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STEPHANIE FOWERS

THE *Harvest Ranch Romance* SERIES BOOK 25

Cole's *Dilemma*



A FALL ROMANCE NOVEL

Cole's Dilemma

Harvest Ranch Fall Romance

Stephanie Fowers

Triad Media and Entertainment

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Art Painter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

To Ashley... Ha! You know why ;-)

Chapter One

Eva had about fifteen minutes to convince West that she was the most irresistibly attractive and charming woman on this planet before her daddy caught up to her.

How hard could it possibly be?

If she didn't, West would send her straight back home! That was a fate worse than death as far as she was concerned.

She was going back to Harvest Ranch if it killed her.

West was gorgeous and Eva was... bored, bored, bored without him. Sure, Eva had to slide her phone under her leg so she didn't have to see the number of messages from her daddy flashing across the screen. Sure, she had to pretend to be deaf every time West asked her if it was *actually* cool for her to come along. So what?

Her chin snapped up to attention as he came down the aisle of his private jet with his phone glued to his ear. He'd taken off his suit jacket, wearing his expensive dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar and his shirt sleeves pushed up to his elbows.

Fiftieth reminder of the day of how incredibly hypnotizing he is!

The veins stood out against West's muscular forearms as he dropped into the seat across from her in the middle of a heated conversation: "I don't care if a stampede of beef cattle come charging through your office, Carl, I want that information on my desk when I get back or you'll face the bull."

She hid a giggle at his funny way of talking. West hadn't strayed too far from his roots. Her man was raised to be a rancher, though he'd abandoned the family business for his true passion: crushing her father's enemies.

So hot. Besides that, West is an absolute doll.

Daddy just worried too much. Eva was the only child and heiress to Devlin Trout, Tennessee's wealthiest oil tycoon, and the way that exasperating man babied her always worked against her, especially *now*. He'd tried everything to keep her away from West. That street-smart cowboy might work all of Trout's multi-billion dollar business deals lately, but that didn't mean he could be trusted with his daughter.

Too bad, Daddy! I've made up my mind. We're made for each other.

Eva sank back into the butter soft seats in West's private jet. What else could a woman do when she was super in love, except smile dumbly up at her daddy's right hand man in her most moonstruck way? She straightened in sudden alarm.

Yeah, she looked like a crazy person. This wasn't how West was catching her when Daddy rained the fireworks on them. She was a Trout, after all! She was raised to smile for the cameras. Ever since she was knee-high to a grasshopper, she'd been used to ducking the paparazzi. As her father moved from one woman to the next, she was the only constant female in his life. All eyes were on her, and when they weren't? She turned them on herself with the lift of her phone.

Even she wasn't sure why she did it sometimes.

Eva ran her fingers through her hair, trying to perfect her woman-of-the-world act while still hoping to be absolutely adorable. West argued through her efforts, letting whoever was on the other line know, in no uncertain terms, that he was in charge.

Poor man! He had no idea they were here to have fun. She'd convince him otherwise... as soon as he quit working! Eva was finally able to relax in cutoff jeans and an oversized tee shirt, for once free of her formfitting dresses—not to say that her shirt wasn't of the finest Egyptian cotton and cut. It was altogether too hard being an influencer on TalkieTalk where everyone scrutinized her every move.

Daddy had told her to cut back on the social media. Their family was too high profile and respectable to be put on cheap display like those needy celebrities. He'd hate to see anything happen to his little princess, but quite honestly, why couldn't Eva get her own little kickback from all this fame she'd never asked for?

The likes and shares were her only excitement as she grew lonelier and more isolated at the exclusive parties held by Devlin Trout Enterprises. It didn't matter if she was surrounded by adoring fans or if conventionally attractive, though equally boring, men were dying to make her their girlfriend of the hour.

No one understood her... until she'd met West's haunting eyes.

Ooh West! He made bad boys look bland in the face of his passion and without even trying! He'd painted the dull world from a faded black-and-white movie into every vivid color imaginable. From the moment he'd walked into her daddy's office, he made up into down, turned everything on its face, and pulled what was left of her heart inside out.

Daddy couldn't talk anyway! After all of Devlin Trout's infamous love affairs throughout the years? Ha! He couldn't say a thing.

Well, he shouldn't anyway!

West's adorable labradoodle puppy sniffed at their drinks on the table, his long snout pushing through important papers to find food. West's phone conversation didn't skip a beat as he leaned over to pick up his puppy from upending any critical contracts.

She melted even more at the sight.

West had meant this puppy for his children, and even though his ex-wife refused to take in the cute little tail-wagger, he brought the little pet along every time he went to visit Charlie and Pip.

Eva suspected that his momma's failing health wasn't the only reason West came home so often. The softie!

This time, West was taking his children for the week. His ex was having her baby with her new husband.

That was kind of awkward.

What a time to meet the family, huh? And still, Eva was thrilled to be invited to tag along.

"Take Lizardman for a second." West handed the puppy over to her across the table.

She clasped the sweet little thing and nuzzled his delicate fuzzy neck, giggling under the puppy's kisses. "Hey, little Lizardman! Relax already." West's oldest had named the puppy the strange name, and West had gone with it. Nothing could be more adorable. She returned all the puppy's kisses with her own. "We're almost there, little guy! You're going to see your little boys really, really soon."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be back soon," West told this mysterious "Carl" on the phone. "I have a little family emergency, but the second I get it taken care of, I'm there."

He was rushing back to Nashville? Her ears stung at the revelation. But—but... what about the charming little vacation they'd planned together? What about his boys?

Her eyes narrowed on him.

"See if you can't hold the fort down while I'm gone." West's gaze shifted to his brother, Nash, who sat in the seats across the aisle with his new wife... like wife-of-two-days new! They were just

returning from eloping to Hawaii.

They were disgustingly cute. Emily sat on his lap, playing with Nash's hair. He wouldn't leave hers alone either. His heavy lids lowered as he took in his new wife like he was the luckiest guy in existence.

What Eva would do to get West to look at her like that! And now he was already planning on cutting their time together short? Over her dead body. He'd promised her a week to meet his family, and she'd accept nothing less.

"No," West said after a moment. His voice turned harder, colder as he shut down whatever was being said on the other end of the line. "Nash is out."

Oh, this Carl was trying to rope Nash back into the business again, was he? That wouldn't happen. West had already tried to get him to work under him in Nashville, and after a stint with the wilder side of her daddy's organization, Nash wasn't going for it.

He'd found love instead.

Eva couldn't be more thrilled for Nash. She took full credit for getting those two together. If she could do it for them, she could do this for herself, right? Right?

Soothing her disappointment at West's party-pooper talk by strategizing ways to get around it, she kissed the puppy's ear and turned from him.

West ended his conversation with a growled order to "Mind your own business," before he slid his phone into his pocket.

"We're rushing back, huh?" she asked. Who cared if he accused her of eavesdropping? She wasn't deaf. She nuzzled Lizardman's furry neck with her nose.

"It's your daddy's fault," West said with a shrug. "Take it up with him."

"He doesn't like to talk business," she muttered. Neither did West. She knew how to trick the information out of the both of them to get her way. "Sounds like you need someone more capable than Carl working for you, someone dependable, who can take anything you throw at them, even when you run off to take care of important personal affairs."

He licked his lips, studying her. West was hard to read sometimes, especially when he watched her with those deep blue eyes. They were as magnificent as he was. She had seen the passion in them more than once, which was why it was so frustrating that she could barely get that emotion to turn on her. "You'll love Harvest Ranch this time of year," he said, changing the conversation abruptly. "It's beautiful in the fall."

"Really? Sounds like you need to take your time showing me exactly what you love about it."

"Don't worry," Nash called over to them across the way. "West is staying the whole week. He promised his kids some good quality time. He's not backing out of that."

Her heart fluttered with happiness at the insider info. "Thanks for putting me out of my misery," Eva said with a wink at Nash. She could always depend on him taking her side. The two of them had grown close while he'd stayed at West's mansion on the posh side of Green Hills for the three months that he'd been there. She suspected that West had thrown his brother between them in an attempt to dampen her daddy's suspicions that she and West were a thing.

That plan had backfired. She'd never felt closer to West.

"I can't wait to meet the rest of your family," Eva told West. She'd already had the pleasure of knowing Nash and Porter. She certainly preferred West's intensity over his goofier brothers, but employing the jealousy angle wasn't beneath her, so she used that card liberally to get his attention. "Are all your brothers as handsome as Nash?"

"More handsome," Nash said. "Even my twin."

His wife disagreed with a laugh. Emily slid her arm behind his neck with a gentle smile. She was as sweet as Nash was spicy, and her forehead wrinkled as she tried to talk some sense into him. “Don’t get me wrong, I love your family... but I love you mostest.”

Mostest? Yeah, super disgustingly cute.

And Eva loved West mostest.

Her heart skipped at the happy realization, but how to prove her absolute adoration to him? She had to act quickly if he was already talking about whisking her back to Nashville.

Her phone went off.

It was her daddy!

She gasped out. Nooooo! She hadn’t told him that she was sneaking to Harvest Ranch with West, and he didn’t need to know until she was there and he couldn’t do anything about it!

She expertly texted her daddy back with one hand: “I’m flying. Can’t talk. We’ll chat as soon as I land.”

He’d better not call West next!

Chapter Two

Cole had just come in from putting away his horse, Sleipnir, in the barn. The paint was fast and reliable on their grounds, which was why Cole had named him after Odin's gray eight-legged horse.

He'd gotten his share of teasing from it. Such a nerd! At least that's what West called him, either that or "the baby."

His older brother was a piece of work.

The guy had been hounding him for days to show his new girlfriend the place while he took care of "business."

Yeah, that isn't going to happen. Take care of your own girlfriend, dude!

Business, business—everything was business with West. Cole, honestly, couldn't care less if his brother slept, ate, and breathed it, as long as he kept him out of it... which never happened. Cole always had to take up the slack with West's kids when he came home to "take care of Momma."

Now it was his girlfriend? Man, what next?

Cole had every intention of laying low this week for his brother's visit.

He shoved aside his ballcap to run his fingers through his hair—it really was dirty blond now with all that dust he'd kicked up on the range. He had just enough time to take a hot shower before their guests descended on them.

Cole charged up the freshly painted steps that he'd just finished last week. Their family's homestead was a three-story, colonial-style, brick building designed after a sketch his momma had made of her dream home in high school.

Their old man built it the second the ranch started to turn a profit. Jase Slade would do anything to make "his Lily" smile. The family was constantly making improvements on the land based on Momma's latest inspirations. Everything that woman touched became beautiful, from her gentle touch on her home to her green thumb. The grounds and wraparound porch overflowed with flowers and decorative bushes and trees. She had five acres set aside especially for her gardens. Her rose garden was especially breathtaking in the summer. People came from miles around to see it.

Ironic that someone who brought everything to life around her was dying. If Momma didn't get that heart transplant soon, she wouldn't last much longer.

Cole pushed that thought away and eased open the heavy oak door at the side of the house. After working with cattle all morning, Cole hoped to make himself a hefty sandwich that dripped with beef before climbing into that shower. He'd have to hurry before West got here. No way was he waiting around for a repeat of their last fiasco.

A few months ago, West had promised his sons a camping trip, and guess who else he'd dragged along? Cole was stuck keeping Charlie and Pip busy while West negotiated a high-powered investment deal. It was all Cole could do to stop his nephews from falling off the raft while they were navigating class four rapids.

West's ex could never find out about that! Liv would've had their heads, and Momma would be devastated to lose any time with Charlie and Pip, which was the *only* reason Cole kept that nightmare quiet.

Cole made his way into the kitchen and stopped short, feeling like he'd walked into the

frontlines of a battleground—at least that’s what his momma was making of the visit. Her white blonde hair hung over her face as she chopped veggies for a salad. Nash was coming, too, and rumor was that he was bringing Emily. Momma’s fingers shook over her knife. Cole noticed that she was doing more of that as her illness took over. He’d tell her to drop the weapon, but she’d probably turn it against him.

“Jase!” she called to Cole’s father. “Did you know that West was bringing someone home?”

“No one tells me anything,” their old man said from the living room. He was knotting a rope, his full lips pressed together as he concentrated. The work from the range followed them home whenever they were trying to relax in the TV room or falling into bed or at the dinner table... much to Momma’s disapproval.

Cole worked the family business with his brother, Porter, and it was all they could do to keep up with five hundred head of cattle roaming freely through nearly a thousand acres of their land. Their old man talked about hiring more hands than the ones they already had, but so far, with Momma’s hospital bills mounting and their debts to the bank piling up, he had to rely mostly on his sons. After all, he’d had five of them. The only catch was that they kept moving away.

Cole and Porter were running ragged.

Rumor was that Nash was coming home to stay this time. The long lost twins were about to be reunited, and despite the mischief that Nash and Porter managed to dig up whenever they were together, Cole was relieved. Calving season was creeping up on them again, and without his brothers, he’d have to kiss his social life goodbye for a few months.

There happened to be a little redhead at Mo’s that he wanted to get to know better.

His momma sighed across the island in the kitchen that separated her from her husband in the living room. “Honey, run a brush through that hair and shower off all that dirt. We might actually need to impress some *real* guests.”

