was having a hell of a time relieving on his own. Yet, in the two days since her arrival, his world sure hadn't seemed as bleak.

Even this morning was different. For the first time in a long time, Reese didn't hit the snooze button once. Instead, when his alarm buzzed, he shut it off, hauled himself out of bed, and dressed without any of his usual trepidation. Hell, he'd even taken a few extra minutes to shave and wet his hair into some semblance of order before heading downstairs for his morning coffee.

Where the sight of Shelby after her morning run instantly blindsided him.

And what a sight she made, too. Body-hugging spandex, skin flushed and glistening with sweat, she resuscitated a need in Reese he'd thought long gone.

Dead. Never to be revived.

His traitorous body still tightened at the memory, but the guilt soon followed.

As it should.

Reese had no business finding another woman attractive. He'd been fortunate enough to find the love of his life once. Just because his time with Olivia had been cut short didn't give him a free pass to go looking for a replacement.

Especially not in the form of Shelby Corbett. The niece of his mother's best friend and his father's administrative assistant. Who was only here for six weeks and had her own life in North Carolina.

Again, Shelby was here to take care of his boys' needs, not his.

Reese tried to keep that front and center in his mind when his heart thundered inside his chest at the sight of Shelby reining Lucy to a halt at the creek's edge. As she dismounted, he pulled Zeus to a stop beside her.

"Looks like I won," Shelby declared, her amber eyes sparkling and her grin beaming.

"Well, you did have quite a head start," Reese pointed out as he swung himself off Zeus and brought him forward for a drink.

Shelby arched her right brow. "*You* were the one who suggested we race," she reminded him. "So you actually had the advantage of getting a head start. You should have taken it."

"I was being a gentleman."

She rolled her eyes. "I bet."

Reese let her response go rather than admitting he was so enthralled with the impressive picture she and Lucy made as they galloped in sync across the pasture that he couldn't summon his faculties enough to prod Zeus into motion.

Fortunately, Alex saved Reese from responding. "Dad! Did you see how fast Shelby and Lucy were going?" His blue eyes were wide with unabashed awe.

Reese nodded. "I sure did."

“She beat you *and* Zeus,” Zach stated unnecessarily as he sidled up to them. His little face scrunched up skeptically. “Did you let her win?”

Reese couldn't keep the rusty chuckle from escaping. “No. I didn't let her win,” he answered truthfully but refrained from mentioning how much he enjoyed watching her sway in tandem with the mare as she galloped across the field in front of him.

“See, I told you,” Alex informed Zach with older brother superiority.

“Do you have a horse?” Zach asked Shelby.

She shook her head. “Not anymore. I don't have any place to keep one where I live.”

“Then how do you get to ride?”

Shelby shrugged her slender shoulders. “There's a stable close to my townhouse back home. When I'm not too busy, I go there, but it's not as often as I'd like.”

“That sucks.”

“Alex!” Reese admonished with a warning lift of his brow.

“Well, it does.”

“Regardless, there are better ways to phrase it in the company of a lady.”

Judging by the perplexed expression on his face, Alex wasn't sure what better word to use. “Well, at least she can ride every day this summer if she wants. And she doesn't have to drive anywhere to do it.”

A smile as bright as the noonday sun dimpled Shelby's cheeks, and Reese's chest tightened.

Dammit.

“That's very kind of you to offer, Alex.” Shelby one-arm hugged him. “But I think we need to make sure it's okay with your father first.”

“I think you proved how well you can ride,” Reese replied. And since we have plenty of horses and fields to ride them in, you’re welcome to both whenever you want.”

Her teeth flashed white against her sun-kissed skin. “Thank you.”

Reese wished for more things he could offer Shelby if it meant she’d smile at him like that again.

Pushing those kinds of thoughts from his mind, Reese suggested they should make their way back to the stable. Reluctantly, the boys hopped on their ponies and turned in the direction they’d come. Shelby and Reese simultaneously swung themselves onto their mounts and followed.

They took the ride home at a much more leisurely pace, giving them time to enjoy their surroundings. The sun hovered along the ridge line of the mighty Blue Ridge, creating a majestic backdrop as they rode back in companionable silence.

When they slowed to a trot, Reese noticed she posted in the saddle. “So you’re an English rider,” he observed, since Western riders generally bounced along during a trot and English riders used their legs to lift themselves out of the saddle with the rhythm of the horse’s gait.

“It’s how I learned. But I’ve also done a fair amount of Western riding. Plus, posting is easier on my insides and rear end.”

“I get that,” Reese agreed, definitely not wanting anything to cause pain to her perfectly rounded backside.

Which he shouldn’t even be thinking about, for Pete’s sake.

They rode in silence again until Shelby said, “Thanks.”

Puzzled, Reese narrowed his gaze. “For what?”

“For this. I’ve missed riding, and when my aunt reminded me about all the horses at Lone Oaks, I hoped I’d get the chance to ride while here.”

“I meant what I said back at the creek. You’re welcome to ride whenever you want.” They threaded their way through the

gate into the area outside the stable. “And if you ever want to go for a ride without the boys, just let me know.”

“I appreciate that.”

Reese nodded. They both dismounted at the same time. Mindlessly, Reese went through the motions of unfastening his saddle from the palomino and carrying it into the tack room, where he slid it onto one of the empty racks protruding from the wall.

He was on his way back out when he nearly collided with Shelby, who was right behind him with her saddle in her arms.

“I was coming back for that.”

“Now, you don’t need to.” She sidestepped him and placed the saddle on the wooden rack beside his. “Besides, where I come from, caring for the horse and tack is a part of riding.” She looked around. “Where do you keep your brushes?”

“The boys and I will groom the horses. You haven’t had a minute to yourself all day. Why don’t you go on to the house and enjoy a few minutes of peace while we finish things up here?”

“It seems unfair for you and the boys to do all the work when I had such a good time riding Lucy.”

Reese let his gaze drift to hers. His stomach knotted. What was she doing to him? He wanted her to stay, but she deserved to go. And she *should*. For both their sakes. “There’ll be plenty of other opportunities for you to fulfill your grooming duties,” he assured her, hoping she’d let it go and return to the house.

If she didn’t, Reese feared doing something they’d both regret. Like backing her up against the wall and kissing the hell out of her.

Thankfully, she relented. “Okay.” She started to turn, paused, and looked at him with her warm whiskey-brown eyes. “But only this time,” Shelby stipulated as her luscious mouth curved into another one of her dazzling smiles.

Then she was gone, leaving him to stand there in such an aroused state Reese wasn't sure he could move. His heart pounded, and his blood sizzled, scorching its way through his veins. More than anything, he wanted to follow her and drag her back into one of the empty stalls to ravage every inch of her deliciously hot body.

As much as he wanted to believe he only needed to release what he kept telling himself was over a year's worth of sexual deprivation, Reese realized it went much deeper. Sure, he could find a number of women to quench the physical need burning through every cell in his body, but he was smart enough to know it wouldn't do a damn thing to quiet the longing deep inside his soul.

The same longing that had steadily intensified from the moment his mother had introduced him to Shelby Corbett two days ago.

CHAPTER SIX

Shelby felt wonderful.

Only it had little to do with her invigorating shower or the free time she'd been allotted but everything to do with her evening ride with Reese and the boys.

Growing up, she spent many hours on horseback, both at home in North Carolina and at Landry's Meadow when visiting her aunt and uncle. She had many fond memories that involved riding, and tonight made her realize how much she missed everything about it.

Like the unmistakable smell of horse and leather. The sheer power of a thousand-pound animal beneath her. The brisk air whipped against her cheeks. The freedom of an uninhibited gallop across a wide-open field, her body rocking in perfect rhythm with the horse as its hooves gobbled up the ground.

Riding Lucy tonight had been beyond incredible. Freeing. Exhilarating. Utterly spectacular. But the best part had been Reese issuing an open invitation for her to ride whenever she wanted during her stay at Lone Oaks.

Well, maybe that was the second-best part because, if she were totally honest, the best part about her ride tonight had been sharing it with the boys.

And Reese.

At first, Shelby had felt a little like a fifth wheel on their family outing. But all three of them had welcomed her with open arms, setting her mind at ease.

Of course, Shelby knew Alex and Zach had no problem with her accompanying them, but she hadn't been entirely sure about Reese. Though he'd opened up a bit more today, he was still a hard man to read. So far, Shelby continued to tread carefully around him, stifling an inherent need to make everything right for him and the boys. Especially after Reese had shared how he hadn't exactly been father of the year material after his wife's passing.

Over the years, Shelby's mother had affectionately referred to her daughter as the "fixer." And on more than one occasion, Barbara Jean Corbett had warned her only daughter to be careful. "Take a step back, baby girl," her mother advised in an attempt to keep Shelby from getting hurt in the process of helping others. "Some people need to find their own way, mend their own fences, and work out their own problems. You can't fix everything for everybody."

More than once, Shelby wished she'd heeded her mom's advice. Particularly whenever she stupidly allowed her heart to get tangled in the mix.

Shelby pulled on the top of her pink and white pajama set, wondering if her mother would caution her about Reese. Was he someone who needed to find his own way? Who neither wanted nor was ready to accept any help she might offer him?

Probably, she decided, shimmying into the mid-thigh-length sleep shorts. Besides, what kind of help did she have to offer Reese, anyway? She was already cooking his meals and taking care of his children. And in six weeks, once the elder Blackwoods came home from vacation, Shelby would return to her own life in Bishop Creek, North Carolina.

All the more reason for Shelby to keep her focus on what Anna Blackwood had commissioned her to do for the summer and ignore the sadness haunting Reese's beautiful blue eyes.

Plus, Shelby had no experience helping someone through the anguish of losing a loved one. The only losses of her adult life had been her maternal grandfather and Uncle Caleb, Aunt Wanda's husband. Though she mourned their passing and missed them both terribly, Shelby realized her loss didn't

begin to compare with the devastating heartbreak Reese had suffered.

When Reese had lost Olivia, he'd also lost a piece of himself. Shelby had no understanding of that kind of profound grief. Or the desolation left in its wake.

She couldn't begin to imagine how Reese felt, let alone help him through his unimaginable sorrow. Time might dull the pain, making it easier to put one foot in front of the other and move forward with his everyday life, but a distinct voice would always remain.

Sometimes, all those left behind could do was be grateful and cherish the memories of the time they did have together while trying to make the most of the life that still lay ahead.

Perhaps that was how Shelby could help Reese and the boys. While at Lone Oaks, she could find other ways to aid in their healing. Help them rebuild the father-son relationship that Reese admitted to neglecting since his wife's death. This evening, going horseback riding was a great start that led to more bonding time while grooming the horses together and bedding them down for the night.

As she rubbed baby lotion on her arms and legs, Shelby decided to continue working with the boys to find more activities to strengthen the bond with their father. Activities they could continue at the end of summer when she was back home in Bishop Creek.

An ear-splitting scream followed by boots stomping up the steps pierced the silence. "Shell-Bee!" Fists pounded on her door. "Come quick! Zach's bleeding."

Heart thundering inside her chest, Shelby pushed her arms into the sleeves of her robe as the door flew open. Alex rushed in and grabbed her hand. "C'mon. Dad has him in the kitchen."

They sprinted down the stairs toward Zach's plaintive wails. "No! Don't touch it!" he screamed before releasing another deafening squeal.

Shelby braced for what she might find when she stepped into the kitchen. As an elementary school PE teacher, she'd seen her fair share of bumps, bruises, and bloody messes from falls on the playground, accidental collisions in the small gymnasium that served as her classroom, and now and then, the occasional fight between classmates.

In ten years, she'd tended to busted lips, goose eggs, lacerations, sprains, fractures, and everything in between. Shelby learned no two children possessed the same pain tolerance either. Some screamed bloody murder over a hangnail, while others hardly flinched when their arm was dangling from a dislocated shoulder socket.

Since this was the first mishap since her arrival, Shelby had no baseline in which to discern the severity of Zach's injury based on his cries alone. She quickened her pace and darted into the kitchen, where she found Zach propped on the counter by the farmer's sink. Reese was at his side, holding a blood-soaked dishcloth to the littlest Blackwood's forehead. "What happened?"

"He fell and busted his head open," Alex answered.

"Only 'cuz you were chasing me with that dead mouse," Zach sobbed in defense.

Shelby moved in closer. "May I see?"

Reese slowly peeled back the edge of the cloth to reveal an ugly-looking cut that sliced right through Zach's left eyebrow. When Zach let loose another blood-curdling scream, Reese quickly recovered the wound.

"I can't tell how deep it is because he won't let me look at it long enough to see."

"'Cuz it hurts," Zach explained, his little voice rising in pitch with each word.

Shelby met Zach's tear-filled blue eye not covered by the cloth. "Do you think I can take a closer peek at it? I promise I'll be extra gentle."

His little body shuttered between sobs. "You promise?"

“Cross my heart,” Shelby vowed and made an X in front of her chest.

“Oh-kkay,” he snuffled.

Shelby sidled closer and fastened her thumb and forefinger on the towel above Reese’s hand so he could pull free. When his fingers brushed her palm, Shelby tried to focus on the little boy crying inconsolably in front of her and not on the heat zinging up her arm from Reese’s incidental touch.

Once Shelby was the only one holding the rag in place, Reese shifted to Zach’s other side and wrapped his arm around his son, holding him against his chest as Shelby gingerly peeled back the dishcloth one micro inch at a time. Zach scrunched up his face, primed to yelp at any moment.

“You’re being very brave,” she praised him, her voice soft as butter as she revealed more of the gash on his forehead.

“Is it s-still b-bleeding?” Zach asked, his tears subsiding little by little.

“Not much,” Shelby murmured and removed the towel completely. Dang, it was nasty looking, but at first sight, it didn’t appear *too* deep. “You’re doing an awesome job, Zach. But I need you to be super brave while I try to get a better look at how deep it is. Okay?”

Fresh tears welled up in his shimmering blue eyes. “It’s gonna hurt. I know it’s gonna hurt.” His voice wobbled, and Shelby feared another meltdown.

“But when I took off the towel, it didn’t hurt, did it? Don’t you trust me to be just as gentle now?”

His little lips quivered, but he nodded anyway.

“Why don’t you close your eyes?”

Instant alarm beamed across his tear- and blood-stained face. “Why?”

Shelby kept her voice calm. “Sometimes, it helps not to watch. That way, we don’t anticipate the worst happening. Okay?”

Bravely, Zach gave her another uncertain nod.

Smiling, Shelby waited until he squeezed his eyes shut before she inspected the laceration, gently probing to get the best look. Thankfully, her initial inspection had proved correct—the cut wasn't very deep. A few butterfly bandages should sufficiently patch the shallow gash back together.

“What do you think?” Reese asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

She looked up at him. His eyes were narrowed, intensely blue, and full of concern. “I don't think stitches are necessary.” Which was a relief in itself.

“What about a concussion?”

She hadn't considered that yet.

Zach opened his eyes and looked up at them through inky, wet-spiked lashes. “What's a ca-cussion?”

“Something that happens when we bump our heads sometimes,” she replied as she peered into his left eye and then his right. Both pupils were equal in size. “Can you close your eyes again for a minute, Zach?”

“Why?”

“I just want to check something.”

With a deep breath, he squeezed his eyes shut again. “Do you have any butterfly bandages?” Shelby asked Reese while waiting for sixty seconds to elapse.

“Let me check.” He went into the mudroom, quickly returning with a handful of boxes. “Thought you might need some gauze and Band-Aids, too.”

“Thanks.” Shelby turned her attention back to Zach. “Okay, open up,” she instructed, her gaze trained on his pupils as his lids lifted. They constricted against the light. “His pupils are reactive,” she announced and felt rather than heard Reese's sigh of relief.

“What's that mean?” Zach wanted to know.

“It means they're doing what they're supposed to do.”

“So, I don’t have a ca-cussion?”

Shelby fumbled through the boxes and found the one with the butterfly bandages. “It’s a good sign.” She held up two fingers. “How many fingers do you see?”

“Two.”

“Good.” She tore open three of the strips. “Can you see okay? No blurriness?”

He shook his head. “No blurriness.”

Side by side, Shelby laid the white strips on the counter. “Headache?”

“Only where the cut is.”

“Awesome.” She looked over her right shoulder. “Alex, can you grab a clean dishtowel and wet the end of it for me with some warm water?”

“You bet.” He jumped up, ready to assist.

Locating a large Band-aid, Shelby opened it and set it beside the butterflies. Alex handed her the towel. “Thanks.” She turned her attention back to Zach. “Now, I need you to be extra brave for me one more time, okay?”

“What’re you gonna do?” His bottom lip began to quiver again.

“Well, I have to clean the blood away so I can pull the skin together with the butterfly bandages. That’ll help the edges of the cut grow back together as it heals. I promise I’ll be gentle like before.”

“But what if it hurts?”

Shelby lightly brushed away the blood around the cut with the wet towel and then dabbed the same spot with the dry end. “Well, it might hurt a little when I’m pulling the skin together. But you’re going to be really brave through it all. Right?”

His little chest shuddered. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all anyone expects.” Shelby peeled back the strips to uncover the adhesive side. With the bandage on her thumb

and forefinger of one hand, she and Reese softly pinched the two sides of the cut together.

A small whimper escaped, but Zach tried valiantly not to give in to the discomfort. Shelby pressed the butterfly into place, repeating the process twice more. Once she covered the butterflies, Shelby leaned down to look Zach in the eye and squeezed his hands. “We’re all done.”

Surprise widened his eyes. “We are?”

She gave him the brightest smile she had. “We are,” she confirmed and instinctively pressed her lips above the bandage. “I’m so proud of you, Zach. Thanks for being such a brave young man.”

Beaming, he swung his gaze toward his father. “Do you think I was brave, Daddy?”

“Absolutely.” Reese’s voice caught on the response. “The bravest of the brave,” he commended, the words earning him a gap-toothed grin as Zach nuzzled his head against his father’s chest. Reese wrapped his arms more tightly around his son and brushed his lips again Zach’s dark hair.

The gesture alone was nearly Shelby’s undoing. Emotion puddled in her eyes and burned inside her chest. What were these Blackwood men doing to her?

The last thing Shelby wanted was to make a fool of herself by blubbering over them, so she took a few steps backward and forced steadying breaths into and out of her lungs. “I don’t know about your guys,” she said once she got her emotions under better control, “but I think all this calls for some ice cream.”

Alex didn’t waste a second voicing his wholehearted agreement. Shelby scooped the ice cream into four bowls, after which Alex drizzled chocolate syrup on top. Then, he grabbed the spoons and napkins while Shelby carried the make-shift sundaes to the table where Reese now sat with Zach.

Fifteen minutes later, the bowls were all but licked clean.

“Boys, take your dishes to the sink, thank Shelby, and head upstairs to get ready for bed.”

Zach's face immediately fell. "What if my bandage gets wet?"

This boy. Always looking for an angle to get out of taking a bath. Shaking her head, Shelby did her best to suppress a grin.

"We'll be extra careful to keep it dry," Reese assured him.

Defeated, Zach heaved a mighty sigh. Then a tiny glimmer of hope lit his baby blues. "Can Shelby read the stories to us tonight?"

"I think we've taken up enough of Shelby's time today, don't you?"

Though Shelby would gladly agree to read the boys their bedtime stories, she chose not to interrupt the conversation between father and son to say so. On one hand, she didn't want them to think she wasn't interested in reading to them. But on the other, this was one of those bonding moments for Reese and his boys. And she didn't want to intrude.

So, instead of responding, Shelby continued cleaning up the kitchen as if she hadn't heard Zach's question. But never underestimate the persistence of a five-year-old. "You're not too busy to read us a story, are ya, Shelby?"

As she wrung out the dishcloth, Shelby bit back another grin. He was quite the little manipulator, she was quickly learning. Turning, she leaned her butt against the edge of the counter. "Wouldn't you rather have your father read to you? I bet he's been looking forward to it all day."

Shelby didn't miss the *look* Reese shot her from over his son's head. The one that asked, *Are you sure about that?*

Even with no tangible evidence to prove her case, Shelby did believe Reese looked forward to engaging in the boys' bedtime routine again. He just needed to remember how relentless boys their age could be with their *just one more* pleas for anything that might prolong closing their eyes for the night.

"He won't mind, will ya, Dad?"

A grin crinkled the corners of Reese's captivating eyes, which hadn't wavered from hers since Zach made his request. "Nope. Not at all." With his response, Reese lobbed the ball back into Shelby's court.

Conceding the point, Shelby nodded. "Okay. You guys let me know when you've finished washing off the stink, and I'll come up."

Amid the chorus of "woo-hoos," the boys raced from the kitchen and bounded up the steps. "Looks like Zach's head is feeling better already."

"If you have something else you'd rather do besides reading bedtime stories—" Reese began, giving her an out despite his passive attempt to manipulate the situation.

"I don't mind."

Reese cocked his head to the side and raised a brow to ensure she wasn't just being polite.

"Really," she answered his unspoken question. "Now, you better get up there before that bandage gets wet and we have yet another crisis on our hands."

It took three stories, two by Shelby and one by Reese, before the boys dared to even think about settling down enough to go to sleep. And that was only after he suggested both boys sleep in his room so Zach would be close enough for him to check throughout the night.

Reese didn't need to make the offer twice. In fact, before he finished the sentence, Alex and Zach raced from their beds to his. For the life of him, Reese would never understand the thrill of crowding three people into one bed. But for some reason, the boys preferred to sleep in his or their grandparents' room rather than their own.

Maybe it has something to do with missing their mother, that little voice in the back of his mind suggested.

Maybe so, Reese admitted as the guilt surfaced and overwhelmed him once again.

At least he was making an effort to do better by his boys. So, if sleeping in his bed made them happy, he guessed getting kicked and crowded all night was a small price to pay.

After tucking them in, Reese headed for the shower. When he emerged fifteen minutes later, Alex and Zach were fast asleep with the TV blaring. Just looking at them, their dark heads a sharp contrast against the white pillowcases, caused Reese's heart to swell inside his chest. During times like this, he found it difficult to believe they were a part of him.

The best part, he hoped.

Olivia would be so proud of them and would love them with everything she had. Both times she had shown him the positive home pregnancy tests, she could hardly contain her excitement and joy.

The day she received the cancer diagnosis, her biggest concern had been Alex and Zach. How growing up without her to share all their hallmarks and tell them how proud she was of everything they accomplished would affect them.

Her heart had broken whenever she thought about all the things she'd miss as they grew up. Watching them grow from little boys into young men. Celebrating their birthdays and every single holiday. Attending their educational activities and athletic events. Supporting them through their first crushes and soothing the inevitable heartbreaks to follow. Watching them graduate from high school, maybe even college, if that was the path they chose to pursue.

In those last months, Reese had found her in tears more often than not as she mourned everything she wouldn't be there to see. But she always shed her tears in private. When the boys were with her, they only ever saw her smiles and heard her laughter as she packed a lifetime of happiness into the short time she had remaining.

She made each day an adventure. Some more subdued and quieter than others, depending on her energy and pain levels.

But every single one was a day Alex and Zach would always remember and hold dear. More than anything, Olivia wanted to leave them with happy memories to cherish forever.

Reese believed Olivia had succeeded in all she set out to do for their boys. And for that, he was eternally grateful.

He was also painfully aware of how disappointed she'd be with him. About how he'd withdrawn, not only from their sons' lives but his own. Life without her was so much harder than Reese ever imagined. After a while, he found the easiest way to get through each day was to remove himself from where the memories of her and their life together were most prevalent.

Where he wasn't constantly reminded of everything he lost the day she died.

Unfortunately, his self-preservation tactic of throwing himself into work on the farm also kept him from spending time with Alex and Zach. Shelby had been right when she reminded him how lucky he was to have his family nearby. Not only to help with the care of his boys, but to kick him in the ass when he forgot that despite the tragedy of losing his wife, his sons still needed him.

More now than ever.

Reese realized he still had a long way to go but he meant to keep the promise he made to his mother before she left. He was going to do better. And for the past two days, he had. But evenings still proved the biggest challenge for him, since that was when he and Olivia shared most of the nighttime routines with Alex and Zach.

Much the same way he and Shelby had done tonight.

Guilt, possibly even shame, overwhelmed him. Although there was absolutely no comparison between the two, Shelby wasn't Olivia. She wasn't the mother of his children. And if she weren't the niece of his father's secretary and his mother's best friend, she wouldn't be here in the first place.

Still, no matter how hard Reese tried to convince himself otherwise, Shelby did affect him. And though he was reluctant

to admit it, he also realized his feelings were about a helluva lot more than simply satisfying his sexual frustrations.

Yeah, the lines between them had begun to blur. And it was only her second damned day at Lone Oaks.

Still, she managed Alex and Zach's care like a pro. Like tonight; she hadn't missed a beat rushing to help with Zach's injury. She also remained cool, calm, and collected, her soft voice not only a soothing balm for his son as she tended to his wound, but for Reese as well.

And she smelled like a combination of baby lotion and wildflowers.

Mesmerized, or in shock, Reese had watched as Shelby cleaned and bandaged the cut bisecting Zach's eyebrow. He noted the rubber band securing her damp hair at the nape of her neck. The pale pink ankle-length robe, untied to reveal pale pink shorty pajamas that showcased shapely and firm honey-toned legs. The bright pink color on her toes.

Why he recalled any of that, Reese didn't have a freaking clue. At the time, his focus seemed to be solely on Zach. Sure, he realized she was ministering to his son's needs and listened as she murmured gentle pleas and encouragement. Soon after, Zach's sobs had subsided, much to Reese's relief.

But that still didn't explain why he could recall, in vivid detail no less, what Shelby smelled like, or what color nail polish she had on her damned toes.