Since Momma had gotten sick, their old man had let his beard grow as rugged as the hair curling against his neck. But when she got it in her head to turn “her boys” more civilized, there was no going back. Cole’s father pushed to his feet, swiping up the rope.

Steeling his shoulders, Cole headed for the fridge before he could be ordered away to join the cleaning crew for the coming invaders. He opened the fridge door.

“Cole, dear,” Momma said. “Did West say anything about this girl he’s bringing?”

Momma looked almost giddy for her “dear, sweet boy.” She shouldn’t. This was the infamous Eva Trout they were talking about here. West had dragged Nash to work with him in the city just to get her off his back. The spoiled socialite had a huge crush on West, which already showed that she was a poor judge of character.

She was a babe—at least that’s what his twin brothers finally admitted when Cole pressed them on why West wasn’t going for her—pretty clever, too. The real problem was that her daddy was Devlin Trout, one of the richest and most ruthless men in Nashville, who *also* happened to be West’s boss.

West wasn’t about to cross Trout by going for his daughter; he was the reason that West was so filthy rich. So what was his brother thinking bringing her home? He was looking for any excuse to get rid of her. Cole almost wondered if that was the reason that West was trying to push her on him. But no, that was too low, even for West.

Cole pulled some milk out of the fridge. “He might’ve mentioned something about it, but I figured he’d tell you.” They had plenty of rooms to accommodate a small army, but Momma would want to air them out first.

“It must’ve slipped his mind.” She knew West was obnoxiously thoughtless, but she never allowed anyone to talk smack about him. She pointed to the fridge. “Mind pulling out that potato salad, and can you finish cutting these up?”

She must be really desperate to delegate the kitchen to him. He palmed the bowl with one hand, and got ready to swig the jug of milk with the other.

“Don’t—” His eyes lifted over the jug to his momma waving her knife at him. “—drink that like you’re one of our livestock, Cole. Let’s pretend my boys are civilized for once. Guests are coming. Get out a glass like I raised you right!”

“Listen to your momma,” his father yelled over from the stairs where he was heading for a shower. Cole’s lips curled up. He doubted that his father even knew what he was seconding, only that Momma had spoken. Their old man sneaked plenty of drinks from the milk jug.

“Sorry,” Cole muttered. So much for saving time. He set the milk and the potato salad on the counter and held out his hand for the knife. “You going to give that up or stab me with it?”

“Honey, I would never!” Her eyes traveled over his dust-covered body. “You just got back from the pasture, haven’t you? You should’ve hosed off in that shower in the barn.”

“Momma, let me help you. I’ll take a shower when West gets here.”

“No, no! Shower up and be out here in five minutes. I want this girl to know I didn’t raise my boys in the barn. She comes from Nashville! And if she runs in West’s circles? Oh, she’s going to be from one of those high-class neighborhoods.”

If you could call some desperate influencer hounding West high class, then sure. He preferred a low-drama country girl, but Cole surrendered to his momma’s bidding with a shrug. “I’ll be back in five. Why don’t you do what you need to do and save those veggies for me?”

His momma went back to chopping the veggies like she was possessed. “Just make sure that the guest room next to yours isn’t a disaster. I’ll put her in there.”

He winced. There were plenty of rooms away from him, closer to West. This would only make his brother more emboldened about leaving her in his hands.

Cole backed up towards the stairs. “How about the red room?” he asked. “It’s...”

“Emily is taking it.”

“The blue?” he tried desperately.

“Cole!” his father shouted from the master bedroom. “Stop giving your momma lip and do whatever she says.”

How did he always know when Cole was trying to get out of something? Sighing, he whipped around on the stairs to his room, so that he could take one of the fastest showers of his life.

Chapter Three

So far, so good! Daddy still hadn't called West demanding that he bring his little girl home. Eva only had so much time to work with. Now how to convince West that he should be as crazy for her as she was for him?

Eva had a few ideas.

The impossible man used a table between them on the plane as his barricade against her. She edged around it, dancing his squirming puppy into his arms. "He wants his poppa."

"Oh no." He shook his head stubbornly. "I am *not* that puppy's daddy."

"You're not?" He sure acted like it. West had trained that pup for hours to sit, catch balls, and play dead. He always hugged that scrawny body close when he thought she wasn't paying attention.

Joke was on him. She always had her eye on him.

The guy pushed everyone away that meant anything to him. No way was he getting away with it anymore.

Eva fell into West's lap with his puppy. "Oops."

His hands went to her waist. He had no problem touching her, and she noticed he took longer to push her away than before—they were getting somewhere. His fingers lingered over her for a moment before he slid her back from him, so that she perched halfway on him and the arm of the chair.

"Darlin'," he said. "Your daddy..."

Ugh. He needed to relax. Her brow arched at him while she balanced on his knees. "He's not here, tough guy."

What man in his right mind wouldn't go for a rich heiress?

But West was different. West just didn't care about stuff like that. Well, he *did*, but he'd rather have his own money with no strings attached. She understood because they were the same. It was why she liked him so much. It was nice to know that he wouldn't use her for her daddy's money. If he went for her, it was because he liked her.

But did he? That was a mystery. His shifting attention was super confusing... and maybe just a little intriguing. She was able to capture *anyone's* heart with the snap of her fingers.

But not his!

Men liked Eva's blonde hair. She kept it long and thick with extensions. Her dark eyelashes too! She'd spent hours at the hair dresser's and at fashionable shops to get it all down perfect. Her fans liked her in her tight clothes and made all sorts of scandalous cracks about her long, long legs. Her looks came from her momma's side.

She tried to use the best part of her genetics on West. She ran her hands down the front of his shirt. "I told you not to worry about my daddy. He'll love anyone that *I* do."

"Don't get me wrong," West said with a sarcastic tilt to his lips. "I like your daddy, but we try to keep things platonic."

She laughed and couldn't help kissing his cheek. Clever West. And he'd just admitted that he didn't feel platonic about her. She'd coax a kiss in return, but their problem was that he wasn't a PDA guy. There were too many witnesses here.

Of course, he'd had no problem kissing her when they were alone that magical night after she'd

agreed to leave her earring in Lacy Lynch's Mercedes.

They'd ruined that man.

No one would work with WhiteBoulder's Investment Company after they were through dirtying the CEO's name. But Lynch deserved it. He'd been after the blood of West's twin brothers, Nash and Porter. That creep had actually put a price on Nash's head to get him back for ruining his oil scam on a poor widow. And then Lynch had tried to flex his muscles after that by trying to devastate Emily's country singing career with blackmail footage that... Eva had to admit was pretty good.

That had been some pretty scandalous stuff.

That hadn't been the worst of it. Porter had gotten shot by Lynch! And who knew what that jerk would've done to that unfortunate woman he'd cheated on and left pregnant with his baby that he wanted gone?

No matter what threats that dangerous man had breathed back at her, it had been absolutely worth it to take on Lynch.

She smiled and, ignoring that Nash was across the way, snuggled against West, squeezing his puppy between them as she rested her head against his strong shoulder. It was hard as a rock. "Daddy just has a bad rap—he's really a softy. You haven't figured that out by now?"

"No, not really," he said dryly.

"After everything you've seen, you should know better than to believe those hatchet jobs against him in the papers. He's a good guy... deep... deep down." She ran her fingers down West's neck. His breathing grew more relaxed. This was just the sort of trance she liked to put him in. He was far too stressed out lately. Feeling all sorts of mischief consume her, she leaned closer to whisper in his ear. "Do you know how crazy I am about you?"

West stilled, his long lashes lowering as he considered her. "You might have to give me a hint."

Now *that's* what she liked to hear. It had been too long since they'd kissed, and his provocative eyes hinted how he'd like nothing more than to crush her against him again.

Oh yeah, lying to her daddy about that corrupt investor had been so worth it. West's opinion of her as a brainless party girl was destroyed when she'd accused Lynch of hitting on her. Surprisingly, that simple fib, and not the countless wrongs and injustices the man had inflicted on his helpless victims before that, had crushed Lynch's empire.

Well, good riddance. Eva would do it again if that jerk came back for them. Lynch deserved what he got. He was a dangerous man, who used his power to hurt everyone around him.

They'd stolen the tiger's teeth.

And now look how happy everyone was. Nash and Emily were together, and they were the cutest! Porter was healing from his gunshot wound, and that defenseless woman? She'd escaped Lynch and was now dating Porter. Eva absolutely adored Cadence!

Eva was the happiest of them all! She couldn't wait to visit the family that she'd helped rescue. West had an older brother, too—"the saint," and then the youngest one he dubbed, the "baby," who he only talked about when he was annoyed with them, but quite frankly, they were all related to West, and so, *of course*, she was fangirling over his family like they were characters from her favorite TV show.

No, no, he'd better not try to send her back. She threw a disarming smile his way.

Goosebumps popped up all over her arms in her enthusiasm as she met West's mesmerizing gaze as his jet touched down on the runway. The wheels ground over the hard pavement on the way to their hangar.

"Will your whole family be meeting us?" she asked.

“Yeah,” Nash answered for him. Eva startled. She’d quite forgotten that he could listen in across the way. “Porter says he’s picking us up.”

West made a face. “He says he has a surprise waiting for us. I don’t like the sound of that.”

She wondered if Porter’s surprise was anything like Nash’s. He and Emily hadn’t told anyone in his family that they’d gotten married, but knowing the twins, Porter’s bombshell was just as earth shaking.

With difficulty, Eva kept herself back from letting out a squeal that West would definitely not appreciate. “You’re all so interesting! Your parents must be so amazing to raise you all!”

West exchanged glances with his brother. “Well, don’t get too excited. We don’t all exactly... get along.”

“Of course, we do,” Nash translated. “It’s just West that doesn’t.”

That was a creative way of putting it.

West treated his brother to a hardened glare. She was thrilled to see more of his real side lately; it especially came out with the appearance of his mischievous twin brothers. “I don’t have much choice lately,” West said. “Someone’s got to make sure that we don’t lose everything to the bank.”

Nash arched a brow at his brother. “You have an interesting way of making that happen.” He seemed a little more serious than usual, despite his wife’s soothing touch on his arm. “Maybe you should pull back a little before *someone* gets hurt.”

Strangely, he seemed to include Eva in his gaze. She *had* been a part of Lynch’s downfall, after all.

“I’m not a fainthearted chicken heart like you,” West retorted. “I’m doing whatever it takes.”

He’d done everything short of selling his soul for his family, from saving their ranch to fighting for his momma’s right to have her name on that heart transplant list. Why couldn’t anyone see what he was going through? His momma’s poor health was partly the reason he was so distracted all the time. West’s heart hung on that woman.

Nash looked far from happy about West’s flippant response. “Whatever it takes?”

“I’m not going to kill anybody to get Momma her heart if that’s what you’re worried about,” West said with a grumbled laugh.

Nash burst out with his own. Eva never really understood the brothers’ gallows humor that they sank into when they were together, but it was clear they cared about their own, even if they had different ways of showing it. “I’d suggest donating your own heart,” Nash retorted, “but we all know how cold it is. Momma would never be the same.”

“Oh! That’s not true at all!” Eva protested. “You’ve got a heart of gold, West. You do so much for your momma.”

“Ugh... Eva, open your eyes.” Nash stretched to his feet. They’d come to a complete stop at the hangar. “Love is blind, but you take it to another level.”

Emily’s concerned gaze shot to Eva. “Don’t listen to him. I think you’re fantastic.”

Nash took her hand. “Isn’t that what I said?” Smirking, Nash hustled his wife down the aisle of the plane closer to the exit to make their escape from them. Eva didn’t take it personally. He was just excited to surprise his family with his latest news.

It also left her blessedly alone with West.

He turned back to Eva, sliding his fingers through hers. She almost startled at the unexpected advance. She managed to play it cool just in time.

“He’s right,” West said. “My heart’s a bit tarnished for my momma to use. That’s the truth, but...” he lowered his voice, “she *is* amazing. I’m sure she’ll love you.”

She was struck dumb by the sentiment. Gathering her courage, Eva whispered back to him. “I hope as much as you do.” The flirtatious side of her always played with men this way, but this time? Eva was desperate for validation.

His eyes locked with hers as his brother shoved open the door of the exit and carried his wife over the threshold. West cleared his throat. “Yeah... yeah,” he answered in a gruff voice. “Who wouldn’t love you?”

Was there a deeper meaning in that?

She couldn’t help the smile that crept over her lips. This didn’t sound like a man who would send her packing. “Well, that took long enough to get out of you, Mister Slade. You don’t have a problem talking about your feelings, do you?”

He laughed at her sarcasm. “Well, *you* sure don’t! I can’t imagine trying to keep anything from you—you’d drag every confession out of me.”

Her cheeks flushed with happiness. They were so good for each other. “You *like* it.”

“As much as any man under torture.”

“Hmm. I have all sorts of tortures devised for you.” She ran her free hand across his perfectly sculpted jaw. There was a hint of stubble there after a long day—nice and manly, just how she liked it. With difficulty, she kept herself from touching those lips with her own. She knew they were soft and smooth in comparison... and hungry.