Nor did it lessen how badly his fingers itched to rip the band from her hair and fist his hands in the luxurious caramel waves as he gave into the overwhelming need to find out if her luscious mouth tasted as sweet as he imagined.

Holy hell.

Perhaps he needed a drink. Or an ice-cold shower. Since he'd just emerged from the latter, Reese went downstairs hoping someone had been kind enough to stock the fridge with at least a six-pack of beer.

The cool air from the refrigerator was a welcome relief as he plucked a longneck from the cardboard container. *Thanks,*

Mama. She might be halfway across the world, but she knew what her boys needed and made sure to have it available.

Reese twisted off the cap, tossed it in the trash, and tipped the bottle to his lips for a long gulp. As he lowered his arm, something on the porch caught his eye.

Moving closer to the window over the sink, Reese was surprised to find Shelby perched on the concrete ledge of the half-stone wall that circled and enclosed the wraparound porch. Her back was propped against one of the white supporting posts at the corner.

He took another drink of his beer and walked through the mudroom. After opening the screen door, he leaned a shoulder against it and took a moment to gaze across the length of the porch at the woman who'd consumed his thoughts all damned day.

Her eyes were closed and the waning moon bathed her features in a soft, ethereal glow. Though her robe was now belted, the material parted above her knees, exposing the length of her legs now stretched out in front of her on the ledge. For someone who wasn't very tall, Shelby had legs for days.

God. Why did she have to be so damned beautiful?

And sexy?

Reese knew he should go inside before she caught him standing there staring at her like some hormonal pimply-faced teenager who had yet to have his first wet dream.

"I don't think your mother would appreciate you standing there with the door open, letting the cool air out and all the bugs inside."

Damn his legs for not getting the message to move in time.

But her eyes hadn't opened, so how did she even know he was there? Women's intuition? Not that it mattered, since she'd obviously sensed his presence somehow.

Reese pushed himself away from the door and it slapped shut behind him. "You're probably right." How many times

had his mother told him and his brothers that, contrary to popular belief, they weren't born in a barn?

Crossing the porch, Reese stopped at the post in front of her, inches away from her pink-tipped toes. "You realize you're taking a huge risk being out here instead of seeking refuge in your room for the rest of the night."

Her eyes remained closed. "Yeah? Why's that?"

Reese leaned his left shoulder against the post, the beer bottle dangling from his fingers as he rested his right forearm on his hip. "You're running the risk of being commandeered again by one or both of the boys if they happen to wake up and need a drink of water, another story or six, or anything else their little minds can conjure up to keep them from going back to bed."

Shelby laced her fingers together against the flatness of her stomach. "Isn't that why I'm here? To take care of Alex and Zach?"

"I doubt you had a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week gig in mind when you agreed to this job." He tipped the bottle to his lips and took another swig. "Which reminds me. We've never discussed your days and time off."

Her slender but nicely defined shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug as her lashes lifted. "It's not that big of a deal. I come to Hickory Ridge every summer to visit Aunt Wanda. She's the one who suggested me to your mother. So, if I want to see her, I can either take the boys with me, or she can come here. If that's okay with you."

"Of course. But at some point, you're likely to want a little time and space away from Lone Oaks completely."

"So far, everything's been okay."

"It's only been two days." Wow, it seemed like she'd been here a lot longer. Not in a negative way, though. If anything, Shelby had blended in with them easily, and the boys already adored her.

Maybe he should be more worried about that, since her stay in Virginia was temporary.

Shifting, Shelby dropped her legs on either side of the ledge and straightened her back against the post behind her. “How about this? If I need a break or have someplace to go, I’ll let you know in plenty of time to ensure the boys will have supervision.”

“Okay.” Reese nodded. “But after seeing your baseball, fishing, and riding skills, I’m sure they’ll try to wheedle as much out of you as they can.”

The warmth of her smile crawled right inside him.

Reese lifted the beer and drained the bottle.

“That’s what little boys *and* girls do best,” Shelby replied, the smile dimpling her cheeks, which intensified the warmth coursing through him considerably. “It’s natural.”

“Well, if you don’t want to do something or are uncomfortable with anything they suggest, don’t hesitate to tell them no.”

“I won’t.” She held his gaze. “Same goes for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like tonight. When Zach asked me to read them a bedtime story, I honestly didn’t mind. But I also didn’t want to intrude on your time with the boys either. So, if they ever suggest including me in something you intend for only the three of you, please tell me. I won’t be offended. I promise.”

Her sincerity touched him. Hell, that she even bothered to consider his feelings in the matter impressed the hell out of him. Some women wouldn’t give a damn, because everything would be about them. But not Shelby. Just one more thing to fuel his increasing attraction to her.

Fuck!

He still appreciated her thoughtfulness, though.

“Okay,” he assured her. “But trust me when I tell you, that’s highly unlikely. So, if you want to qualify any parts of your previous offer, now’s your chance.”

Shelby's eyes sparkled with her grin. "How about we just leave things at, I'll let you know if and when I need time or space to myself."

Reese nodded. "Fine by me." He eased himself onto the ledge and leaned his back against the post opposite Shelby. He drew one knee to his chest. As hard as he'd fought to keep his eyes open while reading the last bedtime story to Alex and Zach, now Reese found he wasn't as tired anymore.

Maybe the shower had refreshed him.

Or maybe, for the first time in a long time, Reese was enjoying the company of a beautiful woman on a still summer night as toads croaked in the distance and lightning bugs blinked in the trees. Whatever the cause, Reese didn't want to go back inside yet. "How long have you lived in North Carolina?"

"All my life."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

Shelby shook her head. "Nope. Only child."

"I can't imagine what that would be like." He really couldn't. Because, despite the usual sibling angst, he and his brothers shared an unshakable bond. From birth, the importance of family had been ingrained in them—loyalty, responsibility, trust, and love.

Plus, it was comforting to know someone always had his back. And he had theirs. No matter what.

"Well, I can't imagine my life with three brothers." She grinned. "Or sisters, for that matter."

"It's never dull. I can tell you that much." He shifted the empty bottle from one hand to the other. "What made you go into teaching?"

"Just something I wanted to do since I was a little girl. I like working with kids and enjoy being active, so I combined everything into becoming a PE teacher."

"Win-win, huh?"

“So far.”

Reese felt comfortable with Shelby. At ease. Primarily because of how laid back and unassuming she was. She made talking with her easy. So much so, he didn't want to stop. “Did you go to school in North Carolina?”

Shelby shook her head. “No. I went to West Virginia University. They have a good five-year program that includes a master's degree. Thought I might as well get it all done in one fell swoop.”

“What's your master's in?”

“Special Education.” She crisscrossed her legs on the ledge, adjusting her robe over them. “What about you?”

“Virginia Tech with a major in Animal and Poultry Science and a minor in Equine Science.”

“From what I've seen of your bovine and equine operation, it appears you're putting your degrees to good use.”

Her praise gratified him, sending warmth curling through him again. “Thanks.”

Shelby beamed another one of those dazzling smiles at him, and Reese had to remind himself to breathe. “You're welcome.” She uncrossed her legs, swinging them to the floor of the porch. “Well, five o'clock comes mighty early in the morning, so I should get some sleep.”

Disappointment churned through him. Which was ridiculous. It was almost eleven o'clock, and both of them had been up since before dawn, each putting in quite a full day apart as well as together this evening with the boys.

Still, Reese was reluctant to move. “Apparently, my youngest brother passed you this morning when you were running.”

“In the black pickup?”

Reese nodded. “You made quite the impression on him.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why do you say that?”

“Because he didn’t waste any time coming to interrogate me about the hot nanny.”

Her right brow arched. “Oh, really?” Shelby folded her arms beneath her breasts, causing Reese to remember how the material of her racerback tank top had outlined their ample shape to perfection this morning. “And what was your response to his observation?”

“That you weren’t *the nanny*, but Wanda Landry’s good-hearted niece, who was here to help take care of the boys while our mother is on vacation.”

“I see.”

Did she? Reese couldn’t tell if he’d offended her or not. It certainly hadn’t been his intent. Mainly, he just wanted to keep talking to her. To watch the moonlight play across her lovely features. To catch a few more whiffs of wildflowers mingled with baby lotion. To see the sparkle in her whiskey brown eyes when she smiled.

And caution her about his youngest brother.

“Holden likes to yank everybody’s chain. I’m surprised he didn’t show up here tonight to meet you for himself.”

“Would that have been a problem?”

Not under most circumstances. But this was Holden they were talking about. The thought of him or any other man sniffing around Shelby bothered Reese more than it probably should. “Holden has somewhat of a reputation as a ladies’ man. And he loves them all. Best for you to be forewarned, I guess.”

“Is he?”

“Is he what?”

“A ladies’ man? You said he had somewhat of a reputation as a ladies’ man. I’m only wondering if he truly is or if it’s merely conjecture.”

“Why? You looking for a hookup while you’re here?” he asked, sounding defensive to his own ears.

Shelby must have thought the same because a wicked gleam flashed in her eyes. “No. I just figured as his brother, you would know the truth.”

Then, why did it even matter to her?

Moreover, why the hell did *he* care?

Because if she was looking to hook up, you don't want it to be with your brother when you're right here, that damnable voice inside his head taunted.

Which was absurd. He had no claim on her. Hell, he didn't even know she existed three days ago. Well, he knew she existed, Reese corrected himself. His mother had informed him a week ago she was coming, but he hadn't laid eyes on her until yesterday.

Now, all he wanted to do was look at her. Spend time in her company. Listen while she talked.

Imagine how she would feel in his arms as he kissed her.

What the hell was happening to him?

Reese mentally shook his head and forced himself to answer her question. “He sees his fair share of women. Usually not the same one for any length of time, though.”

“Maybe he hasn't met the right one yet.”

“Maybe not.” He held her gaze. “Or maybe he doesn't want to.”

“Either way, it'll be interesting to meet him.”

Uneasiness crept through him. Again. Was she insinuating she might be *the one* Holden hadn't met yet?

Why the hell had he brought Holden up in the first place? If he had any sense, he should have let her go to bed as she'd intended. But no, when she mentioned five o'clock coming early, all Reese could think about was the skimpy little outfit she wore to run in and how Holden made sure Reese was aware he'd noticed.

Shelby smiled again, and his insides twisted into a bundle of knots. “Well, good night, Reese,” she said as she walked

past him.

The screen door squeaked when she opened it.

“Shelby?” He rolled to his feet. When she stopped and looked over her shoulder, he said, “Thanks.”

A slight furrow etched between her brows. “For?”

“For helping with Zach’s cut. For reading the boys their bedtime stories.” He took a step toward her but stopped himself. If he got too close, he’d be tempted to touch her, and if he touched her, Reese didn’t know if he would be able to stop. “For being here.”

Her smile flashed white in the moonlight as her eyes dropped to his lips. She swallowed visibly. “I’m glad to help.” Her dimples winked at him as she raised her eyes back to his. “Sleep tight,” she murmured as she reached out and squeezed his forearm before disappearing into the mudroom.

Yeah, Reese doubted that was likely to happen. First, he was sharing a bed with his two bed-hog sons. Second, he expected this whole evening with Shelby would play in a continuous loop through his mind while he over-analyzed everything that had occurred between them since her arrival.

Especially this evening’s events.

Of course, all that would be in direct competition with his fantasies about kissing her senseless.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Over the next week, Reese, Shelby, and the boys fell into a smooth, companionable rhythm. Each morning, with Sadie now accompanying her, Shelby was up and out for her run by five. Upon her return, Reese was usually nursing his first cup of coffee and pouring himself a huge bowl of cereal, which Shelby considered a flimsy excuse for a working man's first meal of the day.

Instead of saying anything about what he chose to eat, Shelby began surfing the internet for healthier and heartier make-ahead breakfast casseroles, sandwiches, and muffins. All Reese needed to do was microwave whatever she set out for him before she and Sadie headed out to run.

So far, despite Reese's lack of comment regarding his extra breakfast options, Shelby's plan to fill his stomach with more nutrient-dense and filling fare in the mornings seemed to work out well.

Once Reese left for work, Shelby prepared the boys' breakfast and prepped for lunch and dinner while they ate. Of course, by the time they finished, Alex and Zach had the day already mapped out. Most of the activities on their agenda included Shelby, but there were times throughout each day when they entertained themselves by watching TV or playing with their toys.

During those times, Shelby cleaned the house and managed the laundry. Males, she quickly learned, especially those who lived and worked on a farm, certainly went through a shitload of clothing. But running a farm was grueling, often

merciless work. That was why, in addition to incorporating healthier breakfast options, Shelby also made a point to put well-balanced, hearty lunches and dinner on the table daily by noon and six respectively.

Good food that stuck to a person's ribs, as her mother would say.

If the lack of leftovers was any indication, Shelby was meeting her goal.

Being helpful pleased Shelby. Growing up, her visits with her aunt and uncle at Landry's Meadow had given her a bird's-eye view of the long and demanding hours spent planting, harvesting, and rotating crops, tending the livestock, and keeping up with the never-ending general maintenance, repair, and upkeep of the farm itself. Though her uncle employed hired hands, unless she and Aunt Wanda ventured out to help him finish sooner, the only time they saw Uncle Caleb was at mealtime.

Sometimes, not even then.

Since Landry's Meadow was nowhere close to the size of Lone Oaks, Shelby couldn't begin to imagine the magnitude of work generated on a farm as vast and diversified as the Blackwoods' spread. Or the experience, dedication, and intestinal fortitude necessary to keep it running successfully.

Yet, despite how taxing and unforgiving the work, for the most part, Reese genuinely seemed to enjoy it.

Much like Shelby was enjoying her time at Lone Oaks.

When Aunt Wanda first called to inquire if she'd consider caring for two young boys from the middle of June to the first of August, Shelby was hesitant to agree. Though she loved her job working with children the same ages as Alex and Zach, she also looked forward to her summer break to rest, rejuvenate, and refuel for the coming year.

Babysitting sounded more like work than relaxation.

Then her aunt explained the Blackwoods' situation, and Shelby reconsidered.

How could she not? Their story absolutely broke her heart. Two motherless little boys. A father in mourning. A grandfather recovering from a massive heart attack that had required a quadruple bypass. And a grandmother who'd assumed the care and well-being of her grandsons for the past fourteen months.

Throw in a once-in-a-lifetime, much-needed and well-deserved vacation opportunity for Eli, Anna, Zeke, and Sarah Blackwood, and no way could Shelby even think about refusing.

Besides, after breaking her engagement in January, getting away from Bishop Creek for a while could very well do her a world of good. Now, with over a week under her belt at Lone Oaks, Shelby had no regrets about agreeing to come.

Since the first horseback riding excursion, the four of them engaged in some activity together each evening. Everything from video game wars to intense rounds of Slap Jack, Go Fish, and War to more four-wheeling and horseback riding.

Though Shelby knew Reese still had doubts, Reese was an awesome father. The boys clearly adored him, their trust implicit. Losing his wife had thrown Reese quite the curveball, but he appeared to be fighting his way out of the horrible darkness, trying his absolute best to do right by Alex and Zach. As a result, the bond between him and his boys grew stronger every day.

"You know what we should do this weekend?" Alex inquired on their way back to the house after another afternoon of fishing at Lake Sheridan.

"What's that?" Shelby countered, pulling herself back from her thoughts.

"We should have a camp-out in the backyard."

Smiling, Shelby remembered how much fun she and her friends had had when camping out back home. "Sure. We can do that if you have a tent."

Alex looked at her like she should have known better than to have asked such a question. "Of course we have a tent."

“Yeah, and if we didn’t, we could always make our own by throwing a blanket over Gram’s clothesline and staking it to the ground,” Zach added, just in case they couldn’t locate the actual tents.

The boys returned their fishing gear to its place in the shed without Shelby reminding them. Yes! Her heart sang, pleased with the progress. Once everything was back where it belonged, they headed for the house.

“So, can we?” Alex asked, picking up where they left off with their camping conversation.

“Well, first, we need to clear it with your dad to make sure he’s okay with it,” Shelby answered as they walked into the kitchen.

“Clear what with me?”

Shocked to find Reese back from the field this early in the afternoon, Shelby couldn’t help but wonder if everything was okay.

“If we can set up the tents in the backyard this weekend for a camp-out,” Alex rushed to inform his father. “Shelby said it was okay, but we hadda clear it with you first. So, can we? Please.”

“Yeah, puh-lease, Dad?” Zach echoed, his hands clasped in front of his chest and his little face scrunched up in an exaggerated plea.

Reese’s vivid blue eyes narrowed. “You really want to camp out in the backyard?”

“Yes!” both boys insisted.

“Okay.” Reese lifted his massive shoulders in a shrug and exhaled slowly. “But I figured manly men like you would want to ride out to Willow Falls to set up camp.”

Their eyes about swallowed their entire faces. “You mean it, Dad? Like a real camp-out where we catch our food and cook it over an open fire and everything?” Alex’s face glowed with delight and excitement.

“Well, we should at least bring a few rations and supplies along in case the fish aren’t biting.” Reese smiled. “But yeah. Just like a real camp-out.”

“Did you hear that, Shelby? Dad said we can go on a real camp-out at Willow Falls.”

“I did,” she managed to reply despite the effect Reese’s smile was having on both her circulatory and respiratory systems. “Sounds like a great time for you guys.” And it did.

“But you haveta come too,” Alex implored.

“Yeah, you gotta,” Zach piped up, casting a pleading look in his father’s direction. “Tell her, Dad. She’s gotta come along.”

Reese grinned. “Yeah, Shelby, you just *gotta* come along,” he paraphrased his sons’ declarations with a wicked twinkle glimmering in his eyes.

Shelby couldn’t tell if Reese was teasing her, issuing a challenge, or simply being polite in front of the boys. The glint in his beautiful Blackwood blues definitely threw her.

As did his grin.

Regardless of his intention, Shelby’s response was the same. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“Why would you think that?” Alex’s tone indicated her response made no sense whatsoever to him.

“Because camping is usually something guys like to do together.”

“Well, you’re like one of the guys,” Zach stated with a five-year-old’s logic, and Reese nearly choked on the water he’d just swallowed.

Still sputtering, Reese wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and worked at pulling air instead of water into his lungs. He could think of many ways to describe Shelby Corbett, but

none came remotely close to her being anything like one of the guys.

Reese understood Zach's comment alluded more to Shelby's abilities in the areas often, albeit stereotypically, associated with the male species. Activities neither their mother nor grandmothers ever had any desire to do, like pitching and hitting, baiting a hook, and riding four-wheelers.

Fortunately, Zach was far too young to notice how Shelby's exquisite peaks, swells, and curves drastically differentiated her from being like *one of the guys*. Especially for Reese, whose body stirred to life whenever she was near. Or how her brilliant smile catapulted his stomach straight to his feet. Or how her fresh scent of baby lotion and wildflowers tormented him every damn second of every damn day.

Whether she was around him or not.

Since the day she arrived, Shelby was the last thing on his mind before he fell asleep at night and the first thought he had when his alarm went off in the morning. Hell, even while he slept, she starred in his dreams every freaking night.

If he knew nothing else, Reese was one hundred percent positive Shelby Corbett was in no way, shape, or form just like one of the guys. But that was not a conversation he was prepared to have with his seven- and five-year-old sons, particularly when he was having one hell of a time understanding his primal reaction to the woman in question.

"So, are you gonna come with us?" Hope beamed in Alex's blue eyes.

Shelby's gaze darted from father to son. "How about I think about it?"

"What the heck's there to think about?" Zach countered as if it were a complete no-brainer.

"She might have other plans for the weekend," Reese interjected, giving her an out if she wanted it.

He really hoped she didn't. Not that he would blame her if she did. Hell, the only time Shelby'd had to herself in the last

week was when she was asleep or on her morning run. But even Sadie'd horned in on that lately.

"But she said yes when we asked if we could camp out in the backyard," Zach pointed out. "She didn't have any other plans then."

"Maybe she's just remembered some," Reese hypothesized, thinking his youngest should consider pursuing a career as a lawyer. He certainly had his cross-examination techniques down pat.

Zach swung his attention to Shelby. "Didja?"

"Yeah. Didja?" Alex joined the interrogation.

Relentless, they were.

"Boys, how about you run upstairs and clean yourselves up so we can ride into town and have dinner at Antonelli's?"

Both pairs of eyes identical to his own widened once again as they swung their gazes toward him. "Really?"

Shame and guilt assaulted Reese at how something as minor as suggesting they grab a bite to eat in town elicited such disbelief from his boys. Though he was doing better by them, he could always do more. Alex and Zach deserved his best. "Yeah. Really."

The words had barely left his lips before Alex and Zach erupted into whoops and hollers, racing from the room and bounding up the steps.

"I hope that doesn't upset what you planned for dinner."

"It'll keep." She poured herself a glass of tea and leaned a hip against the counter. "What's the occasion?"

Reese shrugged. "It's Friday."

"You have Italian food every Friday?"

He shook his head. "No, but there's no reason we can't *this* Friday." And every Friday or any other day of the week from here on out if they wanted.

"Fine by me."

“And you *are* coming with us.”

Her brow arched. “Is that an invitation or a demand?”

Damn, she was sexy when she got all righteous and indignant, even in jest. “Sorry. *Will* you come to dinner with us at Antonelli’s?” He smiled. “Please.”

“I guess,” she answered with an exaggerated sigh, “since I don’t have anything more pressing to do.”

“Good.” Reese allowed his smile to stretch into a grin. “Now, what about this weekend? Is there something you’d rather do than go camping with a bunch of manly men?”

She finished her tea and deposited the glass in the dishwasher. “I’m sure the three of you will have much more fun without me tagging along.”

He seriously doubted it.

Hmmm. The implications of *that* thought he’d analyze later, for sure.

Not now, though. Now, he felt a need to convince Shelby to come camping with them. “But how much fun will the boys have if they’re wallowing in disappointment because you didn’t come with us? Wondering what you’re doing without them? How bored you must be.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. You sure you want to take that risk?”

She looked up at him. “You, Reese Blackwood, are not playing fair.”

His gaze held hers. “Never claimed I did.” At that moment, Reese wanted to kiss her. More than anything else in the world, he wanted to haul Shelby into his arms, press his body as close against hers as possible while still fully clothed, and kiss the living hell out of her.

As that realization took root, Reese braced himself for the guilt to consume his entire being for daring to want a woman who wasn’t his wife.

Only it didn’t.

Not in the way he expected anyway.

Oh, there were a few pinches in the vicinity of his heart. A couple of twinges and tugs. Even the hollow ache that never went away. But for the first time since Olivia's diagnosis, the heavy veil of darkness in his soul lifted. A tiny sliver of light shone through, giving Reese something he thought was gone forever.

Hope.

"When do you plan to leave?" Shelby asked, interrupting his little epiphany.

Reese shook his head, more to clear it than anything. "For the camping trip?"

She rolled her eyes. "For Antonelli's."

"What about camping?"

"I see where the boys get their tenacity from."

"What can I say?" Reese grinned. "So? Are you going to come along?"

Shelby sighed. "Let's take care of one outing at a time, okay?"

Since Reese doubted Alex and Zach would let the matter drop altogether, he decided not to press the camping issue with her. At least, not right now. "Okay. Let's leave for Antonelli's about five."

Nodding, Shelby brushed past him. "I'll be ready."

If the assembled crowd was any indication, Antonelli's was *the* place to be on a Friday night in the quaint little hamlet of Beaumont. Though tastefully decorated in Italy's red, white, and green colors, the restaurant's most significant appeal had to be the delectable scent of baking dough and bubbling sauces that permeated the air.

Shelby's mouth was already watering.

Luckily, their wait was short. As they wove their way through the maze of tables to their booth, Shelby couldn't help but notice the speculative glances they drew, particularly from those who verbally greeted Reese and the boys by name.

Shelby had no idea how often Reese, Alex, and Zach patronized Antonelli's, but when they did, she was sure it hadn't been in the company of a woman outside their immediate family. If she harbored any doubts, though, the curious stares and indistinct murmurs as they passed proved her assumption correct.

Not that the attention they garnered bothered Shelby. It didn't. Not at all.

What did concern her, however, was the effect everyone's preoccupation with them might have on Reese. Would it upset him? Get inside his head? Have him beating a hasty retreat back into his somber shell of grief and heartbreak?

Shelby hoped not. In no way did she want Reese to feel uncomfortable because he'd dared to venture into town for dinner with his boys. Or for inviting her along. And she definitely didn't want anything to mar the evening for Alex and Zach.

Once seated, Shelby and Zach on one side of the booth with Reese and Alex on the other, the interest the four of them generated from the other diners appeared to subside. For that, Shelby was grateful.

"Are we gettin' pizza?" Zach bounced on the seat beside her.

Reese peered at his son over the top of his menu. "Is that what you want?"

"Yep. With pepperonis."

"And sausage," Alex added.

His gaze shifted toward Shelby. "Are you all right with pizza, or would you like something else?"

Having difficulty narrowing down her selection from the abundance of options listed, Shelby also went with the obvious

choice. “Pizza works for me.”

“Any particular toppings?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m good with whatever you guys decide.”

Their waitress stepped up to their table. “Welcome to Antonelli’s. I’m Brooke, and I’ll be taking care of you this evening,” she greeted with a broad smile, her pad and pen ready. “What can I get you?”

Reese ordered an extra-large pizza with pepperoni and sausage along with four sodas, large for himself and Shelby and small cups with lids for the boys.

“That was easy enough.” Reese handed Brooke their menus, and she disappeared through the swinging doors behind the long wooden counter at the front of the restaurant.

“Hey, Alex, look!” Zach pointed across the restaurant. “They got a new game in the arcade.” His blue eyes darted to their father. “Dad, you got any quarters?”

Without hesitation, Reese dug into the pocket of his Levi’s and pulled out a handful of coins, eight of which were quarters. He fished them out, handing both boys four each before they dashed toward the alcove in the back where a pool table and several arcade games were housed.

Leaning back against the red vinyl cushion of the bench seat, Reese sighed. “I wonder what it feels like to have that kind of energy.”

“Just think of everything we could accomplish in a day if we did.”

Reese smiled, the gesture softening the rugged planes and angles of his handsome face. Shelby’s stomach trembled. What about this man made her insides quiver and her body tingle in places that had never tingled before?

Places Shelby hadn’t realized actually *could* tingle.

Which was sad considering that, until about six months ago, she’d been engaged to be married.

And these tingles she was now experiencing were only the result of Reese's smile. Shelby could only imagine the effect his touch or kisses would have on her.

Thankfully, Brooke's return with their drinks, plates, and silverware interrupted Shelby's thoughts before she got too carried away. "Pizza should be up shortly," the waitress assured them as she sailed off to take the order of another recently seated group.

"Looks like we got here in the nick of time," Shelby observed as the few empty tables around them quickly filled up.

Nodding, Reese rested his tanned and heavily veined forearms on the lacquered black tabletop. "Best pizza in the tri-state area, bar none." He fiddled with the edge of his napkin-wrapped silverware.

"My aunt, uncle, and I always came here at least once when I visited. Uncle Caleb loved his manicotti, and Aunt Wanda hated to make it, so Antonelli's was their compromise. We haven't come here much since he passed away. I guess it carries too many memories for her."

As soon as the words left her mouth, Shelby wanted to snatch them back. More so when the shadows shuttered Reese's beautiful eyes. How freaking stupid could she be, for pity's sake? Surely, he, Olivia, and the boys had come here before she'd gotten sick. And now, her little insensitive walk down memory lane caused Reese's memories to surface, bringing the pain of his loss flooding back to the present.

Shelby didn't know what to say or do now. Her heart ached for him, but God forbid she put her foot in her mouth again. Especially since the ensuing silence only amplified her unintentional faux pas.

Fortunately, Shelby was spared from finding another small talk subject when a man bearing an uncanny resemblance to Reese stepped up to the table. Both men had the same wide-shouldered, lean-hipped build, dark hair, and sun-bronzed skin. Only their eyes were different. Where Reese's were a

vivid blue, the other man's were a deep chocolate brown. Much like Anna Blackwood's.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," the man, who was obviously one of Reese's three brothers, declared. A lovely brunette with sparkly amber eyes and a warm smile stood beside him.

"Guess they let anybody in here these days," Reese countered, the shadows dissipating a fraction from his eyes.

"Seems so." The other man turned his attention toward Shelby. "You must be the poor soul who drew the short straw and gets to spend the summer looking after my ugly mug of a brother and his dynamic duo." His smile dimpled into a grin much like Reese's.

The one that made Shelby tingle.

"I'm Jack, and this lovely creature is my wife, Tess."

Shelby couldn't keep the smile off her face, partly because of Jack's infectious nature but also because he was JB Blackwood, her favorite author of suspense thrillers. Somehow, she'd completely forgotten *he* was Reese's brother.

"Shelby Corbett," she supplied and tried to keep her fangirling under wraps lest she embarrass anyone, especially herself.

"So, how are things going at Lone Oaks?" Tess asked her. "These guys treating you okay?"

"Things are going great." Which, though she'd only been there for a week, was true. Shelby loved Lone Oaks and enjoyed her time spent with the boys.

And with Reese, that little voice reminded her. *Don't forget about Reese.*

Like there was even a remote possibility of that happening. First, how could anyone, particularly a woman, ever forget about Reese Blackwood with his larger-than-life presence and understated yet potent sex appeal? Just resisting the urge to give in to the temptation he presented was becoming a daily struggle.

The thought alone heated Shelby's cheeks and those other places that tingled whenever he smiled.

"Well, you must be doing something right, because it's been a long damned time since the old man here ventured too far from Lone Oaks, unless he was making a trip to Benson's Feed and Grain or Carter's Farm Supply."

Shelby didn't miss the blistering glare Reese shot in his brother's direction. "I thought you were off on a book tour."

"Not until the second week of July. Since this is one night in June my lovely bride isn't taking pictures at someone's wedding, we decided to stuff ourselves with some delicious Italian cuisine before catching one of the new releases at the Cineplex." Jack's grin widened. "What brings you to town?"

"Pizza."

"Is it just the two of you, or did you bring my rugrat nephews with you?" His eyes held a hint of mischief.

"The boys are in the arcade."

Excusing herself, Brooke set their pizza in the middle of the table. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, we're good," Reese replied, and Shelby got the distinct impression he wished Jack would disappear.

"Well, let me know if you do." And with that, Brooke left to gather and fill more orders.

"We better go and let you enjoy your dinner," Tess spoke up and tugged on her husband's arm. "It was great to meet you, Shelby. While you're here, you need to come over and visit sometime. We're right across the lake from Lone Oaks."

"I'd like that." Shelby was already looking forward to it.

"Don't let this guy work you too hard," Jack insisted with a wink as the boys rushed up to the table.

"Uncle Jack, Aunt Tess," they exclaimed, and hugs ensued between the foursome. "What are you doing here?" Zach wanted to know.

“Same thing you are, goofball.” Jack mussed the boy’s hair.

“Guess what we’re going to do tomorrow, Uncle Jack,” Alex piped up.

“Hard to tell with you guys.” He raised his eyebrows. “Fly a rocket ship to the moon?”

Both Alex and Zach burst into giggles. “No.”

“Sail the seven seas?”

The giggles intensified as they shook their heads.

Jack threw his hands in the air with a shrug of his shoulders. “Then, I give. What *are* you guys gonna do tomorrow?”

“We’re goin’ camping. And not in the backyard, either. Dad said we can ride the horses to Willow Falls and have a *real* camp-out.”

Shelby didn’t miss the surprise that lit Jack’s dark eyes. “For realz?”

Both dark heads bobbed up and down. “For realz.”

“Well, I’m green with envy, boys. Growing up, your dad, I, your Uncle Drew, and Uncle Holden had a lot of fun camping at Willow Falls. Didn’t we, Reese?”

“Yeah, we sure did.”

From the look Reese and Jack shared, Shelby suspected life for the Blackwood brothers had never been dull.

“You can come if you wanna,” Zach invited Jack as he hopped into the booth beside Shelby. “You too, Aunt Tess.” His eyes sparkled as an idea struck him. “We can even play ball, ‘cuz Shelby can throw as hard and fast as you.”

Tess lifted a brow. “Really?”

“Yep. And she likes to fish and ride horses and go four-wheelin’, too,” Alex put in his two cents before sliding into the seat next to his father. “Do you wanna come with us?”

“Wish we could, fellas, but I promised to take your aunt into the city for a play tomorrow night.”

“That’s too bad, ‘cuz we’re gonna have the best time ever!” Zach grinned and dug into the slice of pizza Shelby had transferred to his plate.

“Sure sounds like it,” Jack agreed. “I can’t wait to hear all about it. But right now, you better eat before your pizza gets cold.” Jack’s attention swung back toward Shelby. “Very nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet both of you, too,” Shelby replied with a smile.

“Oh, the pleasure was all ours,” Jack returned with another wicked grin directed at his brother. “See ya, old man.”

“Yeah. See ya.”

Aggravated, Reese wondered how long it would take Jack to spread the word to Drew and Holden that not only was he at Antonelli’s for dinner with Shelby and the boys, but he was also taking Alex and Zach camping for the weekend. Knowing Jack, Reese doubted his brother had made it to his car before sending a group text.

He also didn’t doubt Jack would make a much bigger deal about Shelby’s presence at dinner than him taking the boys camping for the weekend. Unless Jack found out Shelby might join them. Reese didn’t even want to think about his brothers’ reactions if that happened.

With luck, they’d be well on their way to Willow Falls in the morning before Drew or Holden showed up to razz him about how out of character it was for him to quit work early on a Friday, drive into town for dinner at Antonelli’s, and leave Lone Oaks in the hands of his foreman for the entire weekend while he and the boys went camping.

Of course, somewhere along the way, his brothers would also find a way to tie Reese’s deviation from his usual

workaholic routine to Shelby. Which, in turn, would provide more fodder for further speculation and innuendo. And all because he'd made a spur-of-the-moment decision to treat Shelby and his boys to dinner instead of eating at home.

On the same freaking night and at the same freaking restaurant as Jack and Tess.

What was that saying? If it weren't for bad luck, he'd have no luck at all. Yeah, after the interlude with Jack, Reese *felt* that.

"I can't eat another bite," Zach declared, sagging back against the booth. "I'm stuffed."

"Guess we won't have to worry about dessert then," Shelby replied as a slow smile creased her cheeks, stabbing Reese in the chest.

Okay, so maybe his luck wasn't *all* bad.

Zach rolled his gaze toward Shelby. "That depends on what they have." His bright blue eyes gleamed.

"Yeah, I sure could go for one of those brownies piled high with ice cream and chocolate sauce sliding all over it," Alex chimed in.

"With a cherry on top," Zach added, licking his lips.

"But you're stuffed," Reese reminded him.

He sat up a little straighter and patted his stomach. "I think I can feel a little room opening up."

All three of them cracked up at Zach's deadpan response, and Shelby's throaty laugh enveloped Reese in a seductive cloud. But when she pulled his son against her side for a one-armed hug, Reese's heart nearly stopped.

"You're something else, you know that?" Shelby said.

"But I can still have dessert, right?" Swinging his guileless blue eyes up at her, Zach snuggled closer to Shelby's side.

"I'd say that's up to your father."

But Reese's focus wasn't on the conversation about dessert. Instead, he was mesmerized by Shelby's laughter and the ease with which she related to and connected with his sons. Her genuine and sincere reactions to whatever they said or did. And her natural and unguarded interactions with them.

She absolutely captivated him.

"So, can we, Dad?" Alex's question pulled Reese out of his thoughts before a full-on panic attack could take root.

"Can we what?" Reese was embarrassed he had to ask.

"Have dessert," Alex answered as if Reese was an idiot.

Honestly, Reese felt like one considering his inability to follow the thread in a simple conversation. "Well, since I won't be able to enjoy one bite of my cannoli with the two of you staring at me like starving pups, I guess it'll be okay."

"Yes!" both boys exclaimed with fist pumps.

Zach looked up at Shelby. "You gonna have dessert, too?"

Shelby combed her fingers through his dark hair. "I'm stuffed, so how about I just have a bite of yours?"

Grinning, Zach resumed his position against Shelby's side. Envious, Reese couldn't help wondering what it would be like to snuggle against her like Zach. With her fingers stroking his hair and his arm resting on her thigh. Would she be as welcoming toward him as she was to his son?

Maybe the time has come to find out, that little voice suggested.

Yeah. Maybe it had.

And though it shocked the hell out of him to admit it, Reese still managed to keep the expected panic and guilt at bay.

At least, for now.

"So, who's up for some dessert?" Brooke asked, bringing Reese back to the present.

The boys immediately rattled off their order. Reese added a cannoli for himself.

Brooke's attention shifted to Shelby. "For you, ma'am?"

Shelby shook her head. "I stuffed myself to the gills with pizza, I'm afraid."

The waitress grinned. "Easy to do."

"But I'm gonna give her a bite of mine," Zach informed the waitress.

"Well, that sure is nice of you." Brooke tucked the ticket book into her black apron pocket and stacked their plates on the empty pizza pan. "I'll be right back with those desserts."

Fifteen minutes later, his cannoli and the boys' ice cream and brownie concoctions were history. Once Reese paid the check, they were on their way back to Lone Oaks.

"That was fun," Alex said from the back seat. "We should do it every Friday night."

Reese glanced in the rear-view mirror at the boys. "Hard to make that kind of commitment this time of year, Bud." Planting and harvesting seasons were the busiest on the farm and often had to be choreographed around the fickleness of the weather. "But I promise it won't be as long till we go again."

"We could even go to a movie. It's fun going with Gram, but she doesn't like action movies so much. How about you, Shelby? You like action movies?"

She shifted to look at them in the backseat. "Sometimes. Depends on who's in them."

"I like Iron Man. He's my favorite," Zach said.

"Mine is Spiderman," Alex supplied. "What about you, Dad?"

Knowing the question would be coming his way, Reese was prepared. "Definitely Batman."

"How 'bout you, Shelby?" Zach asked. "You got a favorite?"

“I’m also kind of partial to Batman. But the earlier versions rather than the darker ones.”

Reese inhaled Shelby’s floral scent, his fingers itching to reach across the console and twine his fingers through hers. Tuck their joined hands on his thigh.

Lord, he felt like a horny teenager on his first date, all hot, bothered, and aching with a need so strong it took his breath away.

Reese wondered how Shelby would react if he acted on the desire building within him. When they were alone, of course. After the boys were asleep. Would she welcome his advances or shut him down completely?

He had no idea. Hell, for all he knew, Shelby wasn’t even attracted to him in the same way. Still, he wanted to find out.

“Are we gonna get all the camping stuff ready when we get home?” Zach wanted to know.

The last thing Reese wanted to do when they got home was dig out camping equipment. Selfishly, he hoped the boys would take their baths and go straight to bed without a fuss or a bazillion story requests, so he could find out if his growing attraction to Shelby was mutual.

Probably best if he just forgot about that, since he was one hundred percent sure he wouldn’t have a minute’s peace from Alex and Zach until they’d unearthed everything necessary for their camping expedition. And since the boys would be up before the crack of dawn, arranging the gear into some semblance of order would benefit them for the earliest possible departure in the morning.

Might as well just get it over with. “Yeah. We should make sure we have everything we need.”

Cheers erupted, followed by a round of high fives between the brothers in the back seat. Guilt slithered through Reese for panting after Shelby when his sons were beyond excited and looking forward to camping out. They deserved his undivided attention.

He’d neglected them enough.

Exploring anything with Shelby would only add complications to his presently screwed-up life. No one, least of all Alex and Zach, needed that. Plus, why start something that already had an expiration date? In five weeks, his parents would return from vacation, and Shelby would either spend the rest of the summer visiting with her aunt or head back to her home in North Carolina.

Shelby also didn't seem like the hook-up-for-a-few-weeks type. And at this point, Reese doubted he had more than that to offer. All the more reason to channel his energy and focus on becoming a better father and think of the woman seated beside him as nothing more than a temporary caretaker for Alex and Zach.

But Reese had a sinking feeling that would be a helluva lot easier said than done.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Reese had not expected dinner at Antonelli's to fuel his attraction to Shelby. But it sure as hell had. And not just in the physical sense either. He enjoyed talking with her. Watching her with Alex and Zach. Admiring how the curious stares and indiscreet whispers from the other diners didn't seem to bother her at all.

Despite the discomfort the initial attention to their arrival drew, having Shelby along made his first dinner out with the boys since Olivia's passing easier. Still, Reese couldn't allow himself to become accustomed to having Shelby around. For his sake as well as his sons'.

Now, after spending the last three hours locating, organizing, and packing their camping supplies and answering the litany of questions from the boys about the trip, Reese was thoroughly exhausted.

Alex and Zach? Not so much.

Nope. As they filled their backpacks to overflowing with more stuff than they'd ever need, both chattered like magpies about everything they wanted to pack into this weekend camping trip. Though he appreciated their enthusiasm, Reese didn't have the heart to tell them it would take two weeks rather than two days to accomplish everything they were planning.

So, instead of bursting their bubble with a reality check, Reese helped them finish packing and shooed them upstairs to get ready for bed.

“I can’t wait until tomorrow,” Alex declared as he snuggled under the covers half an hour later.

“Me neither,” Zach agreed, hopping into his bed.

Reese smiled. “I’m looking forward to the trip as well.” And he was, which surprised him. Not because he didn’t want to spend the weekend camping with the boys, but because for the first time in longer than he could remember, he wasn’t tied up in knots about all the work on the farm he’d be leaving behind.

“Do you think Shelby’s gonna come with us, Dad?” Zach asked.

Shelby. No matter how hard he tried to push her out of his mind, something—or somebody in this case—always brought her back, front and center. “I don’t know, Bud.”

And he didn’t. Although she’d helped them earlier with their preparations, and they’d gathered enough supplies to accommodate her joining them, Shelby had neither confirmed nor denied if she planned to accompany them.

“Try to talk her into coming with us, okay, Dad?”

“Yeah,” Zach piped up. “Cuz she’s a lot of fun to have around, and I know she’ll have a good time with us. We’ll make sure of it.”

Despite his earlier resolve concerning Shelby, Reese couldn’t *not* honor his sons’ request. “I’ll do my best.” Which was all he could do. He’d ask, and if she said no, they’d have to accept her decision. He kissed them both good night. “But right now, you guys need some shut-eye if we want to get an early start in the morning.”

That was all the incentive required. Without another word, they squeezed their eyes closed as if that was all it took for sleep to come. Smiling, Reese turned off the light, closed the door, and headed downstairs, where he found Shelby slapping together some sandwiches.

“Hungry?” Reese crossed to the refrigerator.

Shelby glanced up briefly. “No. Just thought I’d pack some rations for the much-anticipated camp-out.”

Reese pulled a beer from the fridge, popped the top, and tossed the cap in the trash. He leaned against the counter about a foot from where she worked. “So, have you decided yet?”

“About what?” She screwed the lid on the peanut butter.

“Going with us.”

Shelby slid a sandwich into a plastic baggie. “It’s not that I don’t want to go. I just think you and the boys should have this time together. As a family.”

“But they want you to come. In fact, while I tucked them in, they both made me promise to talk you into coming along.”

Focused on her task, Shelby hadn’t looked up since he returned to the kitchen. But that didn’t stop all her powerful pheromones from their assault on him. Her scent, baby powder and wildflowers, teased him. His body responded immediately, and Reese wanted nothing more than to toss Shelby over his shoulder and haul her straight to bed.

Dammit! Hadn’t he just had this conversation with himself on the ride home from Antonelli’s? Decided those kinds of thoughts spelled trouble with a capital TROUBLE? That he needed to devote all his attention to being a better father rather than satisfying the deep-seated desire Shelby awakened inside him?

“You’re not playing fair again,” Shelby accused him and stacked the bagged sandwiches into a collapsible cooler.

Oh, to hell with it, Reese decided, selfish bastard that he was. Setting his beer on the counter, he turned toward her. “And I told you earlier, I never said I did.”

Inching closer, he backed Shelby into the corner where the cabinets and counter space met to form one side of the U-shaped kitchen. Her amber eyes wide, a tiny gasp escaped from her throat, causing Reese’s entire body to tighten with need. For her.

Only her.

Though he knew he shouldn't, Reese couldn't help himself. No, that was a lie. If he wanted to badly enough, Reese could still do the right thing by backing the hell up and walking away. But he didn't want to do that.

Not anymore.

If he ever really did.

And Shelby hadn't said no. Or pushed him away. If anything, the way she was looking at him was pure invitation.

Reese braced his hands on either side of her hips, effectively caging her against the cabinets and counter as he leaned forward and did what he'd wanted to do since the day they met—he kissed Shelby Corbett.

As he'd suspected, her lips were feather soft, and she tasted like heaven. At least, he imagined this was how heaven would taste.

With what Reese hoped was a sigh of approval, Shelby slid her hands between them, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt as she leaned into the kiss and rubbed her delicious lips against his.

He wanted more. So damned much more. Yet despite how much he wanted to yank her into his arms and plunder her mouth in the deepest of kisses, Reese also realized the value of patience. Of taking things slow. Making sure going further was something they both wanted and wouldn't regret.

And most importantly, that this wasn't merely an outlet for pent-up sexual frustration.

Reluctantly, Reese pulled his mouth away from Shelby's without moving from where he stood. Truthfully, he wasn't entirely sure he could. And he damned sure didn't want to. Besides, what would camping be like now if she did choose to join them?

Torture, that's what. Thanks to their seven- and five-year-old chaperones.

"That was probably a mistake," Reese confessed as he drew a line with his forefinger along the soft curve of her jaw,

because now that he had, he couldn't keep himself from touching her.

“Then why did you do it?”

The raw sultriness of her voice shot through Reese like wildfire. “Because it’s all I’ve thought about doing for days.” He cupped the side of her beautiful face in his palm, her skin as smooth as spun silk. “I thought maybe once I did, it might be enough.”

Shelby visibly swallowed. “Was it?”

“Not even close.” Reese dropped his eyes to her lips. “Only made me want more.”

Shelby’s eyes softened into luminous whiskey-brown pools, and the heat inside him burst into an all-out inferno. She tightened her grip on his shirt. “So, what’s stopping you?”

Her whispered invitation was all Reese needed. Lowering his head, he lightly touched his lips to hers again. When she whimpered, he was a goner.

Reese framed her face with both hands and pressed himself closer. He traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue. Her lips parted, allowing him entrance, and he wasted no time deepening the kiss.

Sighing, Shelby relinquished her death grip on his shirt and wound her arms around his neck. Her fingers plowed through his hair as Reese pulled her closer, aligning her body’s soft curves against his own hardened planes. Particularly the area below his belt.

Even if he wanted, Reese could no more deny the reaction Shelby had on him than he could stop his heart from thundering like a stampede of cattle inside his chest.

God, he wanted her.

And if her response was any indication, he was not alone in his desire. Still, everything was happening way too fast. Although he doubted he could have survived another night without kissing her, Reese also realized going any further would definitely be premature.

For them both.

For the second time in less than fifteen minutes, Reese pulled free of their kiss and rested his forehead against Shelby's. He was on the verge of apologizing again, but this time he refrained.

Because he wasn't sorry.

Not for kissing her, anyway.

"Too soon?" Shelby asked as she untangled her fingers from his hair and rested her palms against his chest.

Was it? On one hand, yes. On the other? Hell if he knew.

Shelby peered up at him. "Guess that's a yes."

"No." Reese shook his head. "It's more that I'm not sure."

"I understand."

"Do you? Really?" Reese didn't want her to say she understood to appease him.

"Yeah. I do." She smoothed her palms against his shirt. "Neither of us expected this attraction between us. Nor were we ready when it hit. Throw us living under the same roof and the quasi-family feel of this whole arrangement, and it's *a lot*."

And that wasn't taking *everything* into consideration. Such as him being a widower. Her leaving in a little over a month. The distance between Virginia and North Carolina. And especially the boys, who were the reason Shelby was here in the first place.

Was all that enough to deny their attraction and keep her at arm's length until his parents returned from their vacation? Reese sincerely doubted it.

"You're right. It *is* a lot." He held her gaze. "But that doesn't mean I don't want to get to know you better. Or that I won't want to touch you." He brushed his thumb across her bottom lip. "Or that I can keep myself from kissing you. But I won't if you rather I didn't." It might very well kill him, a slow and merciless death, but right now, reassuring her was more important than anything else.

Without speaking, Shelby wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her cheek against his chest.

Relieved, Reese released the breath he'd been holding and hugged her back. "You okay?"

Shelby nodded. "Yeah, I'm good," she replied, looking up at him with devilment gleaming in her amber eyes. "But I think there is something you should know."

Because of her shit-eating grin, Reese tamped down the sliver of alarm threatening his peace of mind. "And what's that?"

"Although I consider myself a fairly adventurous soul, there's no way I'm eating rabbit or squirrel."

Reese burst out laughing, and the ten-ton weight lifted off his shoulders. "Is that your way of saying you'll come camping with us?"

"On two conditions."

"Which are?"

"No touching or kissing in front of Alex and Zach. We don't want to confuse them."

"Agreed." Reese understood Shelby's concern completely. This was uncharted territory for all of them. "What's your second condition?"

"We need to bring along something more domestic to cook over an open fire in case no one catches any fish to fry."

Reese grinned. "Consider it done." Then, unable to resist, he stole another kiss. "C'mon." Taking her hand, he led her to the piles of supplies set up around the kitchen. "Let's double-check to make sure we have everything we need."

CHAPTER NINE

Willow Falls took Shelby's breath away.

With the sun peeking over the Hickory Ridge summit of the mighty Blue Ridge, the whole area was absolutely stunning. From the glistening water cascading over the wall of rocks into Lake Sheridan to the bright green grass carpeting the expanse under and around the small cluster of towering oak and elm trees that provided the perfect amount of shade.

In the area designated as the campsite, clusters of rocks for leaning or sitting encircled the fire pit and lined the stretch of land beside the falls. Two wooden picnic tables sat in the clearing, and a dock large enough for sitting, fishing, or sunbathing was built far enough away from the falls to ensure safety.

Shelby breathed in the fresh, clean air and turned her face toward the sun's warmth, marveling at its brilliance amidst the cloudless blue sky. Birds chirped happily as they darted from various perches, no doubt calling for more of their flock to join them.

"It's beautiful," Shelby murmured in awe. The entire scene was spectacular. A little slice of paradise to enjoy for the next thirty hours or so. After seeing the magnificence before her, Shelby sure was glad she'd agreed to tag along.

"Yeah. It is," Reese agreed as they rode closer to the campsite.

Shelby followed Reese into the clearing, where they dismounted and relieved their horses of the supplies and gear

they carried. To accommodate everything they brought with them, Alex and Zach had ridden together on one pony so the other could bear more of the load without the additional weight of a rider.

After unsaddling and watering the horses, they made quick work of pitching two tents—a larger one for Reese and the boys and a smaller one for Shelby. Next, they went in search of wood, gathering only enough for cooking rather than warmth since the temps continued to hover in the mid-eighties.

When they returned to the campsite, Reese helped Alex stack the wood and set up the cooking station before leaving to check on the horses. Shelby and Zach unpacked and organized the rest of their supplies. When they finished, Zach jumped off one of the boulders. “What are we gonna do now?”