“I don’t doubt that you have all sorts of plans for us,” he muttered.

Oh, he had no idea!

West needed a happy home to return to every night—not some empty marbled and hollowed-out mansion devoid of love, but one brimming with joy and laughter, and... if there was any mercy in this world, children, lots and lots of rambunctious, wonderful children. She might be a mirror of her momma, but Eva had a heart that ached for a family. And of course, she’d take a collection of adorable animals like Lizardman! She’d first welcome in the family and pets West already had, and go from there.

“It won’t be all bad,” she said. “I’m sure you can find a way to enjoy yourself in my world of dreams.”

His hands tightened over her, though he didn’t answer. His gaze surprised her with its sudden storm of desire.

He was going to kiss her! She knew it.

West’s phone rang and he grappled with Eva and then Lizardman to get to it. He was pinned under them. She laughed, not helping him out in the least. They were having too much fun to lose him to another tense business call.

“Eva,” he muttered. He finally had to reach around her to dig his phone from his pocket. His eyes widened. She glanced over at his screen to see who was calling. It was her daddy.

She groaned. “Oh no, already?”

“You told your daddy you were coming with me, didn’t you?”

She giggled, hoping it sounded more lighthearted than she felt. “C’mon. No need to worry. He’s happy if his little girl is happy.”

West’s jaw stiffened. He shoved his phone to his ear to answer her daddy’s call. “Trout? Oh yes, yes, she’s here. I... uh... yes, sir, I’m taking good care of her.” West’s eyes ran accusingly over her, before he leaned his head back against his seat in exasperation. “Like delicate china... that’s exactly what she is.” He screwed up his face like he was in pain. “Yeah, yeah, you bet. Oh, I’d never, never.”

West stood while he assured her daddy that he’d never do anything to Trout’s baby. He picked

Eva up with him. Her mouth dropped at his strength as he deposited her on the seat next to his, like doing that would convince her daddy that she was safe with him. How'd he manage to make her feel like both an irresistible tease and a child all at once?

Lizardman dropped to the ground, used to being discarded just as easily.

“Yeah, we're good,” West said, nodding like her daddy could see him. “I understand. I promise. Your little girl's going to have an amazing time. She just wanted to see Harvest Ranch and you know... I couldn't tell her 'no.' She is uh... delicate china. Of course.”

He hung up, his knuckles white as he clenched his phone. His gaze shot to her then swept over her head to his brother coming back for his wife's luggage. West stepped back from Eva, as casually as if they were coworkers getting off the same flight.

Nash brushed past West, completely oblivious to the tension emanating between his brother and her.

At the same time, Eva almost felt like nothing had happened by the way West looked through her. Had the kiss of a lifetime really been stopped by her daddy's untimely call? It was like her daddy had a tracker on her or something. Wait, did he?

Nash reached around West to get the rest of his things. His younger brothers were taller than he was... at least the ones she knew were. She pushed stubbornly to her feet. And that's the way she *liked* it! West was built, athletic and quick. Being somewhat closer in height to her made it so much easier to throw her arms around him.

Not that it ever lasted long. She was the forbidden fruit! One word from her daddy and he'd turned into Frosty the Snowman.

West had already left her to give his instructions to his flight crew, leaving her to seethe behind him. Why couldn't he fight for her? Didn't she have a say on who she loved?

This was so pathetic!

It was time to show him *and* her protective daddy how no one could stop her from following her heart. Eva collected her purse and started to work out a plan.

Chapter Four

Cole pulled on his last pair of clean jeans after tidying up the room next to his and scrubbing out its bathroom. He was just tugging on his dark gray shirt when he heard the door open downstairs and Momma's loud welcomes. There was a touch of hysteria in it.

Ignoring the dread that sank into him, he marched out of his room to save her. West was coming through the door downstairs, wrestling three stuffed cases of luggage through. They were neon pink with yellow flowers.

Clearly, they didn't belong to West.

"Such a gentleman," their momma said, beaming. West could do no wrong in her eyes anymore. She desperately wanted him to be the prodigal son that had finally returned home, except West hadn't exactly become an angel overnight.

Sadly, it was the opposite.

His brothers might keep quiet about what West was doing in Nashville to spare their poor momma, but West was still up to his old ways.

Trout was practically a mob boss.

Cole, however, did enjoy watching him struggle under Eva Trout's luggage. West met his eyes over the slick cases. "You going to just stand there and smirk?"

West could count on it. "You're doing a great job," Cole said, encouragingly.

"Nash! Emily!" their mother squealed to the side of them. "You also got married?"

"What?" Cole swiveled to see Emily holding out her ring finger to his momma so that she could inspect the diamond that Nash had put on her finger.

Unbelievable! The twins had pulled a lot of pranks in their lifetime, but this was actually... impressive. Nash's twin, Porter, had taken off with his adorably sweet girlfriend, Cadence, to the justice of the peace a few weeks ago, and he'd kept it secret from Nash. And now Nash looked like he was bringing Emily home as his wife?

How had they actually pulled off the surprise of the century?

His mother gasped—more daughters-in-law meant more grandchildren!

West set the luggage aside and reached across the threshold to lead in the most stunningly gorgeous woman that Cole had ever seen. It didn't take an idiot to figure out that this was the infamous Eva Trout.

Her long blonde hair bounced against her back, smooth like silk, but irresistibly soft and curly. The next thing he noticed were those long legs of hers. No doubt, those jean shorts were meant to show off all that skin. She screamed money. Her clothes, though simple enough to belong on a rack at Walmart, were soft with just the right stretch and cut that advertised fashion icon.

She was perfect for West.

Eva swept a self-assured smile across the room. There was a deep dimple in that cheek. She was trouble with a capital "T."

His momma's eyes swerved to Eva, and the young socialite bit her lip self-consciously. "So, West, did you...?" Momma couldn't quite get it out. "Did you...?"

"What she means to ask is who *isn't* married here?" Cole asked.

His momma elbowed him, but Eva softened Cole's insolence with an indulgent look. She raised her hand like she was the best student in class. "Me! We're not married."

"Wait." Their father came down the stairs, rubbing a towel through his wet hair. "Did I just hear Nash and Emily are married?"

Nash had the good sense to look nervous. Emily had no such misgivings; she just ran to her new father-in-law and threw her arms around him with an excited cry. "Yes! I've never been so happy!"

That softened their old man up. There were benefits to having women in the family.

"What do I call you?" Emily asked him. "Dad? Father? Jase?"

"How about the old man?" Nash suggested with a laugh. His wife gasped, scandalized, and he kissed her cheek.

While Nash tried to explain to their father that they'd gotten married in Hawaii, Eva swung around to West, putting her hands behind her back as she gave him a coy smile. "When *I* get married, I'm headed down the aisle of Shelby Street Bridge ahead of a big brass band with all my friends dancing and singing behind me," she said in an undertone. "No way am I tying the knot without my daddy giving me away to the love of my life. You'd better remember that."

West stared at her. The muscle at his jaw ticked... actually ticked. Wasn't that just a thing that soap opera guys did? Cole broke into a grin. He'd never seen West so off his game. His older brother covered his unease well, but Cole saw right through him.

"So who is this love of your life you're marrying?" Cole goaded West as he turned to Eva to question her. "Have you met this lucky guy yet?"

His momma elbowed him yet again.

"I might've," Eva said softly.

"Whoever he is, he *will* be a lucky man," West said.

His brother had quickly regained his usual charm. Cole wasn't going to let him. "Maybe he should identify himself?"

"I'll leave it up to Eva to figure out," West said. He gave her the "look."

Cole groaned at the smarmy trick. Such a cop-out. He almost felt sorry for Eva. She might be a spoiled socialite, but she didn't deserve to be led a merry dance like West did to the rest of them. Just like any cold-blooded chameleon, West was good at turning into whoever anyone needed him to be to get what he wanted, then he'd try on the skin of a snake and devour his victims.

His ex, Liv, could attest to that.

West tucked Eva's silky hair behind her ear. Cole watched on with distaste as she melted into happy smiles. It would be different if West meant *anything* by it, but he played perfect "boyfriend" just like he played perfect son. West jetted home at least three times a month to drive Momma to her doctor appointments and her rehab in Charleston.

Everyone knew that he was only trying to sweep his sins under the rug after everything he'd done to her.

Before West had cleaned up from the drugs and drinking, his partying had Momma up most nights worrying about her boy. When she'd started having heart troubles after that, no one was surprised. And now, ironically, West's constant visits were yet another stress on her.

"It looks like Eva knows what she wants," Cole said with a hard look at his brother. "Do you?"

"Cole!" His momma's scandalized voice immediately put him to shame, but only because he was adding to her anxiety over her new houseguests. His father would have his head. "Honey, why don't you help with all of this luggage while I get to know Eva. It *is* Eva, correct?"

"Yes!" Eva blushed. Even the tip of her nose went red. Strangely, she was nervous to be

formally introduced to their momma. She dug her fingers into her pockets. “West works for my daddy, and uh... well, we’ve gotten to know each other in Nashville, and I-I think the world of him.”

Momma laughed, looking delighted. “So do we! I’m so glad that you see him like we do.”

“Well, Mrs. Slade, ma’am, I like to think so.”

“Please, call me Lily.”

Eva ducked in pleasure like their momma had just granted her West’s hand in marriage. “That’s so pretty,” Eva said. “I’d be honored to call you by your first name. Thank you.”

A smile played over West’s lips as he took Momma’s hands. He ran a soothing thumb over her fragile skin. “Where are we putting her?” It wasn’t even in question that he and Eva would be sharing the same room if they weren’t married. No one wanted Momma’s lecture about not running *that* kind of establishment. “The sunflower room?” West asked.

Of course he wanted the room next to Cole’s. West can forget about making me “babysit” Eva. It isn’t happening!

They’d just freed up a room with Nash and Emily conveniently coming home *already* married. “The blue one’s perfect,” Cole suggested.

“Yes, but the sunflower room has a nice view of my rose garden,” Momma said.

Eva clasped her hands together. One of her legs twisted around the other in a nervous way. “Oh, I’d love that.”

“Then that’s where you need to be.” West’s eyes on Cole’s dared him to object. “You mind getting some of these bags?” West was used to a staff—from his household, on his jet, at work—all obeying his edicts. He always thought his brothers could take over the job. Before Cole could object, his mother gave him a warning look.

Squaring his shoulders against further insult, Cole grabbed Eva’s bags, tossing one over his shoulder and throwing the other under his arm.

Wrong choice.

These had to be at least a hundred pounds each, and yet, nothing would get him to stay another minute with West. He grabbed the third and dragged the luggage up the first flight of stairs.

He listened to Eva run up behind him, her bracelets jangling. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “You don’t have to take *all* of them!”

Glancing back he saw the dainty gems on her jewelry gleaming from her neck and wrists. They were meant to be subtle, but they only advertised how much money her family had.

“Those are super heavy.” She tried to wriggle around him on the stairwell. “Let me help.”

Her small hands went over his, like she could actually make a difference with that tiny frame of hers—she wrapped her arms around him, blowing his senses away at her surprise attack—*that tiny frame with curves!* “I can take this,” she said, plucking the bag from his shoulder.

He got a good whiff of her expensive perfume and he smelled... gardenias?

The girl was wearing his momma’s favorite flower. It also happened to be his. He stumbled over the sudden shift of weight and toppled over her like a giant. He practically was to her, and to his horror, he pinned all that beauty to the wall.

Oh great! The silky hair that had mesmerized him only minutes earlier was shoved into his face, and those long legs wound around his as he flattened her on the top stair.

His hands let go of the luggage and he only had her. He let out a breath that echoed hers.

If West saw them now...?

Forget that. Cole had to make sure that she’d survived becoming the brunt of their fall. “You okay?” he asked.

She nodded, wordlessly. Her seafoam blue eyes moved up to his.

Why did he feel like he was losing his mind all of a sudden? “I think that the—the luggage was balancing it—it all out.” What? Now he was stuttering? He tried to clear his thoughts of any trace of her. He had to get a grip on himself. “I’m so sorry. It took us all down.”

“I can see that.” That bright smile she shot his way seemed somewhat genuine, but it also confused him. She was supposed to be some untouchable influencer, above such indignities as getting caught on the bottom of a dogpile.

She was!

He needed to get off her! His fingers went to hers. He meant to help her to stand, but touching her again had been another mistake. His skin burned, but he wasn’t about to let a little chemistry stop him from being a gentleman.

Chemistry? Stop already. She’s with West!

He tugged her up and went for her luggage next. It was near their feet.

“I’ve got the shoulder bag,” she said. Her hands landed on his, twisting his fingers away from the strap like her honor depended on it. “I’m trying to make a good impression on the family...” She stopped herself with a giggle. “Please don’t tell West about me tripping you. He’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

He completely agreed with her.

Cole carefully unwound his fingers from her soft manicured ones. This girl was killing him. Why did she keep touching him? “My lips are sealed,” he said. He scrambled back from her and headed back up the next flight of stairs with only two pieces of her luggage this time. All the way he tried to screw his head on straight.

She took a deep breath, hounding his steps. “You’re the baby, huh?”

“The baby?” He distastefully rolled the insult over his tongue. What did she think? He was seven? West might’ve dubbed him that, but Eva had nothing on him. He snickered. “And how old are *you* supposed to be? Sixty?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Now who’s the one in diapers?” he teased her back. “I’ve got you by two years, almost three.”

“Baby of your family, silly,” she replied, undeterred.

“It’s Cole,” he said, “but if you really want to call me the baby, then you’re going by ‘embryo.’ Hope you’re okay with that.”

She let out an explosive laugh. “West warned me that you had a mouth on you. He talks about you all the time.”

He cringed, wondering what demeaning things West had blabbed about him.

Eva sighed loudly behind him, perhaps oblivious to the brothers’ feuding. “The girls must go crazy for you in town. I’m sure you have to brush them off you like glitter.”

He rolled her luggage into her room, aware that he was now free to make a break for it. Instead of running, he leaned against the frame of the white-painted door and tried to explain how things really were in Harvest Ranch. “It doesn’t really work that way around here. We all grew up together in this town, so we know *way* too much about each other. We have to go to Charleston to find anyone to date, so...”

She seemed intrigued. “You don’t have a girlfriend?”

“Uh no.” And why was he admitting that to her again?

“I’d be happy to set you up.” Her delicate brow arched with excitement, and she clapped her hands. “Ooh, what’s your type?”

His mind flew to that beautiful redhead at Mo's. He couldn't quite remember what she looked like in the face of Eva's pale beauty and—and... it didn't matter. No way was he allowing Eva to meddle with his heart. "It's cool," he said. "I think I've got a handle on my own love life."

"No, no! I want to be there for you!" She jumped onto Momma's soft patchwork quilt that was spread over the four-post bed. The mattress squeaked under her swinging legs. "I love matchmaking. I helped Nash with Emily! How about I bring a friend with me the next time we come to visit?"

He could just imagine how that would go. He winced. "Don't even *think* about it."

Her beautiful eyes narrowed. "You're hard to crack, just like West, I see."

"No!" He was annoyed to hear his voice tightening with his disgust, but she'd gotten to him. "I'm *nothing* like West." She'd somehow stumbled onto Cole's worst nightmare, and he groaned inwardly at her surprised expression. Still, he had to set her straight: "Get that out of your mind right now. West and I are way, *way* different."

Her cheek turned from him, seconds before he saw her knowing smile. Apparently, she disagreed.

He leaned back against the door again. It didn't matter. His momma would be appalled at how unpleasant he was being to their guest anyway. Somehow Eva had gotten under his skin, but he needed to tone it down, way down. "Do you need anything else?"

"Yeah, I'll need your number because I'm going to set you up."

Eva had a hint of a southern accent. It was kind of cute. And then he thought about what she'd said.

He groaned and shook his head. "Forget it." He turned to make his escape.

"Ha! Baby West." She leaped off the bed to follow him out. "You've sure got his stubbornness, don't you?"

He rolled his eyes and rushed down the stairs. This was worse than having a kid sister, in a way. She was relentless. As he got closer to the main floor, he could hear his oldest brother, Hudson, and his wife, Mimi. They'd come to drop off West's two boys. By the sounds of things, they'd just returned from the hospital where their mom, Liv, was having her baby.

Mimi just happened to be sisters with West's ex. Hudson had come for her anyway, like some Viking warrior who cut through all that drama and hurt, so he could win Mimi over like the boss that he was.

Now... if Eva had compared Cole to Hudson, he wouldn't have minded. That's what everyone said anyway, not... *West* of all people!

Dah! Cole's ears rang at the insult. He'd *never* get over that one!

Cole reached the bottom landing with Eva hot on his heels, seconds before realizing that he was surrounded by happy couples—Nash and Emily, Porter and Cadence, Hudson and Mimi.

Well, maybe not so happy.

Listening to their raised voices, he realized that he'd crashed an argument. The frayed tempers weren't too unusual when Hudson and West were in the same room.

"Oh, you called them, Hudson?" West scoffed. "Really? You think that'll do it? Wow—*way* to be bold!" Cole tried to figure out what they were talking about. Whatever it was, Hudson had touched a nerve. "Walk in and make them see your face," West said. "That's the only way to get it done."

"What else are we supposed to do?" Hudson fired back. His oldest brother had his arm around Mimi. His fingers were entangled in her red hair. Hudson's wife was tall, but he still towered over her and everyone else as he faced down West. "Momma's on the donor list. We have to wait like everybody else."

Ah yes, that explained it—Momma’s failing health was always a bone of contention. The Slades were big strong men who belonged in caves. They were used to taking care of their problems with fists. Now that their hands were tied, they were all going crazy.

“We can’t just tell people to hurry up and die so we can get her a heart,” Hudson argued with West, “as much as you’d like that!”

That went too far! Where was Momma? In sudden worry, Cole quickly scanned the room to see if she’d overheard. He let out a breath of relief, seeing that their old man was gone, too. This explained why a riot had erupted in the living room.

But then a new worry hit him. Where *did* she go? Was she okay?

“She should be on the top of that list,” West said. “I’m going to the Virginia Heart Transplant Center at the Charleston Hospital tomorrow and I’m asking what the holdup is.”

“You think you can just nudge everyone else aside who’s waiting for their turn?” Hudson asked. “Aren’t their lives important too? We’ve got to be fair about it.”

“Fair? You think anything about that donor list is fair?” West sneered. “It’s *all* in who you know.”

Hudson seemed to remember himself when he turned to their nephews. Charlie watched on with wide eyes as his father argued with his uncle. The diminutive Pip had his fist in his mouth. “We shouldn’t talk about this in front...” Hudson tilted his head at West’s children.

West let out a heavy sigh. Charlie was barely eight. Pip was six. Neither of them should be involved in this drama. West’s gaze shot to Cole. “Why don’t you take Charlie and Pip out... and uh... show them Lizardman? I dropped the puppy off in the barn.”

Cole was already getting stuck with the puppy *and* West’s children? Not a chance! No matter how much he loved his nephews, that was West’s job.

Charlie skipped up with excitement. “Lizardman is here?”

“Lizardman! Lizardman!” Pip jumped up and down. His wildest dreams had come true.

It wasn’t that Cole didn’t enjoy hanging out with Charlie and Pip, but West did this *far* too often. “Are you kidding me, West? You’re doing this again?”

Their father came down the stairs at that moment, looking bone weary. Without having to hear what they were asking Cole to do, he held out a hand. “Cole, move it! I don’t want to hear anything more about it.”

Cole was floored. Eva was right! It didn’t matter how old he was, he’d *always* be the baby. His hands rolled into fists and he got ready to put West in his place.

“I’ll take them!” Eva said quickly. She leaned down to meet Charlie’s deep blue eyes. They were a mirror of his dad’s. “Hi, you’re Charlie, right? You want to see the puppy?”

Charlie stepped back in shock that a stranger knew his name, though he still looked intrigued. And why shouldn’t he? This stranger was pretty as a flower. “Who are you?”

“Eva. You want to be friends?” She stuck out her hand.

Pip stuck his drooly one in it.

She giggled... which was a bit unexpected coming from the daughter of a rich oil tycoon.

The cute sound was enough for Charlie to seize her other hand. “I’ll show you!”

Cole shook his head. He couldn’t make West’s girlfriend watch Charlie and Pip. It wasn’t right. Before he could tell West to stop being an idiot and watch his own kids, his brother had turned to their old man to interrogate him. “How’s Momma doing?”

“Just lightheaded. She says she’ll be down for dinner.”

Cole’s stomach clenched. It sounded like she’d had another relapse while he was upstairs with

Eva. He shouldn't have argued with West in front of her.

"We can take over dinner," Emily said.

She and Mimi, along with Cadence, all went to the kitchen like an army to see what they could do about taking over the meal. There was no doubt that they all adored their new mother-in-law in their own ways and would do anything to help her out.

They worked in sync. Emily and Cadence seemed like they already knew each other from Nashville. They talked a mile a minute, trying to catch up on everything that had happened since they'd parted ways. They talked a lot about that Lacy Lynch.

Cole squinted as he overheard every awful thing that monster had tried to do to his new sisters-in-law. Cadence had been fooled into believing that she was in love with the father of her babies until he'd turned psycho. Mimi's eyes widened as she dug for more information. She finally declared that she'd rearrange Lynch's face if he ever came near any of them again, all while they brought out mixing bowls and pots and pans.

In an instant, they had become a family.

Eva started to lead the kids out the door. "Show me this cute little puppy!"

"No, I've got it!" The words of surrender were pulled out of Cole like a horse fighting his reins. "It's okay, I'll take the kids." His eyes went to West, who gave him an impatient wave to get lost. His annoying brother had won again, but it was better than throwing this all on the newcomer. He turned to his nephews. "Let's go."

"Yay!" Charlie hopped up with all the joy that the eight-year-old could muster. Pip grabbed Cole's hand, not letting go of Eva's, either. "Lizardman is waiting!" Charlie led them both out the door.

Wait, what? They were *all* going?

Cole had walked into that one, hadn't he? He'd be showing West's girlfriend around the ranch, whether he liked it or not, and his brother hadn't had to do a thing. Cole set his shoulders and marched out the door with his new entourage.

Chapter Five

Eva sat in the soft hay in the barn, holding Ballerina. She rubbed her nose into the puppy's fuzzy white fur hiding the creature's slender neck. "You were the one who named her?" she asked Charlie.

He nodded eagerly. "And Lizardman, too."

And West had kept his son's name for that other wriggly little pup, too. She thought it was the cutest thing ever. West always seemed to grimace when calling out Lizardman's name in public.

Cole settled into the hay next to her, picking up a chirping chick. It ruffled its fluffy feathers as he settled the tiny bird into his arm—a very muscular arm.

Her cheeks went warm. She'd gotten front row tickets to feel those guns when she'd accidentally tripped him on the stairs. The guy was built with broad shoulders that seemed out of place in this stall made for tiny, cute things. And yet when he'd tripped, he'd gone down like someone had taken an ax to the base of a redwood tree.

She hid a laugh at the memory, not wanting to set him off again.

He'd been mortified when he'd knocked her over, and just like West did when he was flustered, he'd turned tail and tried to run. She'd get through his defenses soon enough. She was almost through his brother's.

"Beep Beep." Charlie called out the attendance. "Are you here?" The kids had decided to play school with them and the smaller animals in the barn. To Cole's credit, he'd gone along with it.

A chick made a little noise, as if it knew its name was being called from the imaginary roll. Good thing too, because Pip was becoming impatient with the chicks who ignored their names. He threatened the principal's office through his missing teeth more times than she could count.

So adorable! She could hardly wait for her turn.

"Lizardman?" Charlie called out.

The puppy lifted his head and wandered over to sniff at his striped shirt. "Please, take your seat," Charlie said, though he had visibly softened from the stern teacher that he was trying to play. His hand fluffed his miscreant student's floppy ears. "Sit, sit!"

Eva picked up her phone and texted West between Ballerina's squirming paws: "Your kids are precious."

"Eva?" Charlie called out... *after* consulting Cole, she'd noticed. The sweet kid had forgotten her name.

She cleared her throat. "Here." She glanced over at Cole. "I feel a little out of place with such interesting names."

"You haven't even met Bartleby yet," Cole said, breaking into a grin—it transformed his hard features into something more approachable than the rugged cowboy that he'd turned into. He'd been in a mood since being forced to watch West's kids. She could understand, in a way, since he'd symbolically been excluded from the "big kid's" table at his exalted age of thirty-one. Again, she hid her laugh. As an only child, she'd always be the baby too.

"Bartleby's a horse," Charlie explained. "So, is Sleipnir."

She couldn't keep her lips from tilting up this time. "You named an animal Sleipnir?" she asked Charlie. It sounded like a squished tomato.

“No, Uncle Cole did!” He ratted him out with his usual innocence. “He’s uh—uh a paint, and he’s fast!”

She fixed Cole with an amused look. “Looks like the creative name giving runs in the family.”

“It’s from a Norse mythology,” he said with a roll of his blue Slade eyes. “He’s Odin’s steed... a Norse god.”

Made sense, since Cole looked like one. He was a total Hemsworth with his scruffy day’s growth on his chiseled jaw. West’s brother was a hotty like he was. Not only that, but she was taken aback by his depth. It definitely ran in the family. She couldn’t believe that he didn’t have a girlfriend. She’d fix that for him.

“R2-D2?” Charlie was back to his fantasy roll call. “R2-D2, are you here?”

There was no answer. Eva could see Pip getting ready to threaten the principal’s office again.

“Cheep,” Cole called out, saving the truant bird blinking over his arm. “Cheep. I’m here.”

She let out a laugh, touched that Cole would play along. So cute! He might not go easy on her, but he was a softie for his nephews. None of her guy friends would have that kind of patience.

Pip’s stern look softened. “Okay, R2-D2’th here,” he announced through his missing teeth. “He’th here.”

“Cole,” Charlie asked the room. “Are you here?” He pretended to read an order slip that he’d found from the side table.

Cole leaned back against the boarded wall of the stall. “Here,” he answered.

“All right, that’s everybody,” Charlie said, still consulting the slip like it held his lesson plan. “Sit, sit,” he commanded Lizardman. The squirmy labradoodle was trying to climb into his lap.