Laughing, Shelby shook her head at his never-ending supply of energy. “We’re gonna eat,” she answered, knowing full well the nourishment of their bodies was pretty low on the boys’ to-do lists for the next two days.

“Do we haveta?”

“Unless you want to risk passing out from hunger in the middle of whatever *is* next on our agenda, then yes, we have to.”

From one of the coolers, Shelby dug out the sandwiches she’d made the night before. Warmth heated her cheeks as she remembered the kiss she and Reese shared after she’d bagged the PB and J. Though they stopped at the second kiss, her body had remained on mega tingle long after she’d gone to bed.

Hell, the memory alone right now set off another round trembling through her. Resisting Reese Blackwood was not going to be easy. Of that, Shelby was most certain.

“What are we gonna do after we eat?” Alex’s question brought Shelby back to the present.

She unwrapped the sandwiches. “You’ll have to check with your father on that.” She added an apple and a bag of chips to the paper plate.

As if on cue, Reese returned from checking on the horses. The boys wasted no time pouncing on him. “What are we gonna do after lunch, Dad?”

“Can we go hunting or fishing? ‘Cuz we need to scare us up something for supper,” Zach asked.

Chuckling, Reese took the plate Shelby handed him and nodded his thanks with a grin glimmering in his blue eyes. She wondered if the sandwich brought to mind the same memory for him as it had for her.

“I think you’ve been watching too many westerns,” Reese directed his observation to his youngest son.

Shelby passed him a cold bottle of water. Reese twisted off the cap and guzzled over half of it. There should be nothing hypnotic whatsoever about a man drinking water, but for the life of her, Shelby couldn’t drag her gaze away from the muscles flexing along the strong column of his neck with each swallow.

Desire ignited like a wildfire in her belly.

Dang!

Maybe joining them wasn’t the brightest idea she’d ever had, Shelby decided when all her girlie parts quivered just watching the man drink water.

But she couldn’t help it. Not only was he one of the most attractive men she’d ever seen, but he was also sexy as hell. That he didn’t even seem to realize the potent effect he wielded only enhanced his appeal. Plus, he was also the father of these adorable little boys presently chomping at the bit to start on the million and one activities she knew they had planned.

“So, what’s up first?” Alex asked around half the sandwich he’d stuffed in his mouth. “Fishing or hunting?”

“We better fish first,” Reese suggested, sending a conspiratorial grin at Shelby. At least he’d remembered she drew the line at eating rabbit or squirrel.

“I’ll get the gear.” Zach scrambled to his feet as he sucked the sides of his juice box together to obtain the very last drop. He stuffed his trash in the bag at the end of the table and bounded off to gather their fishing paraphernalia, Alex hot on his heels.

“I made sure to pack some burgers,” Reese assured Shelby before grabbing another sandwich from the cooler.

“I like fish.”

“But they might not be biting, and we’ll be forced to *scare us up* something else to eat,” Reese repeated Zach’s verbiage. He laughed again, a deep rumble erupting from deep inside his chest as little lines fanned out from the corners of his incredibly blue eyes. “Where he comes up with some of this stuff is beyond me.”

Realizing she was staring, Shelby averted her gaze before he caught her gawking at him like some lovesick teenager. “This is definitely their element out here, that’s for sure.”

Nodding, Reese finished his sandwich and second bottle of water.

“C’mon, you guys,” Alex hollered impatiently as he and Zach staggered under the weight of fishing poles, tackle boxes, nets, and buckets.

“Guess our reprieve is over.” Rising, Reese tossed his and Shelby’s trash in the bag and held his hand to her.

The minute Shelby slipped her hand in his, a little zing shot up her arm. They were close. So close, Shelby watched Reese’s eyes darken as his hand tightened around hers. Did he feel the electricity crackling between them? Hear her heart pounding against her breastbone?

Reese squeezed her hand and tugged her closer.

“We’re ready!” Zach shouted from the water’s edge, stretching the two words into about four syllables.

Shelby jumped back and jerked her hand free.

“We’re coming,” Reese yelled back while holding her gaze. Then, he surprised the hell out of her by recapturing her

hand and leading her toward the spot Alex and Zach had set up for fishing.

As night fell, no one dared complain the day hadn't been jam-packed from beginning to end. While fishing, they'd caught three rainbow trout and two catfish, but Zach still insisted they head into the outcropping of trees to hunt for rabbits, squirrels, or any other unsuspecting critters living in the underbrush.

Having never developed a fondness for hunting, Shelby stayed behind to clean the fish while Reese and the boys went in search of defenseless animals. She doubted either Alex or Zach had ever eaten anything gamier than deer, if that. Still, in their minds, for this to count as a legit camping trip, they needed to put some helpless varmint on a spit over an open flame.

When the three of them returned empty-handed, Shelby hid her relief in deference to their obvious disappointment. To divert their attention from not bagging their quarry, she enlisted the boys' help preparing the rest of their supper while Reese fed and watered the horses.

To be on the safe side, Shelby not only fried up the fish but also a few of the hamburgers Reese thoughtfully brought along. As she tended the food in the cast iron skillet, Alex stirred the kettle of baked beans, and Zach set out the rolls, fruit, and drinks.

Though Shelby had been camping more times than she could count, she'd never totally mastered the art of cooking over a campfire, but once again, the absence of leftovers indicated she must have done an adequate job.

After they finished eating and cleaned everything up from supper, the boys, bless their little pea-pickin' hearts, were all set to begin the next activity. Reese suggested they ride a little farther along the lake where Willow Run Creek meandered through the lush countryside. The boys agreed, and like this

morning when she'd first caught sight of Willow Falls, Shelby was utterly amazed by the stunning vistas they encountered.

She envied Reese and his family for the incredible beauty surrounding them at Lone Oaks.

Dusk settled as they returned to the campsite. While Reese and the boys took care of bedding the horses down for the night, Shelby stoked the fire back to life, adding a few extra chunks of wood onto the burgeoning flames. Then, she gathered the chocolate, marshmallows, graham crackers, and four sticks long enough to reach the fire without anyone standing too close to the flames.

Which they didn't. Only the five-foot-long makeshift skewers did nothing to prevent ooey-gooey sugary goodness from sticking to their fingers, hands, and faces, not to mention Zach's hair, Alex's shirt, and Reese's hat.

Working their way through the ingredients, Shelby learned that, like her, Reese preferred his marshmallows burnt to a crisp on the edges, whereas the boys freaked out if theirs had even a smidgen of black char atop the white.

Once everyone had assembled and devoured at least two s'mores along with who knew how many toasted marshmallows, Shelby braced herself for the mother of all sugar rushes to hit Alex and Zach like a tornado of epic proportions. But surprisingly, it didn't.

Or at least not like she'd anticipated. Sure, they exuded a bit more energy, but by ten, both boys were clearly winding down from their adventurous day.

"Looks like it's time for some shut-eye," Reese observed when Alex tried to stifle another yawn.

"But Dad," Zach implored, "it's too early to go to bed."

"It's an hour past your bedtime," Reese pointed out. "Besides, if you don't get enough sleep, you'll be too tired and cranky to do anything tomorrow."

That seemed to be all Zach needed to hear. "Okay. But you gotta promise to wake us up real early so we don't burn any daylight."

Reese crossed his finger over his heart. “I promise to make sure you’re up and at ‘em before the sun barely rises. Now, tell Shelby good night.”

Both boys rushed her. They wrapped their little arms around her neck and squeezed hard. “I’m glad you came with us,” Alex said near her ear, and something shifted inside her chest.

“Me too,” Zach concurred.

Emotion blurred her vision. “Me, three,” Shelby managed to eke out. She kissed both their cheeks. “Sleep tight.”

“Night, Shelby,” they chorused as Reese herded them toward their tent.

Well, if she hadn’t been sure before, there was no way Shelby harbored any doubts now—she was a complete goner for those boys. But how could she not fall in love with their irresistible charm and complete zest for life, let alone keep them from slipping past her defenses to sneak right inside her heart?

Guess things could be worse, Shelby decided as she ensured all the food was safely stored inside the collapsible coolers. She dusted any traces of food into the dying embers of the fire. The last thing they needed was any four-legged visitors searching for a nighttime snack.

Just thinking about it gave Shelby the heebie-jeebies.

When Reese crawled out of the tent and joined her, Shelby handed him one of the beers she’d pulled from the cooler. “You’re a mind reader.” He took the bottle and twisted off the cap.

Shelby followed suit, tossing her cap into the trash bag. “You earned it.”

Reese tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear. “Is that all I earned?” he asked, his voice low and deep.

Unsure precisely what he might be propositioning, Shelby swallowed past the nerves suddenly tightening her throat. “What about the boys?”

“They’re asleep.”

“They might wake up.”

“I’m willing to take the risk,” he murmured and lowered his mouth to hers in a kiss so hot Shelby melted into him faster than the chocolate in her s’more.

And he tasted just as delicious. More so, really.

As Reese deepened the kiss, Shelby’s pulse kicked into high gear, sending her blood racing through her veins. Awakening, then tempting her to the point she wanted to strip them both naked, climb his body like a tree, and beg him to have his way with her.

But she wouldn’t. Not because she didn’t want to, but because she did. Very much.

Before she had the chance, Reese pulled his lips from hers, his breathing ragged. Apparently, the kiss had a similar effect on him as it had on her. Still, he didn’t release his hold on her. Instead, he pressed his forehead against hers, much like he’d done the night before. “I should have thought that through a little more.”

Yeah. Ditto.



“Well, you know what they say. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty.”

Yeah, Reese’s body didn’t quite agree. Particularly the lower half.

Though he knew he should hightail it back to his tent, Reese wasn’t ready to say good night to Shelby. Instead, he took her hand and led her to the circle of rocks around the fire pit that was now reduced to smoldering embers.

Reese eased himself onto the ground in front of the enormous boulder, leaned back, and pulled Shelby down to nestle in the cradle of his thighs with her back against his front. He realized their position might prove dangerous, but Reese had no intention of letting go of her completely.

Besides, in this moment, being here with her like this felt a helluva lot more right than wrong.

“Everything is so beautiful here,” Shelby murmured, her head tipped back against his shoulder as she gazed up at the blanket of stars twinkling across the midnight sky. “And so quiet.”

Reese took a sip of his beer. “I’m glad you decided to come with us.” He pressed his cheek against the softness of her hair and inhaled the wildflower scent.

“I’m glad I did, too.”

Reese rested his right wrist on his knee, the beer bottle dangling from his fingers. “Aside from Tess, you’re probably the only other woman who’s been camping up here.”

“Your mother doesn’t camp?”

Laughing, Reese shook his head. “No. As much as she loves being outdoors and living on the farm, she said as long as she had a bed to sleep in, there was no reason for her to sleep outside on the ground.”

“So, you guys just come out here on your own?”

“Pretty much.” Reese tipped his beer to his lips. “When we were dating, I tried to get Olivia to come with me, but she didn’t want any parts of it. I tried again when the boys were old enough, thinking that might change her mind, but she insisted we’d have a better time without her.”

Kind of like Shelby had. Only Shelby’s protests had nothing to do with her dislike of camping and everything to do with him spending quality “guy” time with Alex and Zach.

“My mother often says, ‘It wouldn’t do for us all to like the same things.’”

“She’s right.” Still, Reese wondered what had attracted Olivia, a city girl through and through, to him, the tried-and-true country boy.

Maybe it was the whole opposites-attract thing. Their differences binding them together rather than driving them apart. They didn’t need to be in each other’s pockets twenty-

four seven, engaging in the same activities all the time. Besides, when conflicts arose, they compromised, always putting their family first.

But they'd never shared an evening under the stars at Willow Falls while their boys slept off the exhaustion of an action-packed, thoroughly enjoyable day.

“How long were you married?”

“Eight years. But we'd been together for ten.”

Shelby threaded her fingers through his and squeezed. “I'm so sorry for your loss, Reese.”

Though he appreciated Shelby's sentiment, Reese didn't want to talk about Olivia anymore tonight. As soon as that realization hit him, his heart sank low in his chest. Yet this time, the guilt didn't consume and overwhelm him. Nor was the pain quite as raw.

Oddly comforted, Reese rubbed the pad of his thumbs across Shelby's soft knuckles, stopping on the third finger of her left hand. “Why hasn't some guy put his ring on this finger?” A logical question, since he would bet his last dollar a woman as beautiful and compassionate as Shelby wouldn't go unnoticed by the men in North Carolina.

Or anywhere else in the world either.

Unless, of course, they were all morons.

“Someone did,” she answered, her voice whisper soft.

Reese narrowed his gaze. “You were married?”

“No.” Her head moved back and forth across his shoulder. “Engaged.”

“What happened?”

“I caught him in bed with another woman.”

Ice slid through his veins. “The bastard cheated on you?”

“At least once.”

Un-fucking-believable. How stupid could her ex be? Furthermore, if the asshole wanted to screw around, why

propose to Shelby in the first place? It didn't make any damn sense.

But what made less sense was how in hell any man could even look at another woman when he had Shelby in his life. She was the total package. Beautiful. Kind. Independent. Giving. He could list her attributes all night, and he'd only met her a week ago.

"Looking back, I'm fairly certain the affair had been going on for a while. Unfortunately for them, the conference I attended was cut short due to an impending snowstorm, so I came home a day early and walked in on their little lovefest."

Reese set the bottle on the ground and wrapped his arms around her. "What did you do?"

"Packed my shit, tossed his ring in the toilet, and told him I never wanted to see him again. Then, I left."

Damn right she did. Pride burst through him for how Shelby had stood up for herself against the cheating son of a bitch. "Did he try to stop you?"

"Oh, he apologized profusely. Swore it didn't mean anything. Begged my forgiveness. Promised it would never happen again."

"Good for you, not falling for that line of bullshit."

"Even if it had been an isolated incident, which I sincerely doubted, I figured if he cheated once, he was bound to do it again. Plus, since he'd already destroyed my trust, what was the point in giving him a second chance to do the same thing again?"

"I imagine there are some who would have."

"They're idiots, then."

Yeah, she was right about that. "When did this happen?"

"In January." Shelby shifted to face him. "Full disclosure. That's one of the reasons I decided to take this job. To get away from Bishop Creek for a while."

“Because you still care about him?” He braced himself for her answer.

“No.” Shelby shook her head. “To be honest, in the last few months, possibly even the last year, we’d already started drifting apart. Wanted different things. Peter wanted to become a politician, and I’m probably the least political person you’ll ever meet.” She smiled. “We’re both better off, I’m sure.”

“Hindsight’s twenty-twenty?” Reese stole the line Shelby had used on him earlier.

Her smile turned into a grin. “Something like that.”

Reese traced her knuckles with his forefinger. “You *are* better off without him.” Or anyone else who didn’t appreciate all she had to offer.

“I know a few who would dispute that.”

“On what grounds?”

“Several, actually.”

“Like?”

Shelby leaned back and ticked off the reasons on her fingers. “First, I didn’t give him a chance to make amends. Second, I should have suggested counseling or at least tried harder to work things out. Third, he’s a good man who merely made an error in judgment. And fourth, he wouldn’t have needed to search elsewhere if I’d done my part to fulfill his needs.” Shelby shrugged. “Take your pick.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Now you can see why I didn’t want to stay in Bishop Creek for the summer.”

“You mean to tell me that after five months, there are still people pleading his case?”

“Mainly, it’s inferred.”

“Why?”

“Peter comes from a very prestigious family in North Carolina.”

“I assume that translates to mean he’s wealthy.”

Shelby nodded.

“So, because he has money, you should overlook the fact that he couldn’t keep his dick in his pants?”

“We weren’t married.”

“Does that mean it would have been okay if you’d had an affair before signing the marriage certificate?”

“Maybe.” Shelby shook her head and shrugged. “Not that I had any desire to find out. Or to fix what was broken between us.”

Reese didn’t blame her. Not one damned bit. “Some things, as well as some people, can’t be fixed.” He knew because he’d been one of those people for the last year and a half.

Now, though, Reese wondered if that still held true.

For the first time since Olivia received the terminal diagnosis, Reese didn’t feel as if he were suffocating from the overwhelming weight of helplessness and despair. Instead, he felt lighter. Happier. And most notably, hopeful.

Time, he realized, was a significant component in easing the level of his grief. But so were his circumstances. Like how his mother refused to go on the much-needed and well-deserved vacation she’d been planning for months unless he allowed Shelby to come to Lone Oaks and help with the boys.

Which, whether Reese was willing to admit it or not, also meant Shelby played a vital role in his recovery process.

Shelby shifted in his arms. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?” After the revelation Reese’d just had, shouldn’t he be the one thanking her?

“For today. Tonight.” A smile tugged at her lips. “For validating my decision to kick Peter to the curb.”

“Any man who even thought about cheating on you doesn’t deserve you, Shelby. No matter how damned much money he has.”

She laid her hand against his cheek. “You’re a good man, Reese Blackwood,” she murmured before pushing herself to her feet and extending her hand to help him up.

A peacefulness Reese didn’t think would ever again exist in his world settled over him like a warm blanket of comfort. He put his hand in Shelby’s and stood, facing her. His heart pounded against his sternum, his blood pumping like wildfire through his veins. His entire body tightened, hardening with need.

Dear God in heaven, he’d never wanted a woman more. To taste her. Touch her. Bury himself so deep inside her he wouldn’t be able to tell where he left off and she began. Reese wanted to be one with Shelby more than he wanted his next breath.

But he couldn’t.

Not tonight anyway.

Though he realized plunging his scorching-hot and fully aroused body into the cool waters of Lake Sheridan was the only other way to obtain any relief, Reese resisted the urge to devour her. Instead, he brought her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss against her palm. “Good night, Shelby.”

Understanding glimmered in her amber eyes as she turned away from him and walked across the campground. Reese was equally relieved and disappointed she hadn’t hesitated or dared to look back at him before opening the flap of her tent and disappearing inside.

If she had done either, Reese doubted his boys sleeping only a few feet away could have kept him from following her.

CHAPTER TEN

The week following their camping trip was much the same as the week before. Between her morning runs, planning and preparing meals, managing the staggering mounds of laundry, and keeping the house in some semblance of order, Shelby, Alex, and Zach continued to enjoy activities around Lone Oaks while Reese worked.

Although he didn't always join them for breakfast or lunch, Reese always made dinner a priority. Even after they moved mealtime back an hour to gain more daylight in the evenings and when more work in the fields remained.

However, life on a working horse and cattle farm was unpredictable, and sometimes Reese needed to finish a job or tend to an animal after supper. Whenever possible, he took the boys with him. What they did together made little difference to Alex and Zach. Spending time with their father was what mattered most to them.

The first few days after Shelby arrived at Lone Oaks, Reese appeared to only go through the motions. Now, he was more present and engaged, planning more of their activities instead of merely going along with whatever Alex and Zach suggested.

And as each day passed, Shelby noticed the changes in Reese. His smiles became more genuine, his laughter more spontaneous, and his whole demeanor less resigned and more enthusiastic.

Though his grief would never wholly dissipate, Reese had begun managing his emotions rather than giving them complete control. At times, Shelby watched the melancholy resurface, stealing the glimmer of hope from his incredibly blue eyes and darkening his expression. Some days were worse than others, depending on the trigger.

Or the memory.

But Reese didn't give in or give up. Instead, he continued to fight through the tangle of emotions waging war inside him. Shelby ached for him and wished she could do more to help him. To ease the pain still festering deep within his heart. To assure him that even though nothing would ever be the same, things would continue to get better with time and patience. He just needed to continue putting one foot in front of the other, not letting anything derail his progress with Alex and Zach.

As for Shelby and Reese, the attraction between them simmered on a slow burn. If the activity for the evening interested her, she joined them. If not, she'd either visit her Aunt Wanda at Landry's Meadow or simply enjoy the quiet solitude and decompress from an action-filled day in the privacy of her room.

Plus, it gave Reese and the boys time to strengthen the bonds between them.

Each night after the boys were tucked into bed, and if Reese didn't have any paperwork to attend to, they often met on the porch or in the family room. Shelby looked forward to those alone times with Reese. Not that anything more had transpired between them on a physical level. Well, nothing they'd acted on, anyway.

But a few times, Shelby feared she might burst into a ball of flames from the heat sizzling between them. Several times, Shelby nearly threw caution to the wind and begged Reese to quench the desire raging through her.

But she didn't. Not because she didn't want to, but because she didn't want to put undue pressure on Reese. If they ever took things beyond getting-to-know-you-better conversations, a little more friendly canoodling, and a few panty-melting

kisses, Reese needed to be the one to instigate it. He'd come too far in the past few weeks to risk rushing into something, thus negating the progress he had gained in overcoming the enormity of his loss.

Patience was the key. If something were meant to happen between them, it would. If not, all was definitely not lost, considering how hard Reese continued to work toward restoring and strengthening his relationship with his sons.

The landline rang, jolting Shelby out of her thoughts. She dried her hands on the dishtowel slung over her shoulder and plucked the handset from its cradle. "Blackwood residence."

"Shelby?" a female voice she didn't recognize greeted her in the form of a question.

"Yes. This is Shelby."

"Hi. This is Hope. Drew's wife. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time."

"No. Not at all. How are you?" Since they'd never met, Shelby wasn't sure what else to say. And if she remembered correctly, Hope had just had a baby a little over a month ago.

"I'm good. How about you? Overwhelmed by testosterone yet?"

Shelby laughed. "I'll admit it is rather strange going for days without seeing or talking to another female."

"Which is why I'm calling. To invite you to lunch. Tess will be here, and we hoped you could join us."

"That's awfully thoughtful of you." And it was.

Shelby also suspected the invitation to lunch wasn't *just* a hospitable gesture but Tess and Hope's version of the vetting process. To ferret out as much information as possible about how things were going at Lone Oaks and ensure she passed muster.

Shelby couldn't blame them one bit.

"So, you'll come?" Hope asked.

“Well, the boys *are* with Reese.” And after unloading a few wagons of alfalfa, Reese was taking them to The Feed Store.

“All the more reason for you to break free for a couple of hours.”

Shelby wasn't sure she should, though. By the time Reese and the boys returned, they'd be starving. “I don't know. I try to have lunch ready for them around noon.” It was already ten-forty-five.

“I'm sure Reese can figure something out for one meal. Drew's coming by the farm in about thirty minutes, so he can relay the plan to Reese when he gets there.”

Shelby wanted to accept Hope's invitation but felt guilty about leaving Reese and the boys to fend for themselves. After all, that was why she was there.

“They'll be fine,” Hope assured Shelby again, as if she could read her thoughts through the phone. “Trust me. They won't starve.”

True enough. Besides, it was only one meal. “Okay. I'd love to come.”

“Awesome. Tess is coming back from town around noon. She'll pick you up.”

“I'll be ready.”

“Great. See you soon.”

Jabbing the off button, Shelby returned the handset to its dock. With a glance at the clock on the stove, she decided she had plenty of time to throw a few sandwiches together for her charges before heading upstairs to shower and change.

Since her arrival, Shelby had never been very far from Reese's thoughts. So, when Boone arrived with the first wagon load of alfalfa, Reese welcomed the diversion of hard, physical labor. Only tossing bale after square bale onto the conveyor for

transport to the uppermost haymow didn't require much brainpower.

Which meant Shelby Corbett continued to consume his thoughts.

Did he want her? Hell yes.

Was getting physical with a woman who deserved more than a summer fling a good idea? Definitely not, considering all the factors involved. Such as Shelby's recent breakup and the fall-out from those who believed she should forgive her ex's infidelity. Then there was the devastating grief Reese continued to battle despite his progress toward becoming a better son, brother, and father.

And most importantly, Alex and Zach, who'd suffered not only the loss of their mother but also their father when Reese withdrew into his shell of darkness and despair. His boys deserved so much more than he'd given them in the last year and a half. How fair was it for Reese to expect them to share his attention so soon after beginning his efforts to be more present and involved in their lives?

Besides those variables, Reese needed to be careful about Alex and Zach's growing attachment to Shelby. Right now, they understood that when their grandmother returned, Shelby would leave. Reese didn't want to complicate matters for his boys by muddying the waters.

As Reese tossed the last bale onto the conveyor, he spotted Drew's truck pull up outside the main horse barn. He must be here to check the shoe boil on one of the broodmares, Reese assumed and jumped off the wagon onto the ground.

"Hey, Dad. Uncle Drew's here," Alex shouted from his perch on the side of the wagon he was climbing.

"I see." Reese tugged off his gloves and used them to dust the dried hay leaves from his jeans before tucking them into his back pocket.

"Can we go with Boone to get the next wagon?" Zach met him as he started toward the stable.

“I told ‘em it was up to you,” his foreman explained as he climbed onto the tractor seat.

Reese arched his right brow. “You sure you don’t mind?”

Boone shook his graying head. “Not if you don’t. ‘Sides, I figured you might need to give Doc a hand, and it would be a lot easier if you didn’t have to answer a million questions in the process.”

“True,” Reese agreed. “Only now, *you’ll* have to answer all their questions.”

The older man’s weathered features softened. “Helps keep my mind sharp.” Boone inclined his head. “We’ll be back shortly.”

“Boys, you climb up in the wagon, sit down, and stay seated for the entire ride. Also, you do whatever Boone says. Okay?”

“We will,” they chorused before scrambling into the wagon.

“Do they ever wind down?” Drew asked as Boone started the tractor and pulled the wagon toward the gate to the hay fields. “Or is it zero to two hundred miles an hour all day, every day?”

Reese laughed. “Pretty much Mach speed right up until they fall into bed.” He shook his head and followed Drew into the stable. “It’s like a switch gets turned off when their heads hit their pillows.”

“Guess it was the same for us at their age.” Drew headed for the stall where the mare was waiting.

“Likely worse. Especially if we ask Mama about it.” Reese shook his head again. “I don’t know how she put up with the four of us. I bet she was so exhausted by bedtime that she slipped straight into a coma.”

Drew chuckled and swung the door open, stepping inside. He began inspecting the knot on the elbow of the horse’s left front leg. “Doesn’t appear to be infected, but I’m going to give her a shot of antibiotics to be safe.”

Grabbing a syringe and a small vial from his vest pocket, Drew uncapped the needle and pulled in about two cc's of clear liquid before injecting the medication into the mare's flank. He handed Reese the remainder of the antibiotics and rubbed the mare's flesh at the injection site.

"Give the rest to her tomorrow." Drew peeled off his gloves. "You're also gonna need to wrap her hooves so the shoes don't continue to rub the boil when she's lying down."

"Will do."

With a pat on the chestnut's rump, Drew exited the stall and fastened the door behind him. "Come out to the truck, and I'll give you some bandages for her leg."

"We have plenty in the tack room," Reese said but followed Drew anyway.

"Won't hurt to have a few more." Drew gave Reese four of the brown ace-like bandages. After closing and locking the compartment on his truck bed, Drew turned back to Reese. "So, how are things going?"

Reese had been bracing himself for the questions he expected from his brother. He was surprised it had taken Drew this long to make his way to Lone Oaks to check things out for himself after Holden had caught sight of Shelby on one of her morning runs and Jack and Tess had run into them having dinner at Antonelli's with the boys.

Though Reese was close with all three of his brothers, he always felt the strongest bond with Drew, mainly because they were born less than twelve months apart. Irish twins, some called it. Until Reese had left for college, they had shared a room and many of the same interests. And they'd been the other's confidant in all their rites of passage from childhood into adulthood.

Despite heading in different directions for postgraduate studies and career paths, they remained close and kept in touch by phone and email. Those late-night calls with Drew kept Reese from going quietly out of his mind when Olivia was

suffering so badly from the physical and emotional effects of her illness.

Honestly, Reese owed a debt of gratitude to his brothers, parents, and grandparents for getting him through the darkest days of his life. If it hadn't been for them, Reese wasn't sure where he might be today. Guess their curiosity regarding how Reese was managing with the boys in their parents' absence was only natural.

And like it or not, Shelby Corbett was a vital part of that curiosity.

"Everything's going well," Reese finally answered.

Drew grinned. "That's what I've heard."

Reese narrowed his gaze. "Don't read anything into what you've heard, Drew."

Drew tipped his hat back on his forehead. "Well, let's see. I hear you haven't been working from sunup till long past sundown every damn day of the week. That you ventured into town for pizza at Antonelli's one Friday night. And that you even took a weekend off to go camping with Alex and Zach." A devilish gleam twinkled in Drew's Blackwood blues. "Exactly what do you think I'm reading into that?"

"Nothing," Reese replied, knowing full well Drew was well aware Shelby had accompanied him and the boys on both outings.

"If you say so." Drew kicked some gravel under his boot. "But it wouldn't be the end of the world to admit you're also enjoying the company of Wanda Landry's niece while she's here helping out with the boys."

There it was. Somehow, Reese knew his brother would find a way to bring Shelby into the loop of his observations. "It's not like that," Reese insisted and ignored the twinge of guilt stabbing him in the gut.

Reese's claim that nothing was going on between him and Shelby might not be the whole truth, but it wasn't a complete lie either. They had snuck in a few kisses, sometimes snuggling together on the sofa to watch TV after the boys were

asleep, but they always refrained from taking their mutual attraction past the point of no return.

And that freaking struggle was real, because Shelby was always on his mind. No matter what he was doing or where she was, she took up residence in his thoughts. Just like before, while he'd been unloading hay. Or when he was checking fence lines or working with the horses.

Or hell, just lying in his bed twenty feet from where she slept every night.

Alone.

In her pink shorty pajamas.

His thoughts and feelings weren't only physical in nature, though. Reese enjoyed Shelby's company. Talking with her and getting to know her better. Sharing stories about themselves and learning how much they had in common. Enjoying a beer or a glass of wine before retiring for the night. And recounting the day's activities, particularly anything involving Alex and Zach.

Much like couples might do at the end of the day.

If he and Shelby were a couple.

Which they weren't.

Not yet, anyway.

"But if it were like that, it would be okay," Drew assured his brother as if he'd been reading Reese's mind for the last few minutes.

"She's only been here two weeks, Drew."

"I hate to break it to you, but you aren't the same man you were two weeks ago. You're better. More like your old self. And I, for one, am damned glad to have you back." Drew clapped his hand on Reese's shoulder. "I've missed you, brother."

"And you really believe Shelby has something to do with that?"

“I definitely think she’s a factor.” Drew shook his head. “But that isn’t a bad thing either.”

What if Drew was right? Regardless of the reason, change for the better was never *a bad thing*. And Reese had changed. He no longer dreaded getting up in the morning to face another day. Instead of finding reasons to continue working long past dark, he searched for ways to knock off early so he could spend more time with Alex and Zach.

Not only did Reese look forward to more things in his life these days, but in the last two weeks, he’d found it easier to breathe. Did Shelby have something to do with those differences? Not entirely, but there was no point in denying her presence certainly made a positive impact. And according to Drew, it had been a long time coming.

“Well, I’d better hit the road.” Drew pulled open the door of his truck. “Oh, I almost forgot. I’m supposed to let you know that Hope invited Shelby and Tess over for lunch, so you and the boys are on your own.”

Reese raised an eyebrow. “Really? And whose idea was this?”

“I think Hope and Tess concocted it together.”

Of course they did, especially once Tess told Hope about seeing the four of them at Antonelli’s.

“Do you think Shelby’s figured out lunch is a ruse to find out about her time at Lone Oaks with you and the boys?”

“She’s pretty sharp. I’m sure she has some idea of what she’s walking into with Hope and Tess.”

“So, she’ll be able to handle their friendly inquisition?”

Reese grinned, remembering how he had underestimated her ability to handle Alex and Zach. “Since she had the boys toeing the line by dinner on her first day, I’m fairly confident she can hold her own against Hope and Tess.”

If not, Reese would have to find some way to make it up to her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tess picked up Shelby at the main house a few minutes past noon.

On the short drive to meet Hope, Tess explained that the new parents were living in Reese's house until Holden and his crew finished the construction on White Oaks, Drew and Hope's new home. The beautiful two-story stone farmhouse Reese had built for his wife.

Her heart ached all the more for Reese and the boys.

She kept that to herself, though. "It's beautiful here," she admired her surroundings instead. "Then again, I've yet to see a part of Lone Oaks that isn't."

Tess shut off the SUV and nodded. "You're right about that, for sure," she agreed and hopped out of the car.

Shelby followed Tess to the house. The door swung open before they could knock, and another tall man bearing a striking resemblance to Reese greeted them.

"Drew!" Tess exclaimed. "I didn't expect you to be here."

"Relax, T." He smiled, and lines fanned out from the corners of eyes that were identical in color to those of every Blackwood male she'd met except Jack. "I'm not here to intrude on your girl time," Drew teased, stepping back to usher them inside.

"Good thing," Tess tossed back at him before beginning the introductions. "Shelby, this is Drew, Reese's brother, and here comes his much better half, Hope." She paused for a

second while a smile that rivaled the sun beamed across her face. “And this,” Tess moved closer to her sister-in-law, “is the beautiful Miss Samantha.” Tess cooed the last part of the introduction as a dark-haired woman carrying an equally dark-haired baby joined them. “Drew, Hope, this is Shelby Corbett.”

Drew’s large hand swallowed Shelby’s. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet, *and* thank you.”

“Thank me?” Shelby narrowed her gaze. “For what?”

“For helping Reese realize the farm can survive without his twenty-four seven supervision.”

“I think that has more to do with your parents going on vacation and leaving the boys in the care of a virtual stranger than it has to do with me specifically.”

“Maybe regarding Alex and Zach,” Drew agreed. “But I saw Reese today. He’s quite different than he was only a few weeks ago.”

Shelby shook her head. “I don’t think that’s because of anything I’ve done either.” She believed that wholeheartedly. If anything, her arrival merely served as a catalyst—one of the many factors in place to assist Reese in re-establishing his relationship with Alex and Zach.

Before, immersing himself in his work and relinquishing his parental responsibilities to his mother had been easy. Now, Anna’s absence had forced Reese to take those terrifying yet crucial first steps back into the land of the living. When moving forward with the boys hadn’t been as difficult as he’d feared, it was easier to continue making progress.

Plus, the three of them were having a great time reconnecting. In her heart, Shelby truly believed his time with the boys had caused the difference his family currently observed in Reese.

“If you say so.” Drew grinned, the gesture instantly reminding Shelby of Reese. An alarm dinged on his phone. “Guess that’s my cue.” His attention shifted to his wife and daughter. Adoration beamed across his handsome face as he

leaned down to kiss the baby's tiny forehead, then his wife full on the lips. "See you later, babe."

The love emanating between Drew and Hope was so evident that Shelby expected to see heart emojis bubbling around them any minute. Envy, and something that felt a lot like longing, bloomed inside her.

"Tess, take care of my girls." Drew straightened and turned his sky-blue gaze to Shelby. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Shelby. And despite your refusal to accept any credit for the positive change in my brother, I have no doubt you're partially responsible." Drew smiled again. "And for that, we all thank you."

Before Shelby formulated a response, Drew winked at his wife and headed out.

"Let's have some lunch," Hope suggested, leading the way into the brightly lit kitchen. The table in the breakfast nook was set with food, plates, silverware, and drinks. "Please. Sit down," Hope invited as she placed the baby in the sling-like seat of the carrier perched on the cushioned window seat.

"How old is she?" Shelby asked, marveling at the baby's tiny and delicate features.

"Seven weeks." Love vied with pride on Hope's face.

"She's beautiful."

Hope's smile lit up her entire face. "We think so."

They each filled a plate and chatted about life in general for the next ten minutes. Among other things, Shelby learned Tess was both excited and nervous to join Jack on his book tour, and that although an excellent baby, Samantha had yet to sleep through the night.

"So," Tess began during a lull in the conversation. "I have to agree with Drew. Reese does seem different these days. Since losing Olivia, that is."

Shelby grinned inwardly. As she'd suspected, Hope's lunch invitation was partly a cover for Reese's sisters-in-law to get the scoop on her. Size her up a little. Ferret out some

information on what had been happening at Lone Oaks these past two weeks. Ensure she passed muster.

If their positions were reversed, Shelby would like to think she'd do the same thing after the hell Reese and his sons had been through in the last year and a half. Though she'd just met these women, Shelby believed their curiosity was born out of genuine concern for Reese and the boys rather than pure nosiness.

Actually, Shelby found it endearing that Tess and Hope cared enough about their brother-in-law to affirm she was worthy of whatever they suspected might be happening between her and Reese. Which, so far, had been little more than a mutual attraction between two unattached adults thrown together for the summer under an unusual set of circumstances.

Not that it couldn't be more. Physically, at least. But that was a huge step, and Shelby wasn't sure either of them was ready to take it.

And *that* wasn't something Shelby intended to share with Tess and Hope.

"No one processes grief in the same way or in the same time frame. Maybe Reese needed until now to find his way back from his devastating loss."

"But Jack and I saw the two of you together at Antonelli's," Tess reminded Shelby. "Seeing Reese out in public and away from Lone Oaks was surprising enough, but he also appeared much more relaxed around you. Even Jack commented on it."

"I think he's just more relaxed in general." Which was true.

Tess sat back and studied Shelby. "So, you honestly don't believe you have anything to do with that?"

Shelby shook her head. "No. Not really." She shifted slightly in her seat. "I mean, yes, I'm here helping with the boys, but since I'm not family, Reese can't distance himself from his parental responsibilities. If anything, my being at

Lone Oaks provided the push he needed but was reluctant to take with Alex and Zach. Whereas before, it was easier to let his mother handle everything.”

“Then, no sparks are sizzling between you and Reese?” The tone in Tess’s voice indicated she didn’t believe that for a second.

“Tess!” Hope chastised, her dark eyes wide.

“What?” Tess jerked her head toward Hope. “He’s a good-looking man, and she’s a beautiful woman. They’re living under the same roof. Eating meals together. Practically co-parenting Alex and Zach. Seems only natural for an attraction to form between them.”

“I’m sitting right here,” Shelby reminded them.

“Too personal?” Tess asked.

Hope gave her sister-in-law a wide-eyed nod.

“Again. Sitting right here.”

Tess’s gaze swung back to Shelby. “Sorry.” She placed her forearms on the table and leaned forward. “It’s just...Jack and I were shocked spitless at seeing Reese out in public the other night.”

“Why?”

“Aside from picking up farm supplies or attending a school event for one of the boys, I can count on one hand the times Reese has left Lone Oaks since Olivia’s passing. And when he did leave, he was absolutely miserable. But at Antonelli’s the other night, he wasn’t. There, he looked happy. Smiling and laughing. Giving Jack shit.” She pinned Shelby with her intense gaze. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve heard Reese laugh?”

Speechless, Shelby shook her head.

“Yeah. Me neither. So, it’s been a long damn time.” She leaned forward a bit more and held Shelby’s gaze. “But he was on Friday night.”

“As I said, everyone deals with grief differently. Maybe his wounds are starting to heal, making everything easier.”

“Maybe,” Tess conceded, sitting back in her chair. “Or maybe he just needed you.”

No. Shelby didn’t believe that. Not at all.

And if she did, she shouldn’t.

Yes, she and Reese shared a mutual attraction born out of pent-up sexual frustration. Which had nothing to do with the change everyone in his family seemed to notice in Reese. One had nothing to do with the other.

Right?

Little Samantha’s cry captured everyone’s attention, for which Shelby was eternally grateful. Not that the baby was discontented, but that Tess and Hope’s focus shifted from her.

“She’s probably hungry.” Hope unlatched the straps of the carrier and lifted the baby out. “I breastfeed, so I can take her into another room if you’d prefer.” She addressed the comment to Shelby.

“Whatever is most comfortable for you is fine with me.”

Hope smiled. “Okay. It’ll only take me a minute to set up the lactation buffet.”

While Hope prepared for Samantha’s feeding, Shelby and Tess continued their lunch. Thankfully, the conversation veered into more neutral territory. Shelby learned Tess was a professional photographer, that she and Jack had been best friends since they were twelve, and that at her sister’s engagement party earlier in the year, he’d suggested they also get married.

At first, Tess thought Jack had flipped his gourd entirely. But when he began courting her, Tess’s defenses against him crumbled. With her place housing her photography studio, they moved into Jack’s home after she finally agreed to marry him.

Hope, like her husband Drew, was a veterinarian. They’d met while working at the same equine clinic in Kentucky. One

night after an unbelievably distressing day, they'd shared a bottle of Patron, woke up the next morning in bed together, and nine months later, baby Samantha entered the world.

Between Samantha's conception and birth, Drew came home to Lone Oaks for the holidays to appease his grandfather. He invited Hope along to keep her from spending her first Thanksgiving and Christmas alone after the death of her father. During their six-week visit, love blossomed, and much to Pops's delight, Hope and Drew decided to remain in Virginia, join the elder Blackwood's practice, and take over for him when he retired.

Envy settled deep in Shelby's heart as Tess and Hope shared their love stories. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever be fortunate enough to someday have what these women had found with their husbands.

She certainly hadn't with Peter.

Even before he cheated on her.

By two o'clock, a steady summer rain began to fall as the three of them made plans to get together again the following week. They exchanged hugs with Hope and stole a few snuggles with the baby before they headed back to the main house.

"That was fun."

"Even though we badgered you about the changes we've noticed in Reese?"

"I wouldn't call it badgering, exactly." Close, but once they finished eating, the conversation became more about getting to know each other as friends.

Tess pulled the SUV to a stop by the split rail fence surrounding the log and stone farmhouse. "It's been awful watching him suffer. I've never seen anyone as devastated as Reese after Olivia died. My heart broke into a million pieces every time I saw him."

Shelby thought back to the first day she'd arrived at Lone Oaks. How utterly somber his appearance. The way his

shoulders slumped beneath the weight of his grief—the vacant, far-away dullness in his beautiful blue eyes.

Like Tess, seeing Reese so dispirited had also broken Shelby's heart.

“Being the one left behind would be devastating enough, but with two little boys...” Shelby shook her head. “I can't even begin to imagine.”

Tess nodded. “The hardest part was not being able to reach him. The more we tried, the further he seemed to withdraw. Throwing himself deeper into the work on the farm. Almost like he stopped living, except when it came to the horses and cattle.”

“Or maybe working was the only way he could find to escape the unspeakable pain.”

“Yeah. You're probably right.” Tess's eyes brightened. “But he's not that man anymore. He's standing taller. Smiling more. Not working himself into an early grave.” She looked across the interior of the SUV at Shelby. “I know you don't agree, but I'm convinced your presence here has helped Reese more than any of us could.”

Shelby sighed. She wished his family wouldn't keep saying that. Each time they did, a sliver of hope sprang to life inside her that their observations may be accurate.

At least a little.

But Shelby also feared those hopes were a recipe for disaster.

And heartbreak.

Her own, this time. Because with every second Shelby spent with Reese and the boys, the larger amount of real estate they took up in her heart. With that realization, Shelby needed to tread carefully.

“I'm just glad he and the boys are reconnecting and bonding and enjoying themselves in the process.”

For a few seconds, Tess held Shelby's gaze before speaking. “You're good for them, Shelby.”

Perhaps she was. For their sakes, Shelby hoped so. “Thanks for the ride, Tess. I’m really looking forward to next week.”

“Me too.”

Shelby hopped out of Tess’s SUV and ran through the rain to the back door. She grabbed a towel from the mudroom dryer and began wiping the rain off her arms and face.

“Well, aside from being drenched, you don’t look any the worse for wear,” Reese greeted her as soon as she entered the kitchen.

Startled, Shelby gasped, her stomach taking a massive nosedive straight to her toes. “I didn’t expect you to be here.” She looked around. “Where are the boys?”

“In their room.” Reese filled a glass with iced tea and leaned a denim-clad hip against the counter. “I’ve been catching up on some paperwork.” He took a drink. “How was lunch?”

“Good.” Which sufficed. No need to elaborate on the observations of his sisters-in-law. “Tess and Hope are very nice. And your little niece is adorable.”

“Yeah. I’ll have to admit Jack and Drew got pretty damn lucky with those two.”

As the words left his mouth, shadows drifted into his ocean-blue eyes. Shelby’s heart twisted. Seeing how deliriously happy his brothers were with their wives had to be extremely difficult for Reese. Not that he begrudged them their marital bliss, but more because their happiness served as a constant reminder of everything he no longer had.

Instinctively, Shelby wanted to wrap her arms around him. Comfort him. Give him hope. Promise him things would eventually improve even though they’d never again be the same.

But she didn’t.

Partly because she wasn’t sure Reese was ready to hear those sentiments, but primarily because it wasn’t her place as

the temporary caretaker for his children.

Shelby knew it wouldn't take much for her to fall head over heels for Reese. She suspected she was already halfway there now. And why not? He was a thoughtful, compassionate man and a kind, loving father. His sons were crazy about him, and anyone with eyes in their head could see the feeling was mutual.

Whether on an adventure with the boys or alone on the porch after Alex and Zach were asleep, Shelby enjoyed the time she spent in Reese's company. Listening as he talked. Laughing at his dry sense of humor. Simply being near him unleashed a swarm of butterflies in her belly. His slightest touch burned like a torch against her skin.

And with only a look, Reese twisted all her girlie parts into one ginormous knot only he had the power to untangle.

Or tighten even further.

Shelby shook those thoughts away and rubbed the towel over her hair. "They've been worried about you."

"They don't need to be," Reese assured her though a few shadows still lingered, clouding his beautiful eyes. "I'm fine."

"Are you?" The question was out before she could stop it.

"I'm definitely a helluva lot better than I was."

"They've noticed that too."

Reese laughed. A low, slow rumble from deep inside his chest. A shiver that had nothing to do with the air conditioner danced up Shelby's spine. "Great. Then, hopefully, they can get on with their own lives and stop being so damned wrapped up in mine." He took another drink of his tea. "I hope they didn't bore you to tears at lunch with this shit."

Shelby shook her head. Nothing about Reese would ever bore her, Shelby was coming to realize. But that wasn't an admission she was willing to make. Out loud anyway, but especially to Reese. "They didn't," she said instead.

Draining his tea in one last gulp, Reese dumped the ice in the sink, rinsed out the glass, and popped it into the

dishwasher. “They mean well, and I appreciate their concern. But when Drew told me they’d invited you to lunch, I hoped they wouldn’t do or say anything to make you uncomfortable about any of this.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Any of what?”

“Everyone’s preoccupation about how different I seem to be. Particularly since your arrival at Lone Oaks.”

Oh. *That*. “Well, I’ll tell you what I told them.” Honesty was the best policy, right? “I think this change everyone is observing has more to do with circumstances than it has to do with me.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “It makes perfect sense. Until your mother left, you relied on her to take care of Alex and Zach because you knew she would without question. Plus, you trusted her. When she went on vacation and left a virtual stranger on the scene, the circumstances changed drastically, which compelled you to take a more active parenting role. Once you realized Lone Oaks wouldn’t fall apart by turning over more responsibilities to your farmhands in order to spend more time with Alex and Zach, you allowed yourself to enjoy the extra moments with them. Which then made everything easier to continue.”

“And you don’t believe you’ve played any part in this at all?”

Why did everyone keep asking her that? “Only as a catalyst.”

“Did Tess and Hope buy that answer?”

His question surprised her, but the intensity darkening his blue eyes gave her pause. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Because I sure as hell don’t.”

Suddenly, Shelby found it difficult to breathe. “You don’t?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I don’t.”

Reese pushed himself away from the counter and crossed the room until he stood about a foot in front of her. He didn't touch her, but the heat radiating off his powerful body curled through her, leaving her weak-kneed and giddy.

“Don't get me wrong. What you said about the boys is true. I did think things would be harder than they were. When it wasn't as difficult as I expected, rearranging my priorities to spend more time with Alex and Zach did get easier.”

Reaching out, Reese stroked his index finger along her cheek. The gesture lit a fire straight to Shelby's lady parts. “But as much as it might be easier for both of us, I can't deny that you being here has also made a difference.”

Swallowing hard, Shelby fought for words. None came. “I don't know what to say.”

He took a step forward. “Then don't say anything,” he murmured and touched his lips to hers.

Shelby grabbed onto the fabric of Reese's shirt to keep herself from dissolving into a puddle. Good Lord, what was happening to her? If he could ignite a fire this white-hot inside her with one simple kiss, Shelby feared she'd disintegrate into a ball of flames if he did anything more.

As he ended the kiss, Reese brushed his thumb along her jaw. For such a big man, his touch was incredibly gentle. The gesture nearly made her weep.

“What are we gonna do about what's happening between us, Shelby?”

A million-dollar question, for sure. “I don't know.”

“I think it's something we need to talk about, don't you?”

“Yeah. I guess so.” Was that her voice that sounded so shaky? “But not right now, okay?” Whatever happened between them wasn't something they should delve into when Alex and Zach could interrupt them at any minute. She was surprised they hadn't already. So, yes, later would be best. Plus, with the extra time, they could give the matter some additional thought.

“Okay. Tonight. After the boys are asleep.”

Since she didn't trust her voice, Shelby nodded.

Smiling sweetly, Reese pressed a kiss to her forehead, and something melted inside her chest. “Guess I'll go finish the payroll, then.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

With the boys down for the night much earlier than he expected, Reese used the extra time to shower and shave now rather than right before collapsing into bed like usual. Particularly since he had no idea how long his talk with Shelby would take. Or what might happen as a result.

Not that Reese harbored any preconceived notions or expectations. He didn't. But the longer Shelby was at Lone Oaks, the harder it was to keep his hands off her. So, if, or more likely when, he touched her, he didn't want to be a grimy mess or smell like the farm.

Reese stepped out of the shower and dried off. With the towel wrapped loosely around his waist, he wiped the steam from the mirror and took a long look at his reflection, searching for all those changes his family kept insisting they saw in him. Only Reese didn't see much difference from what stared back at him every other day.

Sure, his skin was a little more weathered from working out in the elements year-round. A few extra lines fanned out from his eyes and bracketed his mouth. Hell, if he looked closely enough, he could probably find a few gray hairs to boot.

But those aren't the differences everyone is noticing.

Okay. Maybe what they saw weren't so much physical changes but behavioral. Emotional. Even social to an extent, he imagined. This time two weeks ago, he'd likely still be working to delay coming back to the house while anyone was

still awake. By timing his return right, Reese hadn't been forced to make conversation or excuses with either his parents or his children.

Or fielding questions for which he had no answer.

Hell, many nights, Reese skipped a shower altogether because he barely had the energy to strip off his clothes and fall into bed. Now, as he pulled on a clean pair of Levi's and tugged a gray tee-shirt over his head, Reese felt energized instead of bone-weary. And the last thing on his mind was going to bed. Or rather going to sleep, since he very much *wanted* to go to bed.

Just not alone.

The mere thought of taking Shelby to bed ignited a fire deep inside him. His pulse upped its tempo. His entire body tightened, warming from the inside out. Being intimate with Shelby was something Reese wanted more than anything he'd wanted in a long time.

But was he ready to cross that line? Physically? Hell, yes. Emotionally? Reese still wasn't sure. And the hell of it was, he didn't know if he ever would. Especially not when just thinking about taking another woman to bed made him feel like he was cheating on his wife.

If this were only about scratching an itch, none of these concerns would matter one damn bit. But this wasn't some random hookup. This was Shelby. Someone who deserved more than a meaningless roll in the hay or a casual summer fling.