A message chirped from Eva’s phone. She eagerly read West’s response to her text: “You like my kids, huh?”

“Love them!”

Well... she *would’ve* texted that, but she didn’t want to sound desperate. He’d taken about five minutes to write back, so she’d have to set a timer before she replied. It was just how it was done.

“Okay, Cole,” Charlie said. “What is five times five times twenty-three?”

“Uh...” Cole closed his eyes while he processed the figures. “Twenty-five times twenty-three, it’s like five hundred...”

“Wait!” Eva found the calculator app on her phone. She usually used it for tips. “I’ve got it.”

“No calculators!” Charlie decreed.

“No calculators? What? Why not?” she asked. “I can’t remember any math after third grade, so...”

“Five hundred seventy-five,” Cole said.

She turned sharply. “That’s not it!” She checked her phone, letting Ballerina escape her hands. Immediately Lizardman pounced and the two wrestled in the hay while she discovered that Cole had guessed the number right. No way! He *had* to have cheated.

“Lizardman! Ballerina!” Charles lectured them gruffly.

Pip grabbed Lizardman’s collar and made his usual lisped threats. “Printhipalth offith now!” But Lizardman and Ballerina were having the time of their lives. Both of them rolled around like the playful little puppies that they were. Pip stumbled backwards from their wriggling bodies and stomped his foot. “Do you hear me?”

The two looked like best friends as far as she could see. “Awww, puppy love,” she whispered. She turned to Cole, deciding she’d find this for him too. “You’d like my friends.”

“Wait... did you think of me because you said puppy love?” he whispered back. Obviously he

kept his complaints low because no one wanted to be kicked out of class. Standing up to roleplay getting into trouble at the principal's office would take too much effort. "You still think I'm the baby," he accused.

Was he teasing or was he upset? Maybe both? His eyes both sparkled with humor and glinted with annoyance. Wow, those stormy blue eyes reminded her of West's. Everything did.

"Oh c'mon." She quickly changed the subject to what she wanted it to be. "What do you have against love?"

"Nothing."

Their gazes locked. Why was he giving her West vibes? She couldn't figure it out. Just like the rest of his brothers, Cole was taller and bigger—yeah, much bigger—he happened to be more built than any of them. The kid must wrestle cattle for a living, but his mannerisms? His similarities to West cracked her up. Those level stares of his belonged to his brother, but while West was always up for a good time, Cole was a little stick in the mud.

She could hardly wait to ruffle his feathers.

"Mr. Pip!" She raised her hand to tattle on him. "Cole is being mean."

Pip turned a stern look on them. Of course, he was delighted to be taken seriously as one of the teachers. He waved his hands at him. "What are you doing to Eva?"

Cole burst into a laugh that he quickly covered up. "I swear." He held up his hands, still carefully balancing the baby chick on his arm. "I was being really nice."

"Stop talking or I'll give you five years' worth of homework," Charlie yelled over the squirming little pups. He still tried to peel Lizardman and Ballerina away from their roughhousing.

"I think he should be punished," Eva suggested.

"I'm the teacher," Charlie reminded her. "No tattletaling, or you don't get recess."

Whoa, tough crowd.

The baby chicks rushed out of the way of the playful puppies, squawking loudly with a rustling of their tiny fluffy bodies. "You better watch out," she warned the chicks. "Charlie's going to fail you for making such a fuss."

Charlie assured the fleeing babies that they were fine while he tried to get ahold of the pups. Cole reached over and dragged Lizardman back onehanded. "Come here, little guy."

Eva picked up her phone and shot off a text to West like she'd been far too busy to reply until now. "Charlie and Pip are too cute! Come out to the barn. You're missing out. We're snuggling big eyed baby animals without you." She scooped up the displaced chicks and snapped a shot of herself with them. She made sure to get the best angle that she could find of herself before she sent it off to West.

She caught Cole's surprised look on her.

She smoothed her hair back, trying to pick up the threads of their conversation. "My friend Ashley is cool," she said, barely remembering where they left off.

He shook his head. "You're still on that?"

"I won't be happy until *you* are happy," Eva declared.

"Then be happy because I'm happy... alone."

Nonsense. No one was.

"It might come as a surprise to you," he said, "but not just any woman is going to fit the bill. I actually enjoy the single life, so if the right woman does come along, she'd better be pretty special because I plan on making her my life."

That was sweet. He might not have West's polish, but he certainly had his charm... more

actually. Or was that what people called sincerity?

And still, there were holes all over his theory. “How will you know if someone is or isn’t the right girl if you don’t get to know her?” she asked.

“Quiet!” Pip took over the teacher role while Charlie wrestled down Ballerina. “Get out your reading bookth.”

“Reading?” Cole complained. “Teacher, I forgot my book.”

“Mine is in my phone,” Eva said. She turned to Cole. “Just use your phone.”

He cracked a smile. “I don’t drag that thing around like you do.”

Interesting.

“Headth down and read,” Pip ordered.

Cole pretended to follow orders, though his gaze veered to her. He lowered his voice. “Are you and West really a thing?”

She stiffened—he’d found where she was most vulnerable. “Define ‘a thing.’”

“Are you dating?”

“Noooo, not yet, but... well, I like him, and I came here to meet the family, didn’t I?”

He didn’t seem satisfied by that answer. “What about West? What’s he said to you?”

Nothing. A big fat nothing! She licked her lips. She was going to change that.

“Do I need to start setting you up with *my* friends?” he asked with an arch of his brow.

She gasped and swatted his knee. “You brat!” A part of her realized that if she hadn’t been so intrusive in his personal life from the get-go that they wouldn’t be having this heart-to-heart, but honestly, after Nash got together with Emily, she’d missed having a confidante. She immediately picked up this same friendship with Cole. “I’ll show you exactly how good I am at getting a guy interested.”

“Yeah?”

She picked up her phone with a practiced swipe and texted West again: “I miss you.” She turned to his brother, whipping her hair back. “I just have to show him that he’s special.”

“That’s it, huh?”

Annoyance flooded through her. He thought he knew more about flirting than she did? He’d better think again. “How about I give you lessons some time, bad boy.”

He snorted and leaned the opposite way to drop Lizardman next to Ballerina, where the puppies immediately went back to their wrestling. “I think *you* need a few lessons,” he mumbled to himself.

Say what? She guessed that she wasn’t supposed to catch that. Before she could call him on it, Charlie gave up on the puppies and tried to rein in his other rambunctious students. “Please hand in your homework, class.”

“Umm.” Eva glanced over at the blur of fur. “Ballerina ate my homework, so...”

“Ballerina!” Charlie looked very disappointed, as he pointed a stern finger at the puppy.

“That’s the oldest excuse in the book,” Cole said, leaning next to Eva with a grin. She froze at his nearness. She wasn’t sure why her heart was trying to climb out of her ribcage, only that maybe he reminded her too much of West. “Dog ate my homework?” Cole met her eyes inches from her face. She felt his warm breath against her lips. “Charlie, you’re going to let her get away with that?” Cole asked.

“Nice try! Where’s *your* homework?” Eva asked.

“I didn’t do it!”

“What!” That was almost more than Charlie could bear. The little boy stiffened with rage.

Eva’s phone beeped with a text from West. She hurriedly opened it and read his message: “Give

me five minutes, and I'm all yours."

Oooh! West was coming! Cole could stop with his superior attitude already! She knew exactly what she was doing. Her insides turned all gooey and soft like melted chocolate. West *did* care about her. And now would be the perfect time to surprise him like she'd planned since she'd gotten off the jet. She was going to prove her feelings to West once and for all. Forgetting her own set of rules, she texted him back immediately: "Cool! I'll be waiting."

She raised her hand, but didn't wait for their diminutive teachers to call on her. "Can I have a hall pass? I need to be excused."

"No, no hall path," Pip adamantly declared.

"I think we're playing jail, not school," Cole said with a laugh.

Somehow his cynical words softened their teacher's austerity. "Recess!" Charlie suddenly announced. "Hide-n-seek... in the barn!"

"Oh?" That sounded like a good way to make her escape. "Who's 'it'?" she asked.

"Not me," Charlie said. That sentiment was echoed by Pip. "Cole!" the kids decided unanimously.

Cole seemed okay with that. He leaned back against the stall like he'd take a nap. "So I come for all of you in thirty minutes then?"

"No!" His nephews were used to his shenanigans and didn't seem worried at all as they ran out of the stall to find their hiding spots in the barn.

"Don't fall asleep!" Charlie shouted out behind him. "Five minutes!"

That was about how long West said he'd be. Eva couldn't wait! She eyed the hayloft above them. What a perfect romantic spot! She'd lead West there and show him exactly how much she was into him. Shivers of anticipation ran through her romantic soul. She shooed the little chicks away from her feet so that she could stand, though her feet slipped over the hay. Her sandals had absolutely no traction!

Cole grabbed her to steady her. Eva turned back to him. His lips tilted up on one side in a crooked smile. She could see the creases of humor set against his rough jaw. She untangled her fingers from his. She felt a little out of breath.

"Thanks," she said, her eyes going to those sweet little chicks. "I almost flattened our classmates."

"I'm sure they'd be okay," he said. "They're pretty quick to get out of the way."

Her tongue felt tied up in her mouth, and she made her escape before she made the mistake of trying to set him up with another friend. For some reason, he brought that out in her.

She texted West instead. Strangely, she'd almost forgotten about her plan. "I've got a little surprise for you. Text me when you get this."

She hurried through the barn, passing the stalls until she reached the ladder below the hayloft. Her hands landed against the railings. This really *was* like recess. She hadn't done any climbing like this since grade school. Eva had forgotten that she was a little afraid of heights. She reached the top, breathing out when she glanced back and saw the ground looming too far below her. Crawling over the platform, she made her way past a tall stack of hay that concealed her view from the rest of the barn. There was a cozy little hideaway behind it made just for two.

It was perfect!

She wrote West again, her eagerness making her reckless with the speed of her texts: "You coming?"

He finally replied: "Yes."

“How far are you?” she asked.

“Give me about three minutes.”

“Perfect,” she wrote back. “Take the ladder up to the hayloft. You won’t believe what you’ll find there.”

Me!

Eva giggled into her hand. He was going to get a surprise that he wouldn’t soon forget. She’d heard more than enough country songs to know that hay was pretty much the most romantic spot to find a cowboy.

She picked up her phone. Running her fingers through her apps, she found TalkieTalk and set it on a live feed. She wasn’t a notorious influencer for nothing! Eva had every intention of declaring her love to the world.

West would never doubt her feelings again.

“Hey, everybody,” she told the screen when she switched on her live feed. She watched the numbers jump from zero to the hundreds, to the thousands, to the hundred-thousands. It would hit over a million views soon. She smiled.

Just how she liked it. Her sponsors were going to have a heyday with this.

“I’m in an actual hayloft in Harvest Ranch,” she told her fans. “Can you believe it? Kinda screwy for anyone to find *me* in the country, but that’s what people do when they’re in love.”

Wait, did she want to admit that yet?

But now the cat was scratching its way out of the bag and so, she let it out all the way by admitting everything. “Oh wow, such a funny thing to say. It feels so strange, but so right. Yeah, I’m in love!” She squealed the second the words came out. “Crazy, right? I’m finally saying it out loud. But I-I think he just doesn’t know how I feel because...” She tried to work out exactly *why* he didn’t know. “I’m too friendly sometimes,” she admitted, “so it’s hard for that special someone to know that they’re special, right? So anyway, I never want this guy that I care about to doubt how I feel about him again.” She lowered her voice, “His name is West Slade. I told him to meet me up here in the hayloft. As soon as he comes up that ladder and comes around that haystack, I’m going to surprise him with a kiss that’ll melt his face off. We’ll just see what he has to say.”

She smiled.

Sure, haters might criticize her for giving away the most important events of her life, but... she was a sharer! Eva just happened to be really open about her feelings. She’d grown a skin tough enough to handle all criticisms, and she did her best not to let the fame get to her head.

Right? Right?

After all, why was the tradition of kissing in front of everybody to finish the wedding ceremony at a church any different than what she was doing now?

She gulped, turning back to her fans. “And maybe I’m stupid for making this ‘live’ because I could very possibly get rejected, but what if? What if... *he* feels the same? I can’t let my fear get in the way anymore. I have to be honest, no matter what happens! I’m ready to put this all out there. You with me on this?”

She needed a good angle for this livestream, definitely not a shot from below. Looking around the cozy little nook, she noticed bales of hay piled up on every side of her. One stack was tiered like stairs. She could put the camera up there.

Stepping up on the first bale of hay, she made her way up, so that she could reach the highest point to set up her camera. She adjusted her phone so that the screen would catch West when he came around that first bale of hay across from her. This angle also caught her best side.

Another must!

This was going to be awesome. She put her thumb up to the screen, then noticed how dark it was in this loft. She squinted at the screen, seeing that she was entirely in the shadows. Ah great! The picture was awful. Eva searched for some sort of overhead lighting, just as she heard a sound behind her.

He was coming! She took a deep breath. This lighting would have to do.