Someone Reese was beginning to care about more than he expected to ever again.

Reese met his reflection in the mirror above his dresser. The best he could do was to continue taking one step at a time. Because regardless of what did or didn't happen between him and Shelby in the next month, Reese would do everything in his power to ensure the decision was right for them both. Being careless with either of their emotions was not a risk worth taking.

Nor would it be fair to either of them.

Or his boys, who mattered more than anything else.

Picking up his dirty clothes, Reese stuffed them in the hamper on his way downstairs to find Shelby. Like many of the evenings since her arrival, he found her on the porch. Only tonight, she sat in the wooden glider rather than her usual perch on the stone ledge.

Moonlight bathed her in its soft glow, illuminating her lovely features. She was so damned beautiful. Both inside and out, Reese had quickly discovered.

Smiling, Reese crossed the porch. Shelby paused the swing with her toe long enough for him to sit. She handed him a beer. Since she'd already removed the top, Reese took a healthy swig to take advantage of a little liquid courage.

"I wasn't sure you were still coming out." She didn't look at him. Instead, she stared into the wine in her glass.

Reese leaned back against the wooden slats of the glider. "Why?"

Her shoulder hitched in a modified shrug against his. "Thought maybe you might be having second thoughts. That you realized everything was happening too fast."

"Is it?"

Shelby lifted her gaze to his. "I don't think that's a question I need to answer."

"This isn't just about me, Shelby." And it wasn't. Not by a long shot.

"I know." She lowered her lashes. "But you've been through *so* much in the last year and a half, Reese. It's important you don't rush into anything you're not ready for or might regret later."

Yeah. He got that. He definitely didn't want any regrets either. At this point, though, Reese wasn't sure what he'd regret more—exploring whatever was blossoming between him and Shelby or not having the courage to take the risk and find out.

“Same goes for you.” Reese curled his fingers around hers. “I don’t want you to feel rushed or have any regrets either.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Shelby ventured a glance in his direction. “So far, I haven’t regretted a thing.” Her voice was low, almost as if she were afraid to say the words too loud.

Relief washed over Reese, and something shifted inside his chest. Loosening. Possibly breaking free. “I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Shelby took another sip of wine, set her glass on the metal table to her left, and pushed herself out of the swing.

She crossed to the stone ledge surrounding the porch, but instead of sitting in her usual spot, she stood by the post closest to the steps and wrapped her arm around the column as she stared out into the darkness.

Reese debated whether to remain seated, giving her the space she obviously needed, or follow her. Though he instantly missed the warmth of her hand in his, he decided to stay put. For now, at least.

Instead, he leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs as he grappled with his own conflicting thoughts. Or were they wants? Needs? Hell if he knew. Which only made what to do about this damnable situation with Shelby more difficult on every possible level.

Yes, he wanted her. Ached for her. Couldn’t stop thinking about her, no matter where he was or how hard he tried. He looked forward to their morning chats after her run. Sitting across the table from her at meals. Watching her with his boys. Seeing her smile. Hearing her laugh.

And tasting her soft, deliciously kissable lips.

Which was precisely what Reese wanted to do right now. Pull her into his arms and kiss her until she couldn’t remember her name. Only kissing her wasn’t all he wanted. Not anymore. But was he ready?

More importantly, was she?

“I also don’t want you to feel pressured in any way,” he added.

“Well, that’s quite ironic.”

Reese narrowed his gaze. “What is?”

Turning, Shelby faced him and leaned her back against the wooden post. “I’ve been doing my damndest to keep from pressuring you.”

“But you haven’t done anything.”

“Exactly. Because despite how attracted I am to you, I’m not sure you’re ready for anything more.” Shelby tapped her fist against her breastbone. “In here. Plus, we have other people and things to consider. Like Alex and Zach. And the fact that I’m only here for a few more weeks.”

Shelby paused for a moment, holding his gaze. “I don’t want to complicate things for you any more than they are, Reese. Not when you’re just beginning to live your life again.”

Unable to sit a moment longer, Reese pushed himself out of the swing and crossed to where she stood. “You have to be one of the most selfless women I’ve ever met.” And realizing that only made him want her more.

She averted her gaze. “Not really.”

“Yes. Really. Because you always think of everyone but yourself.” Reese tipped her chin up with his thumb and forefinger. “But what about you, Shelby? When does what you deserve matter?” He inched closer and cupped her face between his palms. “Or what you need,” he murmured as he aligned his body with hers. “Or want,” he finished before capturing her mouth with his.

She tasted of wine, earthy and tart. Softly, Reese moved his lips against hers, resisting the urge to devour her completely. When he broke the kiss a few moments later, he didn’t release his hold on her. “Tell me what you want, Shelby.”

“You,” she whispered, her breath sweet and warm against his lips. “Exactly as you are.”

Relieved yet terrified, Reese captured her mouth again. As he deepened the kiss and slid his tongue along hers, Shelby wound her arms around him, pulling him closer. God, he ached for her to the point he came close to shutting down the rational part of his brain and giving in to the overwhelming desire consuming them both.

But he didn't. Like Shelby'd said, this wasn't only about them. To be fair to everyone, themselves included, they needed to be absolutely sure about everything before taking things between them to the next level.

Once again, Reese did what he thought was right. He summoned every ounce of willpower in his arsenal and forced himself to stop while he still could. Breathless, he listened to his pulse pounding in his ears, deafening him. When it gave no sign of settling, Reese leaned his forehead against hers, emotions and thoughts battling for control within his mind, body, and heart.

Need versus want. Right versus wrong. Impulsivity versus patience. Self-gratification versus self-preservation.

Shelby versus Olivia.

And there it was. The crux. What muddied the waters more than anything else. What held him back, forcing him to second-guess everything—his thoughts, feelings, and desires—primarily concerning Shelby. Reese didn't want to screw this up, but he realized that before he could move forward, he needed to confront his past.

And settle his conscience.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Shelby prompted, interrupting his thoughts.

"I wish I could." He laughed, but there was no humor in the sound.

"I'm sorry."

When she started to pull away, he refused to let her. Instead, he traced his finger down the curve of her cheek, his eyes never leaving her face. "You have nothing to be sorry about, Shelby."

“But...”

“Nothing.” Reese shook his head. “As cliché as it sounds, this is more about me than you.” As much as Reese wanted to believe he *was* ready to continue moving forward with his life, he knew how important it was for him to be absolutely certain. Not just for himself but also for Shelby and the boys. “That doesn’t mean I’m giving up, though.”

And it didn’t. He wouldn’t let it. Not when the mere thought of Shelby walking out of their lives in a few weeks sucked the air right out of his lungs, nearly suffocating him.

“But you have a few things you still need to work out,” Shelby replied with a nod. “I get it.”

Of course she did. Like him, she had her own obstacles to conquer, issues to work through, and decisions to make.

Reese held her gaze. “I do still want you, Shelby. So damned much.”

A smile tugged on her soft, slightly swollen lips. “Well, that’s good to know.”

“But you deserve much more than a summer fling.”

She circled his wrist with her hand. “So do you, Reese.” She rose on her toes and pressed her mouth lightly against his. “So please bear that in mind while sorting everything out.”

A week or so later, Reese decided to ask Shelby out on a date.

Lame, he knew, especially after spending hours and days wrestling with his conscience and forcing himself to face his doubts, fears, and uncertainties about what he should or shouldn’t do where he and Shelby were concerned. And trying like hell to reconcile his past with his present.

Maybe even his future.

Had he made progress? Some.

On one hand, Reese had successfully kept their daily routine as normal as possible while on his mission to untangle and work through his screwed-up psyche. He was determined not to lose any progress he'd made with the boys. Nor did he distance himself from Shelby. Their morning chats after her run continued, as did their evening meals and activities with the boys.

Reese also hadn't shied away from Shelby's company after Alex and Zach went to bed.

Or from touching and kissing her.

For both their sakes, he did everything in his power to keep his wits about him so things didn't get too far out of control and put them right back to that night on the porch almost ten days ago.

Though still somewhat fragmented, Reese had no intention of losing any headway he'd gained in the last few weeks. Granted, asking Shelby on a date wasn't earth-shattering progress, but it was a positive step in the right direction. A step he was looking forward to taking.

But that in no way meant Reese was free of concern.

He wasn't. Not at all.

Now, his apprehension centered more on his boys and how they would be affected by whatever happened between Shelby and him. He didn't want to confuse them. Or raise questions in their little minds he couldn't answer. Most importantly, he didn't want them to get hurt.

It is one date, that little voice of reason reminded him. Highly unlikely to scar them for life, no matter the outcome.

True. No need to prematurely overanalyze the situation.

Still, if the first date went well, more were bound to follow. Then the dynamic of their relationship would change, which the boys *would* undoubtedly notice. Particularly when Reese unconsciously reached for Shelby's hand as they walked to the stable. Or he squeezed her shoulder on his way past her in the kitchen. Or he brushed her lips with his in a light but potent kiss.

No, his sons' eagle eyes would never miss any of that. Which would lead to questions Reese didn't know if he could answer. God, why did everything have to be so fucking complicated?

How about you get through the first date before letting everything spin out of control unnecessarily?

Good idea, Reese conceded to the little voice in his subconscious. No need to borrow trouble. Just ask Shelby out and see what happened.

But first, he needed a babysitter, because as much as he loved his sons, taking them along on his first official date in over a decade was simply not an option. With Jack and Tess tying up loose ends before leaving on Jack's promotional press junket for his latest best-seller, Drew and Hope were Reese's best option.

Reese pulled his phone from his pocket, scrolled to locate the number, and paused to take a deep, fortifying breath before hitting the call icon.

On the third ring, Hope answered. "Hello."

"Hope? It's Reese."

"Hi, Reese. How are you?"

"Good. You? The baby?"

"We're both fine as frog hair, as Zeke would say. What's up with you? Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Everything's okay." He hesitated briefly but then forged ahead before he lost his nerve entirely. "I'm calling to ask a favor."

"Sure. What is it?"

Reese inhaled deeply. This was harder than he'd expected. "If you can't, or don't want to, please don't feel like you have to agree. I know you have a lot going on with the baby, and the boys, well, they *can* certainly be a handful." God, he was babbling like an idiot.

“Reese,” Hope interrupted when he paused for a breath. “Why don’t you ask me the favor before giving me all the reasons I should refuse?”

She was right. Of course. But if it was this hard to ask Hope to babysit, how in the hell would he ever be able to ask Shelby to go out with him? Reese rubbed his forehead with his thumb and forefinger, wondering if he should forget the whole damned thing.

“Reese?” Hope prompted when he remained radio silent.

“I was wondering if you and Drew would consider watching Alex and Zach on Saturday night.” There. Reese had asked the favor.

“This Saturday?” He could hear the smile in her voice.

Shit. Now Reese had given them more ammunition to use in their observation of the changes they’d seen in him over the last few weeks.

He answered Hope anyway. “Yeah. This Saturday.”

“Sure. Doc McCauley’s on call this weekend, so both Drew and I will be here. We’d love to have the boys over. Unless you’d rather we come to the main house.”

“No. Your place is fine.” He didn’t want to inconvenience them further by asking them to haul themselves, the baby, and all her necessities over here for only a few hours. “That is if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

Reese could all but see Hope’s smile widening into a grin. “Still, maybe you should check with Drew first. You know. To be on the safe side.”

“He’s not going to mind us watching the boys, Reese.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” Dammit, he’d already said that at least once. Reese scrubbed a hand down his face, mortified at how inept he must sound.

“Positive.” Again, he heard the smile in her voice.

Okay. First hurdle crossed. Thankfully, Hope had refrained from asking a boatload of questions about the reason why he needed a babysitter. Then again, she wasn't stupid. Surely, she'd put two and two together. "Well, just let me know if anything changes."

"Will do."

"Thanks."

"What time are you planning to drop them off? Or do you want us to pick them up?"

Excellent question. One he should have thought of himself. Damn, there were so many things to consider just to go on a date. "I can drop them off. Say around four?"

"Perfect. I'm looking forward to it."

Yeah. So was he. "I really appreciate this, Hope."

"We're glad to help." She paused for half a second. "And Reese, why don't you pack the boys an overnight bag and plan for them to sleep over?"

No. Hope Logan Blackwood definitely wasn't stupid. Grateful they were on the phone so she couldn't see the embarrassment heating his face and neck, he managed to reply, "That isn't necessary, Hope."

"Just say *okay*, Reese," she countered. "It's for the best. Trust me."

He hoped the hell she was right. "Okay," he obliged. "And thanks again."

"My pleasure."

Reese ended the call and pocketed his phone as he made his way to the house. While on a roll, he had no reason to put off asking Shelby. Best to strike while the iron was hot. Besides, if he started thinking about things too much, he'd likely lose his nerve altogether.

Not that he thought Shelby would turn him down. This was more about where he, and apparently Hope, suspected the date might lead that unnerved him. Until now, everything that

happened between the two of them had been safe. Some blatant and unapologetic flirting. Passionate kisses he tried to keep from evolving into heavy-duty make-out sessions but still left him hot, hard, and aching.

Despite his resolve not to rush into anything before either of them was ready, Reese was damned tired of cold showers and going to bed alone.

When he was with Shelby, everything felt good. Right. He wanted her. She wanted him. So, what was the freaking problem?

Guilt.

The one obstacle he couldn't seem to overcome no matter how hard he tried.

Bottom line, guilt continued to overwhelm him. Tying him in knots. Because he cared about Shelby, enjoyed time spent with her, and wanted to take their relationship to the next level, Reese also couldn't help feeling as if he were being unfaithful to Olivia. Betraying both her and her memory. Diminishing what they had together. Discounting the love they shared.

If he and Shelby gave in to temptation, would he be able to withstand the guilt? Or would it consume him completely? Reese had no clue. But with Shelby, he was willing to take the risk.

When Reese walked into the kitchen, an eerie silence greeted him. No incessant talking or bickering. No TV blaring. No ripping and running through the house.

Nothing.

A bit unnerved, Reese continued toward the family room, where he found Shelby folding laundry and the boys sitting on the floor, both tucked into what looked like one of his old college tee-shirts. A pile of Lego lay scattered in front of them.

Reese had no idea what was going on, but he had no doubt it would be quite the story.

“Everything okay?”

Both Alex and Zach cast a look of shame in Shelby's direction before turning their solemn blue eyes up at him. "We had a fight," Alex informed him, his voice much quieter than usual.

"A big one," Zach elaborated. "And now we haveta wear this get-along shirt."

Reese tried like hell to suppress the grin tugging at his lips. The shirt's neckline was cut to allow room for both their heads. Alex's left arm was through one armhole, with Zach's right through the other. Quite an ingenious concept and consequence Shelby had here. "What were you fighting about?"

Again, both cast Shelby a sidelong glance. She didn't say a word, just kept folding laundry. "Dumb stuff," Alex answered.

"I was playing with his Lego without asking," Zach confessed.

"And he was mixing them all up."

"We started arguing, and then he hit me. So I hit him back."

"That's when Shelby got mad at us."

"Rightly so, don't you think?" Reese asked.

Both dark heads nodded in unison.

Still silent, Shelby dropped the last folded towel in the wicker basket, picked it up, and rose from the sofa.

"We haveta find a way to play together without fighting," Zach explained another component of the consequences of their actions.

"While wearing the get-along shirt."

Impressed with Shelby's creative disciplinary techniques, Reese couldn't believe he'd ever doubted her ability to handle Alex and Zach. Hell, she might even be more capable than their grandmother.

Not that Reese intended to admit as much within earshot of his mother.

“Well, guess you better start figuring it out,” Reese suggested as Shelby climbed the stairs. “I need to talk to Shelby for a few minutes. When I’m finished, I expect the two of you to have come to an amicable solution.”

Zach’s brow puckered. “What’s an amicable solution?”

“One that keeps this from happening again.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Reese took the steps two at a time and followed Shelby in the direction of her bedroom. He stopped on the threshold, hesitant to enter her private domain. Instead, he leaned his right shoulder against the doorjamb and waited for her return from restocking the towels in her bathroom closet.

When she finally emerged, she didn’t appear the least bit surprised to find him standing in the doorway.

“A get-along shirt?” Reese inquired. “Where’d you ever come up with that?”

“Schoolteachers have all kinds of tricks up their sleeves.” She tucked the now-empty basket between her hip and elbow. “I hope I didn’t overstep my bounds.”

“Are you kidding? I think it’s ingenious. And it seems to be working.”

Her face lit up with a smile, and Reese’s heart tripped over its beats.

“They’ve never argued and fought like that since I’ve been here.”

“Guess the honeymoon’s over. In fact, I’ve been wondering where *those* boys have been for the last few weeks.”

“So today’s scuffle was normal?”

“Absolutely. I’m surprised it took this long to occur.”

“Sorry about your shirt.”

“I have others.”

Shelby nodded. “Well, I better go check on them.”

“They’re fine.” Reese pushed himself out of the doorway and stepped into the room. “I told them to figure out a resolution while you and I talked.”

Shelby narrowed her gaze. “About the get-along shirt?”

Reese shook his head. “Actually, I was on my way to talk to you about something else when I came upon the scene downstairs.”

She adjusted the laundry basket longways in front of her and held onto it with both hands. “What’s up?”

The moment of truth. Did he just blurt out his request? Ease into the conversation slowly? Hell, he had no freaking idea what to do.

“Is something wrong?” Shelby asked when the silence stretched between them.

“No,” Reese assured her. “I was just...” He paused to scratch his jaw. “I thought...” Another pause, this time to pull in a long, deep breath. “Oh hell. What I’m trying to say is, will you go out to dinner with me on Saturday night?”

Surprise widened Shelby’s amber eyes. “You want to take me out? Like on a date?”

Reese nodded. “Yes. I do.” *Please say yes.* He mentally rolled his eyes. What was he, like, fourteen, for pity’s sake?

“What about the boys?”

“Hope and Drew are going to babysit.”

More surprise darted across her face. “You’ve already arranged everything with them?”

Again, Reese nodded. “Just got off the phone with Hope before I came in.” Taking a step toward her, Reese plucked the laundry basket from her, tossed it aside, and took her now-empty hands in his. “So, will you let me take you to dinner and a movie or dancing or whatever else you want to do on Saturday night?”

Smiling, Shelby lifted her face to look up at him. “Yes. I’d like very much to go out with you on Saturday.”

Relief washed through every cell in his body. “Perfect,” he said before claiming her mouth with his own.

By Friday, Hope and Tess had both been in touch with Shelby about her date with Reese. Tess also couldn't resist telling Shelby, “I told you so,” about what she considered Shelby's responsibility for the changes everyone had noticed in Reese. Rather than debate the issue with either of Reese's sisters-in-law, Shelby remained silent on the matter and tried to keep everything in perspective.

Reese had only asked her out on a date, not to pick out china patterns. They would have dinner, maybe catch a movie or grab a drink. Nothing monumental. Just a normal occurrence in the lives of two single people out on a date.

No biggie.

Only, it kind of was. Especially for Reese. And after Hope shared with Shelby that she and Drew were keeping the boys overnight, Shelby realized precisely how big a deal this date might turn out to be.

Her stomach churned in both nervousness and excitement at the prospect.

Perspective, Shelby reminded herself. Regardless of what did or did not happen on Saturday night, proceeding with caution, keeping her eyes wide open, and not expecting anything more than Reese was ready or prepared to give was crucial.

Since her stay at Lone Oaks was temporary, it would behoove Shelby to add an extra hedge of protection around her heart. No easy feat, for sure, considering the effect Reese had on her and the little effort it would take for Shelby to fall for the father when she was already head over heels for the man's sons.

Still, she needed to keep in mind all this was new territory for Reese. There was no guarantee how things between them

would play out whether they consummated their relationship or not. But life was too short for regrets. If all she might have with Reese was a three-week fling, Shelby would take it.

Besides, after her broken engagement and the loss of his wife, they both needed to get that first date out of the way to have any hope of moving forward.

“Hello, Shelby.”

Startled, she whipped around at the strange yet oddly familiar voice and found herself face to face with quite possibly the most beautiful man she’d ever seen. Tall, with jet black hair, piercing sky-blue eyes rimmed by dark, thick lashes, and a body Michelangelo could have sculpted himself, the man was pure sex appeal personified.

This must be the brother Shelby had yet to meet. The *ladies’ man*, according to Reese. And after seeing him, Shelby understood why. Not only was he drop-dead gorgeous, he also radiated that bad boy, rebel vibe females the world over yearned to tame.

Though undeniably a spectacular specimen of masculinity, Shelby’s interest went no further than visual appreciation. No jump in her pulse rate. No swarm of butterflies dancing a quick step in her belly. No explosion erupting like a lava-filled volcano through her girlie parts.

At least nothing in comparison to how her body reacted to Reese.

Shelby wondered if Holden would be surprised by her lack of response to his impressive physicality.

Probably.

She smiled inwardly at the thought.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. Guess I should have knocked.” He stepped farther into the kitchen. “I’m Holden. Reese’s youngest brother.”

Shelby laid the little tee-shirt she was folding onto Zach’s stack of clothes on the table. “I kind of figured. It’s uncanny how all four of you look so much alike.”

His mouth eased into a grin, the gesture sparkling in his eyes. “Strong genes, I suppose.”

Nodding, Shelby laid a miniature pair of Levi’s on Alex’s pile. “I imagine so.”

His grin deepened.

“Reese and the boys aren’t here. He took them into town with him. I think they were headed to the hardware store.” And likely The Sweet Shoppe, too, since father and sons all shared the same sweet tooth.

“Actually, I came to see you.”

“Oh?” Surprised, Shelby narrowed her gaze. “Why?”

“Figured it was time to see for myself.”

“To see what exactly?”

Holden leaned against the counter much like his brother often did. “I’ve heard a lot about you from my brothers and their wives. Even a little from Reese.”

After the time Shelby spent with Tess and Hope, she wasn’t surprised. The Blackwood family was a caring lot. Watching Reese suffer through the loss of his wife had to be difficult for all of them, especially when nothing they said or did seemed to reach him. Or make any difference.

At least not for the better.

“So is this you coming to make sure I pass muster?”

His mile-wide shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug. “Maybe.” Holden crossed one booted foot over the other. “I hear Reese asked you out on a date.”

Big news at Lone Oaks, evidently. “He did,” Shelby confirmed.

“I assume you realize the significance of that.”

“Yeah. I do.”

Though unsure where this conversation was leading, Shelby didn’t take offense at Holden’s comments. After watching Reese withdraw into his grief these past two years,

his family had cause to be concerned for his well-being and to question what might be happening between the two of them.

Still, it rather surprised Shelby that Holden was the sole Blackwood to investigate her more thoroughly when the others seemed content to credit her for the positive changes they saw in Reese. Looked like the baby of the family might be much more than a pretty face.

“This is a huge step for Reese. One we all wondered if he’d ever have the courage to take after losing Olivia.”

“If it’s any consolation, I understand Olivia was the love of Reese’s life, so please be assured I understand how absurd it would be for me or any other woman to think we could ever supersede his feelings for her.” Shelby shook her head. “I wouldn’t begin to try.”

“But he *has* changed since you’ve been here.”

“Yes. He has.” She had no reason to deny the truth.

“For the better.”

“Your parents’ vacation forced him into action. Once the first step wasn’t as difficult as he expected, it was easier for him to continue moving forward.” Even now, repeating the words for the millionth time, Shelby believed them to be true.

And despite any arguments to the contrary, Shelby was convinced the results would be the same regardless of who showed up to look after Alex and Zach.

“Perhaps,” Holden conceded.

Shelby rolled her eyes.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I’m just happy seeing him reconnect with Alex and Zach.”

Holden folded his arms across his chest. “He’s been protective of you since the day after you arrived.”

She narrowed her gaze as her heart did a little somersault inside her chest. “What did he need to protect me from?”

“Me. Or so he thought.” His grin dimpled his cheeks. Although definitely swoon-worthy, Holden’s grin didn’t have quite the same effect Reese’s did.

“Oh. That.” Shelby waved her hand dismissively as she recalled their conversation about Holden’s reaction when he’d seen her running.

One dark brow lifted. “He told you?”

Shelby nodded. “Yes. He did.” The same day he’d given her the description of his brother, *the player*. Hadn’t Reese even asked Shelby if she wanted him to hook her up with his baby brother?

Yeah, not mentioning that part of their conversation out loud.

Holden held her gaze for a moment before responding. “You’re good for him, Shelby.”

Her surprise at Holden’s compliment rivaled Shelby’s realization of how much she did want to be good for Reese. To help him. To be there for him.

To love him.

Shit. Where did that come from?

Oh, girl, give it up already.

As usual, the little nagging voice was right. Despite Shelby’s pledge to protect her heart, there was no denying her feelings. She *was* in love with Reese. Likely had been since the night Zach had cut his head and they’d worked together to patch him up.

“Are you okay?”

“What?” Shelby blinked as Holden’s question cut into her revelation. “Yes. I’m fine.”

“Did I upset you?”

Shelby met his bluer than blue gaze. So much like Reese’s, yet so different as well. “No. Not at all.”

Holden pushed himself away from the counter. “I feel like I should thank you.”

“What on earth for?”

“For being exactly what Reese needs. For bringing him back to life. For understanding what he’s been through and not rushing him into anything he isn’t ready for or might regret.”

“We’re just going to dinner,” Shelby felt the need to clarify. Not just for Holden’s sake but her own as well.

“I think we both know it’s much more than that.”

Yeah, maybe he was right. Maybe Reese did need her. If so, then Shelby vowed to do everything in her power not to let him down.

“So, I passed?” she asked instead of arguing the point further.

Holden paused at the mudroom door and looked over his shoulder, smiling the smile Shelby would bet left a trail of broken hearts in its wake. “With flying colors.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Will you read one more, Shelby? Please,” Alex pleaded later the same night as he and Zach nuzzled closer on each side of her.

From his spot at the foot of the bed, Reese watched the interaction between Shelby and his boys. The ease with which they curled against her. How her fingers absently skimmed over their hair. And how she brushed her lips across the tops of their heads when she turned the page or adjusted their position.

As if it was the most natural thing in the world for her to do.

They trusted her. Wholeheartedly. Without doubt or hesitation. Quite simply, his sons adored her. If the way she cared for them or how fabulously they’d gotten along since the day she arrived was any indication, the feeling was mutual.

For that, Reese was grateful.

“Okay,” Shelby’s voice broke into his thoughts as she closed the book. “Time for some manly men time.” She one-arm hugged Zach first and then Alex, kissing both their cheeks soundly. “Sleep tight, and don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

“Night, Shelby,” both chorused.

Shelby climbed off the bed and put the books back on the shelf. On her way to the door, she squeezed Reese’s shoulder. The heat from her touch seeped into his bones.

“Are you gonna read us another story?” Zach asked, his eyes full of hope.

“Five weren’t enough?” Reese ruffled his youngest’s dark hair.

“Please, Dad. Just one more?”

How could he refuse when they’d outgrow bedtime stories altogether before long?

Reese eased himself into the space Shelby had vacated and took the Disney book Alex handed him. For the next ten minutes, Reese read the animated story, trying his best to incorporate varied voices and inflections into the dialogue as Shelby had done. By the time he read the last line, both boys were fighting to keep their eyes open.

Since they were on Alex’s bed, Reese tossed Zach over his shoulder and playfully dropped him onto his own. He pulled the covers to Zach’s chin and kissed him good night.

“Night, Dad.”

“G’night, Champ.”

Turning back to Alex, Reese helped his seven-year-old under the covers, knowing they would be kicked off within the hour.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you like Shelby?”

Of all the questions Alex might ask, that was not one Reese expected. “Um. Sure,” he answered, wondering where this line of questioning was headed. “You like her, too, don’t you?”

“I like her a lot,” Alex confirmed without a moment’s hesitation. “She’s so much fun. She likes horses, can play ball, and she’s not even afraid to touch a worm. And don’t tell Gram, but she makes the best grilled cheese sandwiches ever.” His blue eyes peered up at Reese. “And she smells good. Like a mom.”

Reese’s heart slammed to a halt.

“It’s okay to say that, isn’t it?”

At a loss for words, Reese smoothed Alex's hair away from his little face and struggled for the best response. "Why wouldn't it be okay?" His voice sounded hollow and far away to his own ears.

"I dunno. Maybe 'cuz I like having her here, and I wish she wouldn't leave when Gram gets back."

Yeah, Reese got that. He was beginning to wish the same thing himself. "But Shelby lives in North Carolina. She has a home and a job there. Plus, that's where her family is." All things Reese needed to keep in mind himself.

"She could find a job here. And we could be her family."

Something tore wide open inside Reese's chest. Shelby had been right. This wasn't just about the two of them. They had Alex and Zach to consider as well. Whatever happened between them would also affect the boys.

Hell, based on this conversation alone, it already had.

Drawing in a deep breath, Reese chose his words carefully. "Shelby only came to help us out for the summer, Alex."

His bottom lip began to quiver.

Shit!

"But she can't leave," Alex insisted, his voice rising. "Because if she does, then you'll stop coming in for dinner again. And we won't get to have fun anymore. Not like we've all had together since she got here."

This time Alex's words split Reese's heart in two. "Is that what you think? That if Shelby isn't here, I won't want to do things with you and Zach anymore?"

"You didn't after Mommy died."

Direct hit. Hard and fast. Straight to his gut. Cut to the quick by his seven-year-old.

And rightly so.

Reese braced his arms on either side of Alex's small frame and looked his son directly in the eye. "That was different. Your mother and I were married, and I loved her. Very much.

When she died, I wasn't sure how to live without her. So, I just kind of withdrew from the world. I know I worked a lot and didn't spend much time with you guys. But none of that was your fault. Or Zach's. And I'm so very sorry for not being there when you needed me the most." He exhaled slowly. "But I promise I won't ever let that happen again. Okay?"

Blinking against the tears still threatening to fall, Alex nodded. "And we'll still do fun stuff together? Even when Gram gets back?"

"You bet we will."

Alex's smile gave Reese hope. Leaning forward, he kissed his son's forehead. "I love you, Alex."

"I love you, too, Dad."

Reese pushed himself off the bed and started for the door. He was just about to snap off the light when Alex's voice stopped him. "Dad?"

"Yeah, Bud?"

"I still wish Shelby didn't have to leave."

So did Reese.

And it scared the living hell out of him.

Immediately, Reese began to second-guess asking Shelby out on a date. Wouldn't spending time alone with her only complicate matters between them when it came time for her to leave? Especially if they ended up sleeping together, which seemed like a pretty sure bet given the internal combustion they generated whenever they were together.

Still, what would be the point in starting something with an end date in sight?

No, Reese couldn't risk his heart, or his sons', any more than he already had. Not after clawing his way back from the depths of despair. Or after restoring the relationship he'd nearly obliterated with Alex and Zach.

Nothing, not even how alive he felt with Shelby, was worth jeopardizing any progress he'd made with his boys. Not

when he had a choice in the matter this time.

Reese found Shelby in the kitchen. As soon as their eyes met, her smile instantly faded at what he assumed was the look of abject terror on his face.

“What’s the matter?” she dared to ask, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Reese shook his head. “I can’t do this,” he managed to choke the confession past the boulder lodged in his throat. “I’m sorry, but I just can’t,” he added before charging past Shelby, straight through the mudroom onto the porch. The screen door banged shut behind him.

The impulse to flee was impossible to ignore. With no destination in mind, Reese bounded down the steps, fear and regret compelling him forward despite the ever-increasing tightness banding around his chest. Everything began closing in, suffocating him. His vision narrowed to pinpoints and his head throbbed in tempo with his ever-quickening pulse rate until his fingers and hands went completely numb.

The farther he ran, the more his legs felt like lead weights. Then jelly. Soon, Reese caught a cramp in his left side, forcing him to stop. Raising his arms over his head, he turned his face toward the sky, gasping for air as wildfire burned through his chest.

Once the pain began to subside, Reese concentrated on slowing his breathing before passing out from hyperventilation. Soon, sensation began returning to his legs. He started walking in the same direction he’d been running, all the while wondering what in the hell was happening to him.

Was he having a stroke? A heart attack?

Maybe lost his fricking mind?

Or maybe when you finally realized your feelings for Shelby go a whole lot deeper than merely physical desire, you freaked the fuck out.

Despite his usual contempt for that nagging voice inside his head, Reese admitted how on point his conscience was tonight. Too bad recognizing the truth didn’t do a damned

thing to solve his current dilemma. Then again, neither did running aimlessly in the dark.

Stopping, Reese took a moment to get his bearings. When he saw lights about a hundred yards ahead, he realized he'd come as far as Holden's. Reese debated his options: continue to his brother's and explain what he was doing on foot a half mile from home at this hour of the night or walk back to the main house on his own to face Shelby—with what? His fears? Doubts? Guilt?

“Reese?”

Shit!

Holden came into view from the shadows, his golden retriever, Bella, close at his side. Moonlight cut through the leaves on the oak and maple trees, slanting across his brother's handsome face. Reese wondered why he couldn't be more like Holden. So easy-going and laid back, with not a care in the world. Just living the dream, enjoying his bachelor life to the fullest, and loving every minute of it.

“You okay, man?”

Reese shoved a trembling hand through his hair. “I can't do it.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend everything in my life is normal. Take another woman out on a date.” He met Holden's concerned gaze. “Fall in love.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. *Oh.*” Reese paced toward one of the mighty oaks in Holden's yard and kicked it. Hard. “Dammit all to hell.”

A few moments of silence passed between the brothers before Holden spoke. “I met Shelby today.”

Reese whipped around. “You did? Where?”

“At the main house.”

“Why?”

Holden shrugged. “To see for myself if she was the real deal like everyone else seems to think she is.”

“And?” Reese asked. Though at this point, what difference did it make?

“You don’t need me to answer that question, Reese. Because you already know she is.”

Yeah. He did. But...“The risk is too big, Holden. One I’m not sure I’m ready to take. Or if I’ll ever be ready.”

“Well, I hate to break this to you, big brother, but sometimes we’re not given the chance to decide who we fall in love with or even when.”

“How the hell do you know? You’ve never been in love a day in your life.”

“Maybe not. But that doesn’t mean I’m wrong about you and Shelby, though, does it?”

Reese dropped his chin to his chest and leaned against the towering oak. “But how can I fall in love with Shelby and still be in love with Olivia?”

“Now that, I can’t answer.”

“Then, how can you be so sure you’re right?”

Holden flashed his *come on, now* look at Reese, adding a roll of his eyes for good measure. “Really?”

“I haven’t known her a month, Holden.”

“Well, if I were one of those uber-romantic types, I’d probably say something like time is irrelevant when it comes to matters of the heart.”

“That sounds like a line right out of a romance novel.”

“Or a Hallmark movie.”

Reese raised one brow. “You have something you want to tell me, little brother?”

“Don’t be that guy, Reese. Don’t try to deflect this conversation from you onto me when you know perfectly well I make it a point *not* to have any stories to tell.”

True enough. Holden enjoyed his bachelor status too much to get tangled up with someone who might expect more than a fleeting no-strings-attached liaison. Not for the first time, Reese wondered what that type of existence was like. If he were more like Holden, perhaps he and Shelby could engage in something similar in the time she remained at Lone Oaks. That would make everything a whole lot easier.

Right?

Probably not.

“Shelby deserves more than I can give her. She deserves someone who’ll love her and only her. I’ll never be that man, because a part of me will always love Olivia.”

“Something tells me Shelby understands and accepts that.”

Reese wished he shared Holden’s confidence, but if his brother *was* right about Shelby, another obstacle loomed ahead. One Reese was afraid he would never find a way to overcome. “What about the guilt? By having feelings for Shelby, I feel like I’m cheating on Olivia. That I should be satisfied with the ten years we were blessed to be together. That it’s selfish to want more with someone else.”

“Come with me,” Holden stated abruptly. “I have something you need to see.” Without waiting for a response, Holden and Bella started up the lane toward his house, giving a puzzled Reese no choice but to follow.

Once inside, Holden commanded his golden retriever to stay with Reese in the living room while he ran upstairs, taking two at a time. Within seconds, he returned and crossed the wood-planked floor, stopping directly in front of Reese. Their identical blue eyes met and locked as Holden held a card-sized envelope toward him.

“What’s that?” Reese wanted to know.

“Olivia asked me to give this to you when you were ready to read it. After meeting and talking with Shelby this afternoon, I planned to bring it to you in the morning. But I think you should read it now.”

For several long moments, Reese didn't move. He wasn't sure he could. Finally, he reached out and took hold of the envelope.

Holden called for Bella. "We'll be outside."

Heart pounding, Reese was oblivious to Holden leaving. Instead, his brother's words replayed on a loop inside his head. *Olivia asked me to give this to you when you were ready to read it.*

Olivia. His Olivia.

Reese's breath caught in his chest when he saw his name written in Olivia's familiar loopy handwriting. He resisted the urge to rip the envelope open to get to the contents inside. Instead, he slid one finger under the edge, breaking the seal and carefully folding back the flap. Easing himself onto the leather sofa, Reese pulled out the pale blue stationery and swore he caught a whiff of Olivia's jasmine-scented perfume.

Inhaling deeply, Reese closed his eyes, savoring the smell, even if it was only in his imagination. Then, with his heart lodged firmly in his throat, Reese slowly opened his eyes, unfolded the note, and began to read.

My Dearest Reese,

For months, I've tried to have this conversation with you. But no matter how badly I wanted to say the words, I knew you were nowhere near ready to hear them. So today, I've decided to write everything down that I want to say and ask Holden to deliver this letter to you when he thinks you're ready. I hope too much time hasn't passed, because that would mean you've been alone and grieving, and that is definitely not what I want for you.

From the first moment I laid eyes on you, I knew you were the man I was going to spend the rest of my life with. What I didn't realize was how short our time together would be. That is my biggest regret—all that I'm going to miss being your wife and a mother to Alex and Zach.

But most of all, I don't want you to have any regrets. Not a single one. No one is to blame for me getting sick. There is nothing you, the doctors, or anyone else could have done to make me well. So please don't beat yourself up or feel guilty because it happened to me and not you. Or that you couldn't do anything to stop it from happening in the first place. As much as I know you hate to admit it, there are things you can't control. Unfortunately, this is one of them.

Living your life after I'm gone, however, is not. That's what I want for you, Reese. To live and enjoy everything in your life. More than anything, I hope that includes finding someone to love who also loves you and our boys with her whole heart.

There is someone out there who will do that, Reese. Not only do I truly believe that, I feel it deep in my soul. And it gives me peace to know you won't be alone. That you'll have someone to share all your tomorrows with.

So, when this woman comes along, please don't feel guilty for loving her. It's what I want for you, for our boys, and for her.

I wish I were saying these words to you so you wouldn't waste precious time grieving or being sad, because then you'd be able to see in my eyes and hear in my voice how badly I want this for you. Since you're not ready to listen to me in person, when I'm finished writing this, I'll give it to Holden, because he won't give it to you until he's absolutely sure you're ready and that she's definitely the right one for you and the boys.

Now, get your ass up from wherever you're sitting and go get this remarkable woman before it's too late. Don't waste another precious second. Please. This is what I want and what you deserve. Truly.

All My Love,

Olivia

Tears streamed down Reese's face. He didn't bother wiping them away. Instead, he stared at the letter, reading and re-reading the selfless words his wife had written to him as she lay dying. She'd known him so well. Better than he knew himself.

Even now.

Everything she expected, Reese had done. Grieved, withdrawn, blamed himself, and stopped living. Guilt had consumed him on so many levels, but mostly for daring to fall in love with another woman. After reading her letter, Reese couldn't help but wonder if Olivia had a hand in sending Shelby his way.

Stranger things *had* happened.

Using the sleeve of his tee-shirt, Reese swiped the tears from his eyes and face. He refolded Olivia's letter and tucked it back in the envelope, careful not to damage the priceless gift his wife had so graciously given him.

Standing, Reese headed outside to find all three of his brothers on the deck surrounding Holden's house. Seeing them there was unexpected, but Reese was grateful they'd come.

"You okay?" Holden asked.

Reese nodded. "Were you all aware of the letter?"

Drew and Jack nodded. "Olivia talked to us about it," Drew confessed.

Coming outside the rest of the way, Reese closed the door and met Holden's gaze. "Did you read the letter?"

Holden nodded. "Olivia made me read it before she sealed the envelope. She said I needed to know what she wrote so I'd be sure to know when the time was right to give it to you."

"And you honestly believe Shelby is *the one* Olivia writes about in this letter?"

"It doesn't matter what I believe, Reese. But if it helps you to hear me say the words, then yes, I really believe Shelby's *the one*."

Reese turned his attention to Drew. Then Jack. “Both of you, too?”

Drew and Jack nodded.

“In that case, I have a bit of a problem.”

“What’s that?” Jack inquired.

“I kind of lost my shit and walked out on Shelby without any explanation. Just said I couldn’t and that I was sorry.”

Holden rolled his eyes. “So go back and explain, stupid.”

“But the boys are there. What happens if they wake up?” Reese thrust his fingers through his hair. “I can’t waltz back in the house as if nothing happened and wait until tomorrow to talk to her.”

“I’ll drive you back and stay with the boys,” Holden offered. “That way, you and Shelby can go somewhere more private, where you won’t be interrupted.”

“And Holden can bring them to our house after they wake up in the morning,” Drew added.

Reese narrowed his gaze. “You think I’ll need all night to explain things to her?”

All three of his brothers stared at him like he was the village idiot or worse. “Sometimes, I wonder how we’re even related,” Holden murmured, followed by Jack’s, “Surely, it hasn’t been so long that we need to remind you what usually happens after a man and woman confess their love for each other.”

“Besides, you already have a date with her tomorrow night,” Drew reminded him.

“Yeah, so you might as well go whole hog and make an entire weekend out of it,” Holden put in his two cents.

“What if I’ve screwed everything up?”

“That’s always a possibility, but if you still have a snowball’s chance in hell with Shelby, you won’t find out standing here.” Holden’s attention shifted to Drew and Jack. “Will one of you turn the lights out and lock up for me?”

“I got it,” Jack volunteered.

Holden clapped a hand on Reese’s shoulder and called for Bella. “C’mon. I’ll drive you back to the main house.”

A riot of emotions ripped through Reese, each battling to win out over the others. At the moment, fear seemed to be on top, hands down.

“Don’t overthink it, Reese,” Holden’s voice breached the silence.

Reese shot his brother a quelling look. How ironic but also fitting Holden was the person Olivia had chosen to deliver her letter. Not Drew, who was closer in age and would be the most logical choice. Or Jack, who had more experience in the romance department.

Instead, Olivia had picked Holden, the least likely choice of all. The one who loved his freedom. Who played the field and enjoyed every damned minute of it. Who had no desire to settle into a committed relationship any time soon. If ever.

Seemed Olivia knew what she was doing, though. Because Jack would have given Reese the letter within a few weeks, expecting it to be the impetus Reese needed to pull himself out of his grief. Drew would have waited until what he considered a respectable amount of time had passed, and who knew how long or short his second brother would deem appropriate?

“She made the right decision choosing you.”

Holden’s brows knitted together. “Huh?”

“Olivia.” Reese held up the envelope. “She knew you’d be the only one to wait until I was truly ready.”

“Well, I’ve had easier jobs. I’ll tell you that.” Holden rubbed a hand over the perpetual stubble shadowing his jaw. “It was her biggest fear, you know. That you wouldn’t allow yourself to love someone else. That you’d believe you should mourn losing her forever.”

“I still feel like I’m being unfaithful to her.”

Holden pulled the truck to a stop in front of the split rail fence and killed the engine. “I’m pretty sure Olivia would

think you were being more unfaithful to her if you denied yourself the opportunity to find happiness with someone else. Especially someone who not only cares about you but your boys as well.”

“They adore Shelby.”

“Because they *know*.” Holden smiled. “They are their mother’s sons, after all.”

“Do you believe in divine intervention, Holden?”

His brother shrugged. “Sometimes. Like when there doesn’t seem to be any other explanation for why things happen.”

“Like this?”

Holden nodded. “Yeah. Exactly like this.”

“I’m scared shitless.”

Laughing, Holden nudged Reese’s shoulder with his fist. “That just means you’re alive. Now, go find your woman and tell her what a fucking idiot you’ve been.”

“Okay.” Smiling, Reese opened the passenger door and climbed out of the truck.

Holden and Bella followed a few seconds later, catching up to Reese as he reached the wraparound porch. “Here.” Holden dropped a handful of foil packets into Reese’s palm. “Since it’s been a while, I didn’t want you to be unprepared.” He grinned. “You know. Just in case.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ever since Reese had bolted past her two hours ago, Shelby tried to define the look on his face and decipher the tone in his voice. Was it desperation? Fear? Terror? Sorrow? Regret?

I can't do this. I'm sorry, but I just can't.

What exactly couldn't he do?

And what had happened in the fifteen minutes after she'd left him and the boys to wrap up their bedtime routine? When she'd finished reading her book, everything seemed fine. Just like every other night since she'd started joining them for story time.

Lately, after Reese read Alex and Zach the final book and tucked them in for the night, he joined her on the porch or in the family room. She'd have a beer ready for him. They'd talk. Hold hands. Make out a little.

Sometimes a lot.

Shelby looked forward to those moments alone with Reese. She thought he did, too.

After asking her out earlier in the week, he seemed less conflicted and more content. Satisfied. Happy, even. Aside from their upcoming date, neither mentioned anything about sharing a future together. Why would they when everything was still so new for them both?

So what happened to trigger his flight response? To make him want to get away from her as fast as possible?

And where the hell did he go?

Yanking her phone out of her pocket, Shelby called his cell, but it went straight to voicemail. She hung up only to dial again, this time deciding to leave a message. "It's Shelby. Just calling to make sure you're okay. That's all I need to know." What else was there to say?

Sure, she could ask where he was. Why he ran out without any explanation. If or when he was coming back.

Or she could scream at him. Demand answers. Ask him what in the hell he was thinking.

But she didn't. Right now, the most important thing was that he was okay. Everything else could wait.

What if he's changed his mind? Decided he wasn't ready to date or even engage in a summer fling. What then?

Well, she'd accept his decision, of course. What other choice did she have? Sure, it would hurt like hell. Rejection always did. But Shelby had been hurt, rejected, and humiliated before. Chances were, at some point, she would be again.

Unless she swore off men. For a while, at least. Possibly forever.

Yeah, all things considered, that might be her best option. There would undoubtedly be fewer complications. No more unfaithful fiancés or emotionally unavailable men. No competition. No games. No reading between the lines.

Life would be so much easier. All Shelby would need to worry about was herself. No one else's happiness but hers. No one else's laundry to wash and fold but hers. No one else's meals to prepare but hers. No one else's timetable to follow but her own.

Yep, definitely less complicated. And easier. So much easier.

But instead of liberation at the thought, Shelby felt bereft.

Hollow.

And so damned lonesome she ached. Physically ached. As if a vital part of her was missing. Like one of her senses. Or an arm or a leg.

Or, more specifically, a huge chunk of her heart.

Which was probably akin to the devastating pain Reese had experienced after losing Olivia. And why guilt consumed him for his attraction to her. The reason he couldn't do *this*, which Shelby translated to mean giving in to the feelings he'd developed for her.

The basis for which he was sorry. And the trigger for opting to flee when struck by his body's natural fight or flight response to the fear, anxiety, and stress of taking their relationship to the next level.

Basically, Reese was running scared. Totally understandable given his circumstances. Shelby got that. She also understood it likely meant he wasn't ready for a relationship with someone other than his wife. Albeit heartbreaking, Shelby got that, too.

Unarguably, life had dealt Reese an unfair hand. One he needed to figure out how best to play. For himself, but more importantly, for Alex and Zach. Over the last few weeks, Reese had made great strides in rebuilding his relationship with his sons. If Shelby had any say in the matter, nothing would derail that progress.

And neither would she.

So, whenever Reese came back, that's what she'd tell him. She would continue fulfilling her obligation to look after the boys until their grandmother returned from her vacation, but she would also need set hours that didn't include her staying overnight.

Instead, she'd stay with her aunt at Landry's Meadow, return to Lone Oaks by six each morning, and leave as soon as Reese came in for dinner, preferably by five, to continue giving him and the boys more time together in the evenings.

While there, she'd continue to cook, clean, do laundry, and keep the boys entertained. If an emergency arose on the farm when she wasn't there, Reese could call, and she'd come right over to stay with the boys while he resolved the problem.

With her out of the way, Reese could devote his undivided attention to the boys where it belonged. They could progress at their own pace, strengthen their bond, and work through their loss together without any distractions.

Easy-peasy.

Yeah, except for every time your path crosses his.

Didn't matter. She could do this. For the boys. And for Reese. They deserved that much.

Besides, Shelby had managed just fine without Reese Blackwood in her life before coming to Lone Oaks. She would somehow manage again.

Shelby glanced at the clock. Eleven thirty-six. Okay, she'd give him until midnight. If he weren't back by then, she'd call Drew.

But what if he was hurt? Maybe she should go ahead and call now.

As she reached for her phone, vehicle lights shone through the family room windows. Only Reese hadn't taken his truck. It was still parked in the driveway. So, if it wasn't Reese, who was coming? And was it because something had happened to him?

Or was he with whoever it was?

Heart pounding, Shelby resisted the urge to run outside and have all her questions answered at once. Instead, she forced herself to stay put, waiting for what felt like a frigging eternity before the mudroom's screen door squeaked open, followed by two sets of heavy boot falls.

Relief washed over Shelby at the sight of Reese, who stopped a few feet from where she stood in the kitchen. Holden skirted around his brother. "Shelby," he greeted as if it were the most natural thing for him to do at almost midnight on a Friday night.

"Holden." She didn't know what else to say.

His gaze bounced back to Reese. "I'm gonna head upstairs. So, you kids, go ahead and do whatever you need to do."

Neither Shelby nor Reese moved or uttered a sound until they heard the door upstairs close. Shelby broke the silence stretching between them. If she didn't, she feared she might implode. "What did he mean by that?"

"We need to talk."

Though she knew he was right, those four words still cut Shelby to the quick. "Yeah, we do," she agreed. Ending things now rather than later was for the best. For all of them. Too bad her realization and acceptance of the facts didn't do anything to lessen the pain.

All the more reason not to delay the inevitable. "With things going so well now with you and the boys, it's a good time for me to give you guys some more space. Therefore, rather than staying here at night, I'll leave for Aunt Wanda's as soon as you come in for dinner. I'll return by six the next morning in time for you to get to work."

Reese narrowed his gaze. "What if I have to go back out after dinner?"

"We'll work it out."

"But otherwise, you won't be staying for dinner?"

Shelby shook her head. "No. But you can pile the dishes in the sink, and I'll do them the following morning."

"We can wash our own damn dishes, Shelby."

"Okay. Whatever works for you." Why was he making this difficult? He was the one who said he *couldn't do this*. That he was sorry, right before sprinting out of the house and leaving her in his dust for over two hours wondering what the hell had happened. When she'd finally decided to make things easier for him by lessening the time the two of them spent in the same space.

Didn't he see she was doing him a favor here?

"So, if this transition plan you've come up with doesn't work for me, you'll stay?"

"There's no reason it shouldn't work, though. I get that emergencies sometimes occur on a working farm, and I'm

willing to make accommodations for them. All you have to do is let me know.”