She didn't even have time to get off the bale of hay before she listened to West clear the ladder and walk towards her hideout. Her fingers curled into a tight fist as every part of her tensed with delight. She'd have to pull him to her because she didn't want to accidentally knock West to the ground below.

Reenacting a Greek tragedy was the complete opposite of what she wanted to do.

She took a deep breath, trying not to laugh, but her happiness was turning her giddy. The silhouette of West rounded the bend of hay bales, and she grasped the ends of his collar and tugged him closer.

A part of her noticed that he'd gotten out of that dress shirt and put on a casual tee shirt more fitting for the country. Standing on the hay bale, she wrapped her arms around him in the darkness. "I want to tell you something."

He let out a breath, and she planted her lips against his before he could try to talk her out of it. Eva might've held back everything that she'd felt for West that first time they'd kissed, but when he'd never come back for more, she'd decided that she needed to show him exactly what he was missing.

She had a wild spirit that matched his!

The lights definitely wouldn't catch any of this on her live feed. Her TalkieTalk would be an absolute failure! She didn't care.

West was unresponsive with shock, but slowly, slowly, his hands moved around her. She felt his heart beneath hers. Blessedly racing. It was the most emotion that she'd ever gotten out of him.

Hope beat through her as he surrendered to her kisses by gathering her close, one arm behind her waist, the other supporting her head. His lips turned demanding over hers. Oh wow, he was strong. She felt like she was disappearing in his embrace. She'd never noticed that he was so big, maybe because she'd only seen him around his brothers lately.

His fingers tangled through her hair. She felt herself melting.

Yeehaw and yippee ki-yay! Is that how they say it here? Who cares!

This kiss was something to die for. West had passion, she felt that, but something deeper too—his every move was the mark of a gentleman. His touch was meaningful, expressive, thoughtful, like he held back the strength of a storm with his gentle caresses.

This wasn't like their kiss before. This was better!

Her knees went weak. Eva stepped back to steady herself. That's when she felt her horrible sandal slip on the hay again. She stumbled. West tried to catch her, only for the both of them to fall back against the bale of hay together.

What a way to go! She giggled, and he let out a shaky laugh. "Eva," he said. "I think that means you're 'it.'"

She ran her fingers through his hair. "Oh, West..."

"West?" he asked. He wrenched back.

She scrambled off the bale of hay and realized just how tall he was.

This wasn't West.

She sprang away.

Chapter Six

Cole couldn't catch his breath, even as he made out Eva's features through the shadows of the loft.

What had just happened?

The memory of her lips still burned against his. He tried to piece everything together that had led up to this. It wasn't like he'd never kissed a stranger before. The women at Mo's were always throwing their arms around him and smothering him with their love, especially after a rowdy swing dance, or even to congratulate him after he and his brothers won a round of pool... but for once, he'd actually given in.

He wasn't sure why, only that tasting the actual sweetness of her lips after seeing that same sweetness with his nephews felt... complete.

Dah! He was an idiot!

She'd told him that she'd teach him a few lessons on love; he'd assumed she meant it in the most platonic, teasing way—until he'd come looking for her in the hayloft.

Even then, he meant to pull back, but then... her hypnotizing scent of gardenias, and the sincerity behind her soft touch was enough to make him certain that there was absolutely *nothing* going on between her and his brother.

That was until she'd called him West.

"Oh!" She hugged Cole again, jostling him back. He felt like a wooden post through his shock. He felt her intake of breath against his ear. "Sorry!"

Hugging him was supposed to make this all better?

Saying that he was stunned was an understatement. He listened to Charlie's voice beneath them on the ladder. "Did you find her?"

Yeah, you could say that.

He wasn't sure whether to be alarmed or angry, but then his heart wrenched with concern when she covered her face and burst into tears.

"Oh, no, are you okay?" Now it was his turn to take her in his arms to make amends. He rubbed her back, trying to get her to stop crying. Wait. What was he doing? He released her. "I'm so sorry."

What was he apologizing for? She'd been the one who grabbed him first, but still he felt terrible. She didn't know who she had, but he did. He'd kissed her back, *stupidly!* He was such a jerk.

Then he noticed that she wasn't crying. She was laughing.

"I'm so, so sorry!" she said. "I... oh no!" She grabbed at her phone. He saw that she'd set it on the hay behind them.

What?

She quickly messed with it, turning the screen black as she slipped it into the pocket of her jean shorts. "I really thought you were West," she said. "And we kind of have this little thing that we do."

Oh, Cole definitely didn't want to hear this.

He held his hands up. "It didn't happen," he heard himself saying. "Just like I didn't fall on you on the stairs, *this* especially did not happen."

She licked her lips. His eyes drew to that silky softness. Just seconds ago, they were... no, no, it didn't happen! Another horrified thought hit him. What if they actually became related after this? He'd

have to take this to the grave that he'd kissed his sister-in-law... and worse? That he'd liked it.

He ran his palms down his face. Not even torturers would get that admission out of him. West had already accused Hudson of going after Liv back in the day. Of course, it wasn't true, but it was the one thing that made West feel justified about breaking up his little family.

West did not forgive.

"No, you're right." Eva's hands went to his again. He scrambled backwards, almost falling from the loft. She grasped tighter to him. "Don't fall!" she cried out. "I promise I meant nothing by it. You have nothing to worry about from me. I honestly thought you were West."

What did she see in that coldhearted snake? He couldn't figure out what was driving her. Or even who she was after that kiss... everything that he'd assumed about her felt wrong now.

And none of that mattered. He needed to fix this.

"It's fine!" Even as he said it, he knew it wasn't. He needed to get the smell of Eva off of him. He'd never look at gardenias the same again.

"We're ready for school to start," Charlie called out from below. "The animals are waiting!"

He flinched. Not the baby animals again! A month ago, he'd told Porter to take Cadence there for the perfect date, and now he'd fallen under that same spell, and he hadn't even meant to. All that cuteness was what had started this trouble in the first place, because the fact was... he would've dismissed that kiss as just another kiss if he hadn't seen Eva lying back against the hay, looking devastatingly innocent as she rubbed her nose against the soft downy feathers of baby chicks.

Ugh, they were definitely steering clear of that place.

Surely the "grownups" were done fighting by now? They should go back to the house. He headed back down the ladder, ignoring Eva's concerned looks.

"Why don't you take Eva to say 'hi' to Bartleby," he suggested to Charlie and Pip as she hurriedly made her way down after him.

They seized her hands like tiny henchmen, and she twisted around, looking gorgeous in her embarrassment. "Sorry," she whispered again.

She disappeared around the corner, and his heart still wouldn't stop reminding him that he was in way over his head. Dang, he was in trouble. He pulled off his ballcap and leaned against a stall to catch his breath.

The very next instant, he saw West storm through the back door of the barn. He straightened. His brother came at him like he knew. But he couldn't!

Cole steeled himself anyway.

"Did I just see what I thought I saw on TalkieTalk?" West hissed.

Cole was dumbfounded. "You saw... what?"

"I'm not an idiot, Cole. That little video of you and Eva is going viral as we speak." He held up his phone.

"What? How?"

"It's this little thing called social media." A fuzzy video played on West's phone. Cole could barely make anything out of it. "I know you're a caveman, but *this* is what is called a livestream."

"I know what a livestream is," Cole snapped back.

"Do you? Well, Eva can do them in her sleep. She probably thought that she was so generous sharing her *love life* with her closest two hundred million friends!"

Great! He'd underestimated Eva's addiction to her phone. The thought that she was some TalkieTalk influencer desperate to give her life meaning by feeding the rabid followers stalking her every move slightly diminished that strange spell that she'd cast over him earlier, at least for a

second, then his emotions flooded over him again when he remembered the feel of holding her close. Cole needed to dunk his head in the horse trough. He was *so* not in his right mind.

Cole held his hands up in his defense. “That was not my fault.”

“Big strong man like you and it isn’t your fault?” West snarled. “You couldn’t hold her back, *baby* brother?”

There was no getting out of this. Cole would be the next brother to feel West’s wrath. He probably deserved it, at least way more than Hudson ever did.

“She said she was waiting for *me*,” West snarled. He consulted the video on his phone. “She told all of her *two hundred million viewers* so far that she was waiting for me.”

“I’m sorry. I...”

“You realize it doesn’t matter if she kissed you,” West said. “It’s me that Trout’s going to go after. Do you know what he’s going to do?”

This didn’t sound like jealousy in the least bit. It almost sounded like... West didn’t really care about her at all! He only cared about getting into trouble with his boss.

“What are you doing, man?” Cole let his temper take over. He might be in the wrong, but West was involved in some weird game if he was playing with Eva’s emotions while walking a tightrope with her father; almost like he was trying to transport a live bomb by bringing her home. “You threw all your responsibilities on me—your kids, your dog, *and* your—your...” Fake girlfriend? Cole didn’t know anymore, but none of this would’ve happened if West had just cared enough to keep an eye on all the dynamite that he was juggling. “What did you think would happen?”

“*Not* this! I couldn’t trust you for an hour?”

“I messed up, okay?” Cole said. “I’m just as stupid as you think that I am, but you’re using everybody. You treat your family worse than your staff—we’re not even people to you, are we? And what game are you playing with Eva? Do you even see yourself?”

West’s phone vibrated with a call. His brother’s eyes narrowed on Cole before he pointed a warning finger at him. “Don’t say anything.” He picked up the call. “Trout!” His voice immediately transformed to the smooth businessman. “What can I do for you?”

The complaints on the other end were muffled, but it was clear that Trout was angry.

West swallowed. “You saw that, huh? I didn’t take you for a TalkieTalk follower. Oh, Miriam showed you, huh, interesting.”

Was that Cole’s imagination or was West sweating?

His brother pulled at his tie. “Yes, you got me. I... love her.” He’d practically choked that out. Cole’s mouth dropped, even as West’s eyes shifted to him with a warning glare. “Well, I’m glad you feel that way. Me too. Yeah, yeah, just waiting on her to—to... yeah. You know how she is, wants everything perfect.”

He waited while the angry voice chewed him out again.

“It will be,” West agreed. “We want the same thing—I want your little girl to be happy more than anything.”

West hung up the phone, staring at it wordlessly.

“Did he sack you?” Cole asked quietly.

“Shut up,” West muttered. He slid his phone into his pocket and turned. “Eva?” he called. “Eva?”

It was like he was calling a dog. “What are you doing?” Cole asked under his breath.

West sighed, his eyes shifting to his. He shook his head slowly. “Who would’ve thought that *you’d* get me leg shackled to a... beautiful and rich heiress?” He snickered, though there was a mean

edge to it. He was a cornered tiger.

Cole's fingers clenched, feeling strangely protective of that spoiled beauty. Had West not heard a word that he'd said? "You don't have to do this. She has feelings, West."

Dang, she was overflowing with them. He'd never seen anyone more animated.

West sneered at him. "What? Are you volunteering to take her on instead? Well, are you?"

He'd just met her! Cole pressed his lips shut, trying to figure out West's angle. He always made the most of a bad situation. Sometimes he *caused* them to happen. Still, this wasn't one of those Jane Austen flicks that Momma forced them to watch, where the man had to marry the girl because they were caught in a compromising position.

"Do you know what Trout would do to you if you dated his daughter?" West asked. He pinned him with nearly the same stern look that his young sons had given Cole when playing teacher. "You'd never be able to handle it."

Cole wasn't fooled. West was only out for himself.

"Believe me," West said. "You want nothing to do with being a part of that family."

"Why do you have to?" Cole asked through tight lips.

"Relax... marrying her won't be the worst thing that's happened to me." West's scowl immediately switched to a smile when he saw Eva.

She walked in with Pip and Charlie tugging at her hands. She cast Cole an apologetic look. "Funniest thing," she said. "I-I thought that Cole was *you* earlier..." She started her apology, which made sense because there was no burying this, since it was on TalkieTalk.

West waved that offense aside with his hand. "Don't worry about that. You were trying to surprise me... which is funny because I was getting ready to surprise you."

"You were?"

"Yes..." West glanced over at his kids. "Hey, Charlie, Pip. Mompa has raw pie dough on the counter. If you hurry, you can sneak some before Hudson catches you."

The boys let out cries of glee and raced each other out of the barn.

Not missing a beat, West got down on one knee. "Eva, make me the happiest of men."

She covered her face, though one jeweled catlike eye peeked through her fingers. "But, West... what? What prompted this?"

Cole felt her same unease, but a million times over.

West stood, his hands sliding over her arms like he couldn't get enough of her. The guy should've been an actor in another life. "You are... haunting. I can't get you out of my head."

Cole didn't like where this was heading. "West..."

His brother glowered at him over her shoulder. "Why don't you give us some time alone, Cole, while I convince this beautiful lady to be my wife?"

"You really mean it? Marry you?" Eva hopped up and down and squealed out for joy. Her arms clamped around him. "West... I... I can't imagine anything so wonderful. I mean, yes! I will!"

Cole's stomach took a nosedive. For some reason, this felt like his fault. Maybe because it was! But she was so happy! Who was he to get in the way of that? He watched them, torn, even as Eva kissed his brother. West expertly took over, leisurely exploring those full lips that eagerly met his every calculated move.

Cole knew exactly what those lips felt like. Somehow, what they'd experienced together only minutes before felt more meaningful. He stepped back the second those memories threatened to take over. No, she'd only thought that he was West. They had nothing together.

Wash her out of your mind!

She twisted around and ran over to Cole. “You’re going to be my brother! I am so, so sorry about the hayloft.” She giggled out her embarrassment. “I promise to keep my hands off you from now on.”

He couldn’t help the grim chuckle that tore through his lips, but something else, darker and more resentful stirred in his heart. That couldn’t possibly be jealousy, was it? He stuffed it down. Could that be the real reason that he objected so much to what was going on here—not that West was just using her like he did everyone else, and she was so vulnerable and... irresistible?

He groaned inwardly. Yeah, this was just stupid jealousy. He wished he’d never seen her golden heart. She could make the sun rise and set with a smile and that teasing sparkle in her vibrant eyes.

Really? Really? Wow. I’m thinking this about Trout’s daughter? I really am an idiot.

“Ooh.” She clasped her hands together. “Do you think we could tell your momma right away?”

West froze.

She turned to Cole. “What do you think?”

He was the last person that she should ask. The words on his tongue hovered between a congratulations and a warning, but it really didn’t matter what he said, did it? There would be no talking sense into either her or West. Eva really *was* one of those girls—the kind who made every guy fall all over her, but only wanted the one whose heart was the farthest away.

She could possibly be the best or worst thing that ever happened to his brother.

And he wanted nothing to do with it. He knew it the instant he saw her dimples.

This was trouble.

He cleared his throat. “Sure,” he said. “Tell Momma. Tell everyone. The whole family will be thrilled to know what West is up to.”

She laughed. “Hey, I know you hate this, but that offer is still on the table. I really *do* know the perfect girl for you. I won’t rest until you’re as happy as I am. You know I won’t.”

He grimaced, not sure how long her happiness would last. “No, I...” His gaze went to West, who watched him steadily. “There’s a girl in town.” Her eyes brightened in anticipation, like he was going to spill his guts to her. “I’ll let you know how it goes, but do me a favor, will you, Eva?”

“Anything.”

“If West gets out of line, let me know. I’ll rearrange his face for you.”

She laughed like she thought he was joking. “I happen to like his face the way it is, but I’ll let you know if you need to break any thumbs.” She winked.

West’s arm went around her, giving him a look to get lost.

Cole wasn’t sure how long he could remain there and stay civil, so he muttered his excuses and left. The usual congratulations that he gave his brothers when they found love died a miserable death in his dry throat, to go unuttered like every lie that he couldn’t bring himself to say.

West was a worm.

Chapter Seven

Three months later—

“Thanksgiving?” Eva asked West. “Who hates Thanksgiving?”

“I do. I don’t like turkey and I don’t like all the weird casseroles and side dishes, and then all the time that goes into making everything for one meal that leaves you bloated and tired, then the dishes that everyone makes Momma do.”

Eva shoved her hands into the deep pockets of her flannel jacket—she was going for the rustic look now that she’d arrived in Harvest Ranch. Everything was about the “outfit,” and a trip to the country was no exception. “Yeah, but... we can help your momma out with the dishes.”

He grumbled out a laugh. “Just you try to take that away from her. And don’t get me started on the fights at the table over politics and everyone’s past grievances. Turkey just brings that out in everybody, I think. Oh, and I hate football.”

Eva burst out laughing. She was going to try to get West to like the holidays if it killed her. He didn’t want to celebrate his birthday—“*What’s so good about getting a year closer to death?*” He refused to even consider dressing up as Han and Leia for Halloween.

She scooped up Lizardman, who poked around her knees, and hugged the sweet little labradoodle close. Eva kissed the pup’s fluffy head before lifting her eyes to find West in that rainstorm that he lived in. “How about we make up some spicy wings for Thanksgiving instead?” Those were his favorite.

He made a face.

Someone was in a mood. She’d been bursting with excitement at the thought of feasting on all of Lily’s best recipes during the holiday, and Eva couldn’t even get West to crack a smile.

The Slades’ family home in Harvest Ranch was silent when they’d walked in after their short trip over from Nashville. Lily wasn’t back from shopping yet. Hudson was spending Thanksgiving with his in-laws. Nash and Porter were both celebrating their belated honeymoons in the Caribbean with their amazing wives. And Cole? Poor guy must be out taking care of cattle with the other ranch hands.

West looked relieved to be alone. She stifled her disappointment and set down the wriggling Lizardman. The puppy sniffed the living room like the little investigator that he was while Eva’s gaze slid over the pictures of the family set on the wall.

This would be *her* family, too. Her children’s history. She sighed out in happiness. Like every “only child,” she’d craved having a tightknit clan like this. Studying every framed memory, her attention caught on a picture of Cole riding a bull in a rodeo.

Hilarious.

Cowboys had always intrigued her. In fact, she’d always dreamed of roping one of her own. And though she hadn’t quite imagined the magnitude of being tied to a family like West’s, she was intrigued by everything that they did. Her eyes traveled over Cole’s strong shoulders, and she smiled in response to that genuinely happy grin he gave the camera when he did what he loved best.

She still hadn't followed up on the details of Cole's love life. After she'd pressed her soon-to-be brother-in-law over the phone a few months back about setting him up with her good friend, Ashley, he'd informed her that he had his eye on a little redhead in Charleston.

She'd squealed with delight!

Ever since then, Eva had pestered him to bring this girl home for the holidays. If he didn't for Thanksgiving, then he definitely should bring her to meet them at Christmas.

Eva hoped that she'd be married to West by then. She glanced over at West, who was checking messages on his phone, his shoulders stiff.

West and Cole were very alike in some ways, but in others, absolutely different. She could see that now. Cole wasn't broken like West.

Oh whoa, she didn't mean to compare them like that.

And still, West's tragic life history never left her mind. She'd become determined to figure out what had hurt him to make him so standoffish. West had done things that he regretted—who wouldn't regret the drinking, the drugs, and the fights, perhaps, even the messy way that he'd ended his first marriage. And she wondered, despite his jaded indifference to his past, if he hadn't quite forgiven himself.

She couldn't let him go on like this.

West was being uncooperative about setting up a wedding date, and she knew that his past was the reason for it. Poor guy was also stressed about work, and to plan a wedding on top of that?

But there was nothing to worry about. She'd take care of everything! Long gone were the days of planning elaborate weddings on bridges or mountain tops. She'd keep things simple.

Eva came up behind West. For once, he was out of his suit, and he almost looked like he was ready to relax at his home in black jeans and a short sleeve, black, button-up shirt.

Well, almost. He was still a little too formal to make himself at home.

She wrapped her arms around his strong middle, feeling his stomach flex under her touch. Her sandals slid under her as she pushed up onto her tiptoes, running her lips over his rough cheek. "This place will be so romantic in the winter," she whispered into his ear. "Just think about it. Fairy lights twisted through the rafters in the barn, pictures of us placed all over bales of hay, flowers from your momma's greenhouse decorating the top of our wedding cake, and all of our friends and family there to wish us a happy life together."

West let out a groan and circling around, he kissed her. His touch on her was so familiar now that she felt like they already belonged to each other. She was crazy about this man. "Or imagine this?" he asked. His smoldering look on her made her breathless. "Barefoot on the beach in the summer, tropical flowers in your sun-kissed hair, exchanging our vows at sunset."

Yes, that also sounded wonderful... if it was tomorrow, but West always had her imagine the farthest date imaginable. Her man was scared of marriage, plain and simple.

"Or..." she said with a determined smile. "We surprise everyone and just tie the knot at the justice of the peace before we come home for Christmas. Just think about it..." She peered at him from under her lashes. "Your mom would finally let us share a room as a married couple."

He laughed. "This is all about a room? There are plenty of places for you to stay here."

It wasn't about a room! And he knew it. "Oh, West, I want you all to myself. I hate sharing you with my daddy, and your work, and your responsibilities. We struggle so hard to find any time together anymore. That would *all* be fixed if we made this official. I want you to come home to me every night. I need you."

West's strong fingers traveled to her hair and he kissed her again. "I'm all yours."

Sometimes it feels like he kisses me to shut me up.

She pulled away and tilted her head at him. “Then prove it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. His eyes were bright with a torrent of regret. “Work keeps us away from each other, but we’re here now. Let’s just appreciate our time together while we have it, and then... we can start talking about the future.”

“Yes, but...” He always said a version of this excuse.

“You can’t blame me for wanting to leave behind all that stress from Nashville,” he said. “I just want to enjoy the feel of my fiancée, and having her close, and kissing her whenever I feel like it.”

He followed that with a kiss against her ear.

Well, that was sweet. She smiled and snuggled into his arms. He sure knew how to talk pretty when he put his mind to it. She still wasn’t letting him off the hook, but for now, she could see the logic of “being in the moment.”

That happened to be her goal for the rest of the year—she’d told him often enough!

And she *was* grateful to be with him. She loved this man, his strength, his unusual background, his quirks and blemishes and all—and goodness! She was already in love with West’s children. He was just so cute with them.

Her rugged cowboy was everything that she wanted; there were only a few times when he felt too distant, but coming home to Harvest Ranch would fix everything. She’d find out everything that was bothering him.

“Ah West, I’m really so excited for this trip...” Eva noticed the yellowing bruise under his eye as he hugged her close, and her heart sank at the familiar sight. She lightly brushed his cheek with her knuckle. “What’s this?”

He flinched away with a grimace. “That old thing? It’s hardly worth talking about.”

Nothing was with West lately. He always briskly marched past her with some new scrape or a mysterious swelling hand. It was like he’d taken up a boxing class that she didn’t know about, except... she knew him better than that.

She gnawed on her lower lip, her worries flooding her. Her daddy played hardball with his competitors in the oil business, and worse he was going into politics, but this was something that she wasn’t familiar with at all. Had West somehow gotten involved with a tougher crowd? She’d already talked to her daddy about what she’d noticed, and he’d poo-pooed her concerns as nothing to cry over.

“He’s a big boy, honey. Don’t you worry. I’ll take good care of him. You leave it to me.”

Eva began to think that maybe she shouldn’t. West already had enough personal demons that came between them. He didn’t need more. “Honey,” she breathed. “You know you can come to me if... uh... something’s wrong,” she told him.

“Oh yeah?” he seemed darkly amused, which irritated her. West had come to her before when he’d needed help with his twin brothers. Why couldn’t he do the same thing for himself? “How about you kiss it all better?” he asked with a glint of some emotion that she couldn’t quite identify in those vivid blue eyes of his. “You have the magic touch.”

That was more like it, and yet... she knew he was only distracting her.

Should she let him? Eva took his hand and brushed her lips over the knuckles, noticing that they were also raw.

“Dear hearts!” West’s momma hurried down the stairs, her beautiful rosebud lips pressed together in pain as she came to greet them in her tired, but cheery way. “Oh, you brought her! You brought Eva. Finally!”

West immediately tossed off that grim look that had kept his face hostage all day. “Well, there you are!” he cried out in a voice that he reserved for those he especially cherished. He used it on Eva very rarely. He glanced over at Eva. “You two have been begging to see each other again. I’m glad I could finally arrange it, if only to get the *both of you* off my back.”

Really? Despite the cutting remark, Eva brightened at the thought that West’s momma had asked after her, too. How kind!

Eva was pretty sure that the rest of West’s family wouldn’t care that much if she visited. Their congratulations when West announced that he’d popped the question had been lukewarm at best—Nash’s guarded response had especially surprised her, since they were both such good friends, but... she’d wriggle her way into this family’s heart if it killed her.

Momma led them both into the living room, calling out for Cole to help with their baggage. “No, no,” Eva hurriedly swatted down that nonsense. She wasn’t about to inconvenience West’s youngest brother again. She’d already done enough to invite his wrath.

Even now her cheeks burned at that kiss that she’d made him suffer through. And worse? That kiss had easily outweighed the top ten best ones of her romantic existence—not a good thing to share with the brother of the man who happened to be the love of her life.

She tried to stuff down her guilt by directing a pleasant smile at his momma as she eased into the couch, all while West tried to find out about her latest heart treatments. Noticing that her flannel jacket was much longer than her shorts, she tugged at the ends to appear more daughter-in-law-like.

Why had she been so impulsive with Cole? And did anyone else besides the three of them know about it?

At first she’d thought that she could laugh off that kiss. Oh, how she’d tried.

So what if that kiss had been great. Too great, so great that she had to stuff it out of her mind so that she never replayed it through that disobedient noodle mushed inside her head again.

Thankfully that overhead lighting had been horrible in the hayloft. The world all thought that she’d surprised West in the barn... hopefully his family did too? Her little mistake had gone viral in a matter of hours, and it had more than doubled her followers.

Honestly, now she wished she’d never documented it. The attention that kiss had inspired wasn’t worth it. She’d thought juggling two hundred million followers was hard; try juggling four hundred. And with that fame came haters, proposals, kidnapping and death threats, and—ugh—stalkers!

Yes, definitely stalkers.