Reese rubbed his jaw. “But aside from arriving and departing, you don’t want to be here when I’m here. Is that what you’re saying?”

Should she confirm his suspicions? Probably. But Shelby couldn’t lie to him. Because God help her, she really did want to be wherever Reese was.

“Well, is it?”

Shelby swallowed hard and shook her head.

“Then why?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Shelby forced herself to look at him. “To make things easier for you.”

“Because of what I said before I flew out of here?”

She nodded. “And I get it, Reese. You’re not ready for a relationship with someone other than Olivia. You need more time to process your grief.” Shelby forced a smile. “Which is perfectly understandable. As long as you don’t lose the ground you’ve gained with Alex and Zach.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “I’m not the same man I was before you came to Lone Oaks, Shelby.”

No, he wasn’t. But no matter what his family, or Reese, believed, Shelby still maintained her only role in his transformation was as a catalyst. Once he realized things weren’t as difficult as he anticipated, it became easier for him to continue putting one foot in front of the other, especially concerning Alex and Zach. For that, she was grateful. “I know you aren’t.”

“Then give me a chance to explain.”

Shelby wanted to. God, how she wanted to, but would it make a difference? Or just prolong the inevitable?

“Please, Shelby.”

If his words hadn’t made it impossible to refuse him, the plea in his beautiful blue eyes surely did. “Okay.” She tucked

her fingers into the back pockets of her jeans. "I'm listening."

Relief washed over his features, visibly easing the tension in his shoulders. "But not here." Reese took a step toward her. "There's someplace I want to take you where I promise to explain everything." He held out his hand toward her. "Will you come with me? Please."

"What about the boys?"

Reese inclined his head toward the stairs. "That's why Holden's here."

Wow. Not only had he returned with a plan, he'd also brought back-up. Yeah, no way she could refuse to listen to him now. Not even if she wanted to.

Which she didn't. Not at all, because Shelby wanted to hear everything Reese had to say.

Despite the nerves tying her stomach into a bundle of knots, Shelby did the only thing she could. She slipped her hand into Reese's and followed him to his truck. She had no idea where he was taking her or why whatever he needed to explain couldn't be done right here at Lone Oaks. If not in the house, then right here in his truck.

Or in the stable. Hell, even in one of the barns.

But Shelby didn't tell him that. Instead, she sat quietly as Reese drove. When he steered the truck off the main road, Shelby suspected where he was taking her. As soon as the clearing appeared, she knew her guess was correct.

He'd brought her back to Willow Falls.

Reese shut off the engine and turned in his seat to face her, the moonlight casting a shadow across one side of his handsome face. He brushed the backs of his fingers along the line of her jaw. "God, you're beautiful."

Her heart trembled. She loved this man so much. Ached with it. She wanted to tell him. To shout it from the rooftops, but fear held her back. "Why'd you bring me here, Reese?"

"Because this is where it happened."

“Where what happened?”

His stunning blue eyes locked with and held hers. He cupped the side of her face in his work-roughened palm, his thumb gently stroking her cheek. “Where I fell in love with you.”

Shelby’s breath caught. All at once, she felt lightheaded, dizzy. Her very southern grandmother would say she had the vapors.

Maybe she did.

“But I’m still a hot mess, which is why I bolted earlier. Everything just kind of hit. Hard. Terrifying the living hell out of me. So, of course, I did what I do best—I ran. I mean, how could I be in love with you when I still loved my wife? Then, right on cue, guilt clobbered me, knocking me on my ass once again. I thought about our date and what was likely to happen afterward between us. That’s when fear completely overruled reason.”

Reese shook his head. “I convinced myself I couldn’t do it. That, by even considering taking you on a date, it meant I was being unfaithful to Olivia.”

Shelby reached out and laid her hand on his chest. Felt his strong yet broken heart beating steadily against her palm. “I’m so sorry, Reese.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear. “Like I told you once before, you have no reason to be sorry for anything.”

“But I’m the one making this so hard for you. Causing you to feel guilty. I love you too much to do that, Reese.”

His eyes widened. “You love me?”

“Of course I love you.” Leaning forward, Shelby cradled the side of his whisker-stubbed cheek. “And I understand how you feel. Olivia was your wife. Your first true love. The mother of your children. Your soulmate.” She smiled at him. “I know you will always love her, Reese. That she’ll always have a special place in your heart.”

Shelby took his hand and pressed it against her breastbone. “And because loving her makes you the man I fell in love with, she’ll always have a place in my heart, too.”

His eyes glistened, and Shelby squeezed his hand tighter. “I never want to take Olivia’s place in your life, Reese. Or your heart.” She laid her other hand on his chest. “My only hope is that there might be enough room in there for both of us when you’re ready.”

“There is,” Reese replied. “And I am ready.” He leaned forward and kissed her. Softly. Sweetly. Tenderly.

“C’mon.” He grabbed two horse blankets from behind the seat and came around to help her out of the truck. He shook out one of the blankets and laid it on the ground in front of the boulders around the fire pit. Easing onto the gray flannel, Reese pulled Shelby down to sit in the cradle of his thighs, very much like the night they brought the boys camping.

He rubbed his nose against her hair, sniffing lightly.

“What are you doing?”

He dropped a kiss where his nose had been. “Seeing if Alex was right.”

“About what?”

“How you smell.”

Shelby frowned. “I’m not sure I want to hear how Alex thinks I smell.”

Laughing, Reese nuzzled her neck. “He said you smelled good.” He rubbed his nose around her ear. “Like a mom.”

Shelby’s heart seized inside her chest. No wonder Reese had panicked. Turning, she faced him. “Oh, Reese, I know that couldn’t have been easy to hear.”

Reese laced his fingers through hers. “Honestly, that wasn’t as difficult as what he said next.”

Unsure whether to ask, Shelby braced herself and did anyway. “What did he say?”

“That he wished you didn’t have to leave when his grandmother came home because that meant I’d stop coming in for dinner, and we wouldn’t do any fun things together anymore.”

Oh, shit. How awful for Alex to think that—but more than devastating for Reese to hear. “He only associates the two because they happened around the same time. He’s too young to understand that one has nothing to do with the other.”

“Doesn’t it?” Reese traced his forefinger around each of hers. “Because I think you’ve made everything easier.” Leaning forward, he kissed her. A little longer and a little deeper than before. An accompanying tingle zipped clear to her toes. “And because of that, my boys got their father back sooner than they otherwise would have.”

Smiling, Shelby laid her cheek against the wall of his massive chest. They were quiet for several minutes, each processing what was happening between them. Again, it was Shelby who broke the silence. “Besides Holden driving you, what brought you back tonight?”

Without hesitation, Reese explained how panic had propelled him to flee. Running on pure adrenaline, he had no destination in mind but found himself near Holden’s. “He knew something wasn’t right, and after I spilled my guts, he told me he had something for me.”

Reese pulled the letter from his hip pocket and handed it to Shelby. “Olivia wrote this toward the end and asked Holden to give it to me when he thought I was ready to read it.”

She took the envelope from him and sat up. “Do you want me to read it?”

“Only if you want to.”

Shelby hesitated, not wanting to intrude on something so personal between a husband and his wife. As if he sensed her reluctance, Reese located the flashlight app on his phone. “Go ahead and read it. Olivia would want you to.”

When she looked at him to be certain, Reese nodded. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Shelby pulled the

letter from the envelope and began to read the words his wife wrote to him while she lay dying. Her words were so heartfelt. So selfless. And so giving.

Tears streaming down her cheeks as she finished reading, Shelby carefully folded the note and slid it back into the envelope. She knuckled the moisture from her eyes and face. Words eluded her because, really, what could she say that wouldn't pale in comparison to the humbling words his wife had thoughtfully written to him?

"I think Olivia sent you to me."

Shelby's breath caught in her throat as more tears fell. "If so, I'm beyond honored."

Reese shifted so they were face to face. "I hope some of these are happy tears."

Smiling, Shelby nodded. "They are."

Reese rested his forehead against hers. "So, what happens now?"

"What do you want to happen?"

His teeth flashed white in the moonlight as he grinned. "Well, right this minute, I'd like to have my way with you," he teased.

"Then, what's stopping you?"

Swooping in, Reese kissed her again—a long, lingering, knock-your-socks-off kiss that left her breathless and wanting. "I thought you might want to go somewhere more comfortable," he whispered as his lips blazed a trail along her jawline and down the column of her neck.

"Right here is perfect," Shelby murmured and pulled his mouth back to hers.

Easing Shelby onto the blanket, Reese aligned her body with his. "Fair warning, it's been a while for me, sweetheart," he confessed, his voice thick with desire.

She cupped his face in her hands. "Me too."

“I can’t promise the first time will be anything spectacular.”

Moving her hands across his shoulders, Shelby rocked her hips against his. “And if you keep that up, it might be over before it starts,” Reese warned her.

Shelby laughed. “Okay. I’ll behave.”

Reese rolled her onto her back. “I hope not,” he ground out and claimed her mouth in a heart-stopping kiss.

Sighing, Shelby parted her lips, and her tongue curled against his, inviting him inside. Her blood heated, thickening as it pulsed through her veins. Reese skimmed his hand down to the hem of her tee-shirt. He pushed it aside and slid his hand along the flatness of her stomach and over the ridges of her rib cage until his fingers brushed the underside of her bra.

As he trailed a line of kisses down the hollow of her throat, Shelby tangled her fingers in his hair. Reese rocked back on his knees, one on either side of her hips, and disposed of her shirt before deftly flicking open the front clasp of her bra. Her breasts spilled into his waiting hands.

“Incredible.” Reese circled one rosy bud with his tongue and tweaked the other between his thumb and forefinger. Shelby arched her back to give him better access. When he moved his hands lower, Shelby couldn’t keep herself from writhing against him. “Please, Reese.”

As if her ragged plea was all he needed to hear, Reese yanked off his shirt, tossing it aside. He reached for the top button of her jeans. Once unfastened, Reese eased the zipper down, his eyes locked on hers as he slid the denim off her legs. Not to be outdone, Shelby reached for his belt, eager to relieve him of his Levi’s.

Apparently not wanting to waste precious time, Reese stood, toed off his boots, and dug out a handful of condoms before shucking both his jeans and boxer briefs. He knelt beside her, sheathing himself while Shelby shimmied out of her undies. Bracing his forearms on either side of her head, Reese eased himself into the cradle of her thighs. “I feel like

I've waited forever for this," he admitted, his voice low and ragged.

Shelby wrapped her legs around his waist. "Make love to me, Reese. Please."

"With pleasure."

Her mouth opened under his as he entered her. Slowly at first, then his urgency escalated, intensifying with each thrust and withdrawal until they were rocking together in a rhythm as old as time.

Their tongues mated in unison with their bodies. Their hands lit a fire everywhere they touched. His hands lifted her hips; her fingers dug into his flesh. Reese filled her, and Shelby accepted everything he offered, breathlessly begging him for more.

Neither slowed in their quest. They couldn't. The need was too great. Reese drove her to the edge of paradise and back. Again and again. Together, they scaled the pinnacle and spun out of control, their bodies quaking in unison as the universe exploded within and around them.

Skin glistening, their breaths coming in rapid gulps as they descended back to earth, they lay gazing into each other's eyes. What happened between them could only be described as magnificent. No other word began to do justice to what they'd just shared.

Once their breathing slowed, Reese shifted. Shelby moaned in protest, and Reese smiled. "I'll only be a minute," he promised, dropping a kiss on her lips.

After taking care of the protective barrier, Reese grabbed the other blanket and dragged it over them. He gathered Shelby in his arms, her back to his front, and nuzzled his lips against the delicious curve of her neck.

"Thank you," he murmured against her ear and tightened his arms around her.

Her heart skipped a beat. "For what?" She shifted slightly so she could see his face.

“For coming to Lone Oaks. For being exactly what I needed. For being patient.” He caressed her face with his fingertips. “For loving me and making love with me.” He brushed her lips with his. “For everything.”

Shelby’s heart nearly burst with relief. She feared they’d moved too fast. That in the aftermath of their lovemaking, he would realize he wasn’t as ready to move forward as he thought. That guilt would once again consume him, leaving him full of regrets.

That he’d been mistaken and didn’t really love her.

His tender words allayed her fears, reassuring her he was, indeed, ready to love her. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye onto his forearm.

“Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“So why are you crying?”

Angling her head, Shelby looked up at him. “They’re happy tears.” She blew out the breath she’d been holding. “I was afraid you might have second thoughts.”

Reese shook his head. “No second thoughts,” he assured her. “No regrets, either.”

Kissing her, Reese rolled Shelby onto her back. The evidence of his desire pressed against her hip while his fingers tormented and his lips teased every inch of her flesh. Her body awakened fully under the ministrations of his hands and mouth. When he touched her core, Shelby thought she might explode right there.

“I don’t think you’re playing fair again,” she moaned against his lips.

His grin flashed white in the darkness. “Is that a problem for you?”

Shelby curled her hand around him, delighting in his unmistakable groan of pleasure. “Not as long as I can play, too.”

It was dawn when Shelby and Reese returned to Lone Oaks from Willow Falls. With Holden sleeping in Reese's room, they headed straight to Shelby's for yet another round of heart-stopping but quiet lovemaking before falling into a dead sleep until almost noon.

When they finally made it downstairs, they found a note from Holden. He'd taken Alex and Zach to Drew's as planned. The rest of the day and night was theirs. Though Shelby insisted they didn't need to go anywhere, Reese was adamant they *were* still going out on a date. She deserved a night out, and he was going to see that she got it.

But first, they decided to take Zeus and Lucy on a leisurely ride to the creek, stopping along the way several times to share a few sizzling kisses and take in the beauty of the land surrounding them.

Back at the stable, Reese and Shelby took care of the horses before returning to the house, where they showered together under the guise of conserving water. Yet, ironically, it took twice as much time as it would have if they'd been alone. But it had sure been a helluva lot more fun.

As had their date.

Before his meltdown, Reese had made reservations at O'Hara's, a newly renovated restaurant on the outskirts of Beaumont, where they enjoyed a deliciously prepared meal by one of Jack's high school buddies, Adrian Cavaletti, who was now a professional, Michelin-star chef.

After dinner, they retreated to the restaurant's lounge and found a corner booth where they canoodled, sipped their drinks, and listened to a local band covering pop, rock, and country classics from the last decade.

They even made their way to the dance floor when the selections slowed to a few soulful ballads. Dancing with Reese was as magical as making love with him. Especially when he pulled her as close as possible and set her body aflame by

whispering all the naughty things he planned to do with her when they got home.

By midnight, in the soft glow of moonlight shining through her bedroom windows, Reese made good on every single promise. A few more than once.

Sated and happier than either of them thought possible, Reese and Shelby picked up the boys on Sunday morning and took them to brunch at The Greasy Spoon. Alex and Zach regaled them with all the fun stuff they did while staying with Uncle Drew, Aunt Tess, and their little cousin, Samantha.

When they returned home, Reese took the boys to check in with Boone and make his rounds on the farm. And after dinner, the four of them resumed their regular evening routine and enjoyed a rousing game of Mouse Trap followed by baths and bedtime stories. Once the boys were tucked in, Reese joined Shelby in the family room.

They talked. Touched. Kissed, and made out like a couple of horny teenagers. Instead of going their separate ways at the top of the stairs as they'd done before, Reese joined Shelby in her room, where their lovemaking continued long into the night.

Each day, they fell into a natural rhythm, commencing with Shelby's five a.m. run. Like before, when she returned, Reese was on his second cup of coffee, but instead of sidestepping each other or running through the plan for the day, Reese would kiss her senseless before reluctantly heading out for work.

Sometimes, Reese returned to eat breakfast with the boys and steal a few moments alone with Shelby in the mudroom or pantry. Once, he joined her in the powder room off the family room for a quick mid-morning delight.

Shelby treasured the time she spent alone with Reese, but she also cherished every moment the four of them spent together. Though Shelby's love for Reese and his sons grew stronger and deeper every day, her time at Lone Oaks dwindled just as quickly.

Since their night at Willow Falls, neither of them broached the subject of what would happen when his parents returned from vacation. Shelby knew they should, but instead of dwelling on the end of her six-week stay, she forced herself to live in the moment and enjoy every second of the time she had left with Reese and the boys.

Besides, before their first night together, Shelby had been willing to take whatever Reese was capable of giving her. Even a three-week fling.

Only what she and Reese continued to share felt like much more than that. Couples engaging in temporary liaisons didn't often fall in love; if they did, neither usually confessed to it.

There wasn't any point.

But she and Reese had. Multiple times. And not only in the throes of passion.

Still, neither Shelby nor Reese had braved the waters enough to bring up the proverbial elephant in the room—what happened when, in less than a week, his parents and grandparents returned from their vacation and Shelby was no longer needed to care for the boys?

Or what that meant for her and Reese.

Even if they both wanted to continue building a relationship together, how would that be possible when they lived in two different states, over four hundred miles apart?

Twice Shelby thought about broaching the subject with Reese, but nerves got the best of her. If they weren't destined for something long-term, why risk saying or doing anything to cut their time together any shorter than it already was?

On the other hand, if, by chance, they might be fortunate enough to have more than a three-week summer fling, Shelby also didn't want to tempt fate or appear overly presumptuous.

She also didn't want to risk scaring Reese off. So she decided he needed to set the pace.

But time was ticking and in five days the elder Blackwoods would be home from their trip. No matter how

hard Shelby tried not to catastrophize it, she feared their perfect little world was bound to crumble with reality's return.

And how could it not? Aside from this summer, Shelby and Reese lived two entirely separate lives. His was running Lone Oaks, and hers was teaching elementary school children in Bishop Creek, North Carolina. Despite the hiatus the past few weeks had provided, Shelby couldn't help but wonder if what she and Reese shared was as temporary as the circumstances that had brought them together in the first place.

For Shelby, the answer was a resounding no. There was absolutely nothing temporary about her feelings for Reese. She loved him. More than she ever thought it was possible to love another human being. He was her person and always would be. No matter what happened in the next five days.

Or if they stayed together or not.

Guess it was time to face the music. To lay all their cards on the table. See if they both wanted the same things. And decide on their future.

Shelby was staring out of the bank of windows in the family room when Reese came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He pressed a kiss against her temple as her fresh powdery scent enveloped him. God, he loved this time alone with her at the end of each day.

And waking up with her warm body curled snugly against his in the morning.

But only for five more days, unless you get your head out of your ass and talk to her.

Yeah. Like it or not, he and Shelby needed to discuss what happened when his parents returned from their vacation. Though a conversation they should have had before now, everything had been going so well that neither of them wanted to rock the boat.

“The boys asleep?”

“Mmm-hmm,” he confirmed, tightening his grip around her waist. “You okay?” he asked as the silence stretched between them. “You’ve been quiet all evening.”

“I’m fine.” Shelby smiled, but in the window’s reflection, Reese saw the gesture didn’t reach her eyes.

“No. You’re not.” Gently, he turned her around to face him. “Tell me what’s bothering you, sweetheart.”

Shelby stepped out of his embrace and tucked her fingertips in the back pockets of her Levi’s. “Your parents are coming home on Friday.”

Precisely what he suspected had her brow all crinkled and her amber eyes full of shadows.

And concern.

The very same things tying him into a gigantic bundle of knots.

Unfortunately, this conversation could go in several directions. Reese had no doubts where he wanted it to go, but he wasn’t entirely sure Shelby wanted the same. He was ninety-eight percent sure she did, but until now, they’d both been content living in the moment rather than facing their future.

Everything was much less complicated that way.

Well, until time forced their hand.

So here they were, with only five days remaining until the rubber met the road. When, ready or not, the future would stare them in the face, demanding answers. Since Reese already knew what he wanted, he saw no reason to prolong the inevitable. And based on Shelby’s earlier comment, neither did she.

“Will their return signal your departure?”

“That was the original plan.”

“And now?”

“I’m not sure.” Shelby met his gaze and shrugged. “I don’t know what you want, Reese. And I damn sure don’t want to

make the wrong assumption.”

How in hell could she make the wrong assumption? He'd shown her Olivia's letter. Confessed he was in love with her. Couldn't keep his hands off her. Yearned to share every aspect of his life with her. And wanted to make sweet love to her every chance he got.

What part of any of that kept her from realizing he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her? That what they had together was so damned much more than some fucking summer fling.

Because women need the words, you idiot.

Okay. He could do that. Especially if it put the smile back on her beautiful face and removed the worry from her eyes. “You know I love you, Shelby.”

“And I love you, too.” She sank her teeth into her bottom lip. “I also know what I want, Reese. And what I hope you want. But I'm not really sure if they're the same thing.”

“Then let me make things perfectly clear.” Reese took a step toward her. “I want *you*, Shelby. Not just while my mother is on vacation, but always.” He framed her face between his palms. “I realize you have a life in North Carolina. A home. Family. A career. But I'm asking,” he paused and shook his head, “no, I'm begging you to stay. Here. At Lone Oaks. With me. To be my wife and a mother to my boys. For us to be your family.”

Her entire heart shone in her beautiful amber eyes. “Oh, Reese. Are you sure?”

“I have never been more sure of anything in my life,” he assured her. “And if you say yes, I promise you'll never want for anything. I'll take care of you and love you as long as I have breath in my body.”

“I was so afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of losing you. What we have together. The boys.”

Reese thumbed her tears away and locked his gaze with hers. “*You* made me whole again, Shelby. How could I ever let you go?”

Her smile, brilliant as the noonday sun, broke through her tears. “I love you so much, Reese.”

No words ever touched him as deeply. “Does that mean you’ll stay?”

“What about my job?”

He saw the teasing glint gleaming in her eyes. “We have schools here, you know. But you don’t have to work if you don’t want to.”

“Can I be a farmhand?”

“As long as you stay with me, you can be whatever you want.”

“Okay. I’ll stay.”

Relieved beyond measure, Reese brushed his lips against hers. “And you’ll marry us?”

“Us?”

Reese nodded. “Yeah. Seems I’m a package deal.”

“Yes. You most certainly are.”

“So, is that a yes?”

Beaming, Shelby looped her arms around his neck. “It is a most definite yes.”

“Thank God,” he whispered and proceeded to kiss her senseless.

An hour later, Shelby and Reese lay cuddled together in bed. “Guess I was right about what I told my mother the day she left on her trip.”

“Yeah? What was that?”

He ran his tongue from her shoulder to her ear. “That I was gonna make some changes, and she might just be surprised when she got back.”

Shelby giggled, and his whole world got a little bit brighter. “I doubt this is what you had in mind at the time, though.”

“Not quite,” he agreed, rolling Shelby onto her back and covering her body with his. “But it’s a damned sight better than anything I could have imagined.”

Yes. It most definitely was.

EPILOGUE

“Gram! You’ll never guess what happened while you were gone!” Alex exclaimed as soon as his grandmother stepped out of the car and her feet touched Lone Oaks soil.

Anna Blackwood peered at the group assembled in the front yard to greet them as Alex and Zach raced toward the SUV. Drew, Hope, and baby Samantha. Jack and Tess. Holden and his golden retriever, Bella. Reese, and was she seeing things or was that really Reese’s arm around Shelby’s shoulders?

Yes, she believed it was.

Hmmm.

“Guess what, Gram. Guess what,” Zach implored, sliding to a halt in front of her.

Dragging her gaze from the crowd on the other side of the split-rail fence, Anna looked down at Alex and Zach. “First, I need hugs from my two favorite grandsons.” She knelt and pulled them against her. God, she’d missed their stinkin’ butts.

“We’re your *only* grandsons, you silly goose,” Alex reminded her before wrapping his arms so tight around her neck she could barely breathe.

“Yeah!” Zach chimed in.

“So you are,” she replied, kissing them soundly. “Now, what happened while I was away that I’m not going to believe?”

“We got engaged.”

“To Shelby,” Zach clarified.

Well, now, isn't that an interesting turn of events, Anna thought, a smile bursting inside her heart. “Aren't the two of you a little young to be getting married?”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Gram,” he drew the word into about three syllables.

“Yeah, only Dad actually gets to marry her. But we're gonna be her family, and she's gonna be our bonus mom.” Zach looked back at Reese. “Right?”

Both Reese and Shelby nodded, identical grins beaming across their faces. Anna's heart melted inside her chest. Though she'd had hopes Shelby might stir Reese back to life, never in her wildest dreams did she expect them to fall in love before she returned from vacation.

Seemed like the Man upstairs had other ideas. Still, Anna couldn't have been happier if she'd had a hand in them getting together herself.

“Well, I think that's the best news I've heard since your Uncle Jack finally realized he was in love with your Aunt Tess.” Anna rose to her feet as her mother-in-law joined her. “Looks like we're gonna have us another wedding, Grandma Sarah.”

“I hope you know what you're getting yourself into, Shelby girl,” Zeke bellowed.

Shelby's grin widened as she turned her adoring gaze toward Reese. “Yeah, I do.”

When Reese dropped a kiss on Shelby's lips without a hint of hesitation, relief and gratitude swept through Anna. She couldn't have asked for anything more. Silently, she sent up a prayer of thanks.

Then, with a gleam in her eyes, Anna leveled her full gaze on Holden as her mother-in-law whispered in her ear, “Three down. One to go.”

Anna grinned. “And I can't wait,” she replied with a wink aimed straight at her youngest son.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabelle Grace is a retired educator who writes sweet to steamy contemporary romance full of heart, humor, and all the feels. Each book contains swoon-worthy heroes and strong, often sassy heroines on their journey to happily-ever-after. Each story is primarily set in a small town, loosely based on her own surroundings in the foothills of West Virginia's section of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

When not writing, Isabelle loves to read and spend time with her family, friends, and her rescue Pomeranian, Bella.

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