Her daddy was already too protective, and more so since he feared what Lacy Lynch would do after she’d helped West destroy his professional life. Already, her infamous oil tycoon father had threatened to cut off all sorts of his daughter’s freedoms by sending his security to be with her. She’d found ways to get around him so far, which was why she couldn’t tell him about even a quarter of the threats that she’d received online.

And forget telling West—he’d go straight to Daddy.

These trolls online were just typing out empty threats anyway, right? They weren’t as dangerous as Lynch.

Hopefully.

The latest threat that she’d gotten didn’t feel like it. It had started only a week ago. Somehow, her private number must’ve been leaked to this creep, but no matter how many times that she’d blocked him, he always found a new number to text her with. She’d have to get a new phone soon.

Such a bother.

That was all this was, right? A bother?

Lily had left them in the living room to pull out snacks from the fridge for her guests. West stood and quickly cut her off at the pass to do it himself. The two played the “I’ll do it” game, while Eva glanced down at the latest message that this horrible creeper had sent to her phone: “Where are you going for Thanksgiving? How about I find you? We could have some fun.”

She shivered at how disturbing that sounded and glanced over at West. Maybe she was a hypocrite for not going to him when she begged for him to confide in her, but if he *knew* about this and didn’t go to her daddy? Well, he’d be blamed if anything happened.

West already had too much to deal with.

Eva stuffed her phone into her purse. She’d never gone so long without running through her apps or posting something on TalkieTalk, but now it felt more like keeping a personal spy in her pocket rather than possessing the gateway to a glimmering and shiny world of freedom and excitement at her fingertips. The consequences of fame felt heavy, oppressive... boring.

Completely and utterly boring. Yuck.

Everyone was being creepy in their own way. She’d never had so many people try to tell her what to do than the ones online did—from viewers telling her not to “frolic” so much, to others who thought that they could dictate to her how to do her hair because they were offended somehow.

It got to the point that she couldn’t respond, vote, or think without a line being crossed. It felt worse than trying to stay on top in high school. The bullies were taking over and the fun of just being herself was gone.

And forget about doing a TalkieTalk in Harvest Ranch to wish everyone a Happy Thanksgiving! There was no way that she’d give away her location, so that any more of these creepers could find her.

So yeah, she had every intention of enjoying the anonymity and freedom that a small town brought. Besides, it had been too long since she could just enjoy the moment and not worry what the world thought of her... food, her daddy, her makeup... her clothes.

Awful.

Eva had unwittingly built a prison for herself, and if she could let go of her need to hear the latest gossip or to share her spontaneous thoughts or adventures to an insta-audience, then she could walk away from it.

The trick lay in creating relationships in real time, and to not see the world as a digital landscape where millions of fascinating faces in her imagination could be reached, but to see what was physically around her and to concentrate on the details.

She turned to West as he helped his momma with the heavy pitcher of lemonade.

Funny, that grounding herself in what was happening in front of her used to be the definition of boring. Now, it was the only thing keeping her sane.

Lily finally allowed her son to bring over most of the snacks to the end table, though she’d insisted on carrying the crackers.

Letting out a content sigh, Eva’s future mother-in-law settled into the white couch across from her. Lily was both smiling and out of breath from her travails in the kitchen. She still hadn’t given Eva leave to call her “momma,” and Lily seemed too formal to use at this point, so Eva just touched her hand. “I’m so thrilled to finally get to know the family better.”

West’s momma tensed up. Her back straightened. It could be pain or she just didn’t like the thought of Eva becoming a part of the family. Taking a deep breath, Eva reminded herself that Lily had insisted that she come as much as Eva had. Years of getting yelled at for not minding her own business crossed her mind, and so she stopped herself from asking Lily how she was doing, and offered her

help instead. “I’m not amazing at putting together a turkey or—or at cooking...” She avoided West’s eyes, in case he thought that was bad, “but I’m more than happy to do whatever you ask me to do in the kitchen.”

“No, no,” Lily argued. “I want you to enjoy yourself.”

“I will! I love helping. I can do dishes. I’m great at them.”

“You’re my guest!” Lily feebly argued.

But Cadence and Emily *and* Mimi had helped with the dinners the last time that they were all together. Before she could push her case, West’s hand squeezed Eva’s arm. Glancing over at him, she saw the quick shake of his head.

Oh! Maybe she was exhausting Lily with her offers of help. Entertaining while trying to prepare a Thanksgiving dinner might be draining in her condition.

“Or...” Eva said carefully, “I’m great with kids, of course. I could hang out with them.”

“You are so good with Charlie and Pip,” Lily said, beaming at her with that sweet, though fragile smile. “They absolutely adore you. I couldn’t get them to stop talking about you...” Eva brightened, imagining all the adventures that she could take them on. “They will be with their mother for most of the holiday,” Lily admitted, “but I’m sure you’ll see them... at some point.”

So... Eva was supposed to do *nothing*?

Hmm.

This was what came from presenting herself to the world as a flighty socialite. Sometimes people couldn’t fathom that she might want to be something more.

“I’m sure West can show you around while you’re here,” Lily said. “He can take you horseback riding, show you the land. I know last time you had to leave early after your surprise engagement, so, maybe now you can take some time to get to know the place.”

“Ah,” West said, not verbally agreeing to that in the least. The disinterest in his eyes deadened his expression. He wasn’t about to explain to his mother that he was multitasking them all with his work.

“You should take Eva to the greenhouse,” his momma said. “Have you shown Eva my ‘Beloved’ yet?”

Ah yes, Lily’s Beloved. The prized dark red perennial reminded Eva of the Beauty and the Beast rose. Eva had been blown away by it! Still, she couldn’t resist teasing West. “Your beloved?” she asked. “Who are you talking about? West?”

West gave her cheek an obligatory kiss for the compliment under Lily’s warm chuckles. “No, the Beloved is Momma’s favorite rose,” he said. “Don’t you remember me showing that to you when you were here last time?”

Yes, of course. She’d pretend that she couldn’t remember it to get another tour, but West would probably refuse he was so busy. He’d already warned Eva that he’d be swamped with business calls while they were here, and still she’d begged to come to the Slade Ranch with him.

So ironic!

Eva shifted, biting down a smirk at her quandary. She couldn’t even open her phone to pass the time. It was far too dangerous. She didn’t trust herself not to do something stupid. Perhaps the animals would need her attention? Of course, those baby animals wouldn’t be babies anymore.

The door opened behind them, and she noticed Cole walk inside. He wrestled with his dusty boots to get them off. He wore those same worn jeans from last time. West’s adorable... kid brother didn’t care about style in the least.

But if she had the dressing of him, well... that little redhead wouldn’t be able to keep away from

him.

Her eyes ran over his strong back and his biceps bulging against the tight sleeves of his olive green tee as he worked on those boots.

Maybe the redhead wasn't the one at fault, come to think of it. Any woman with eyes wouldn't let him go. She let out a breath. Cole was likely the one afraid of commitment—she'd bet her lucrative shares from Daddy's business on it.

No matter how much Cole professed that he wasn't like West, he was a mirror of him.

Ha! What a laugh!

Lizardman shot towards Cole, and she let out a startled gasp. The puppy barked loudly at him, trying to put up a strong front to defend his new home of the hour.

Cole stopped Lizardman's complaints in an instant. His big arms shot around the pooch and he brought him to his chest while he made a fuss over the little guy. "Hey, tough stuff," he said. Lizardman wagged his waterfall tail. "You got left behind, huh?" Turning, Cole stiffened when he saw Eva.

She straightened, trying to appear as innocent and nonthreatening as the puppy. "Cole!" she called out with a wave.

"Dear," Lily told her youngest. "Come say hi. West and Eva just got here."

"I see that." Cole let the puppy go. Lizardman retreated to Eva, looking a little shame faced at allowing the newcomer to win him over so fast. Cole got his last boot off and walked barefoot over the rustic red brick flooring making up the kitchen and part of the dining room. He stopped just before he reached the white carpet. "Sorry for not coming too close. I'm pretty filthy."

West didn't even crack a smile in greeting.

Eva tried to make up for it, even if she was going a little Pollyanna with her friendly moves. "Cole! It's so good to see you again. You need to tell us all what you've been up to!"

He gawked at her.

Goodness, she'd be Mary Poppins, Snow White, whatever it took to get his family to like her. They wouldn't even know what hit them. She took a deep breath and tried again. "So?" she asked. "You bringing that little redhead home or am I only going to meet her if I go with you country dancing?"

Wait. No. That didn't come out right. She reached over and patted West's knee. "How about it? We've never gone before."

West made another noncommittal grunt.

Cole went into the kitchen, pulling food out of the fridge, a little too roughly in her opinion. "West hasn't taken you dancing, yet?" he asked.

"No." And actually, it would be super fun if they did. She knew better than to ask West again though. She didn't want him to reject her pleas in front of his momma.

Cole met her eyes over the jar that he'd taken from the fridge. "You're missing out."

She gulped.

There was something about the way that he wrinkled his forehead at her that made her feel like they were always talking about something other than what they were really talking about... and she kinda knew what he was saying if she really thought about it.

Cole had told her that he didn't get along with West, and she was beginning to suspect the reasons for it. He certainly hadn't been very congratulatory when West had asked her to marry him. He'd even threatened to rearrange his older brother's face if he didn't treat Eva right.

She'd hoped he'd been joking.

Smiling to ease her clenching stomach, she tapped her thumbs together. “How are those baby chicks?”

Chapter Eight

Why did Cole feel cursed when Eva was around? He couldn't quite control what he was going to say or do next.

He was annoyed at them both for jumping into a relationship that spelled trouble, and he'd sworn that he wouldn't get involved.

So what if Cole couldn't stop watching her to see if she was okay?

So what if he couldn't stop glaring at West?

Someone had to be the adult here.

He hadn't been looking forward to Thanksgiving break. At all. West was... well, West. And Eva? She did something to his pulse, his brain, his nerves—it was like she was tying it all into a knot with her helpful suggestions that were *so* not helpful.

The truth was that he hadn't been able to look at that cute little redhead at Mo's since Eva had kissed him. And there was no way that he was telling her that.

He cleared his throat. "Those little chicks aren't babies anymore. We made them a henhouse. Ballerina sleeps in there at night and barks away all intruders."

Her mouth formed an "O" and she seemed to melt into the couch at the thought. "Aww. I want to see that." Seeming to remember herself, she patted West's knee again. "Don't you?"

West shook his head. "I've seen enough livestock to last me a lifetime. You're not getting me out on the range again. I'm sure Cole can take you."

After what had happened last time? Was West crazy? Cole leveled a glare at him. Did the guy honestly care nothing about losing Eva, or was he just *that* secure that neither Cole nor Eva would consciously turn on him.

Maybe both. As much as West rubbed his brother the wrong way, Cole had standards. He'd never steal anyone's fiancée, especially his brother's.

"I'm busy," Cole said.

His *momma* quickly tried to cover up his gaffe. "Cole's working on a pumpkin patch over by the old barn. It's the cutest thing. We're putting on a Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice Festival before Thanksgiving. The Bridges went all out for their scare-fest this year at the orchard, and so we thought it would be perfect to have something just for the younger kids this time."

His *momma* thought it would be perfect.

Then Cole had been roped into it.

But now he could see the logic of working on the harvest pumpkin patch if it kept him away from the drama at home.

He brought the jug of milk to his lips. West wasn't getting away with throwing Eva at Cole while he ignored her for the whole trip. No way was he enabling that entitled user or... torturing himself with how West barely looked at Eva, and how she kept wriggling closer to him like she was begging for his attention.

"Honey! Do not drink that," his *momma* called out.

Cole stopped himself from chugging the milk and pulled out a glass instead, rolling his eyes. Bad habits were hard to break. He poured the milk into the glass and vaguely noticed that chunks plopped

into the bottom in sick globs like it was... the oil from the bacon that morning.

“What are you doing?” Momma asked.

Making an idiot of myself.

He pushed the glass away and found the apple juice. Checking to make sure that it wasn't truly vinegar, he took a long drink to ease the desert that had become of his throat while he'd been out on the ranch. He probably should've hosed off in the barn, but he thought he could hurry and eat before West got here with Eva. He'd planned to be long gone before they got here.

Apparently they'd come early.

Eva was standing to make her way to him. He noticed that West was still inquiring after Momma's health, which was never a short process. Cole took another fortifying drink. His eyes went to Eva's funny little rustic outfit. Her flannel jacket was way too big for her and it hung over her shorts like he'd given his jacket to Pip.

She'd never survive the marshlands in those, and suddenly, despite all his arguments to the contrary, he wanted to take her out there, just to see her try.

“Is that your country outfit?” he teased her.

“Yeah.” A bright smile took over her face. “You like it?”

With difficulty, Cole swallowed any smart comments. Today happened to be a warm day, since Harvest Ranch was on the verge of deciding whether it was autumn or winter yet, but as soon as the weather made up its mind, she'd definitely freeze. “I hope you brought something for the cold.”

She leaned against the counter, pressing her palm into her chin. “Oh, I've got West for that.”

If she could *ever* catch him.

West seemed to be making more plans with Momma for her rehab.

Cole nodded. At least Eva was a fighter. She might win a few moments with his brother.

“Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice, huh?” Eva's eyes were round with intrigue. “Are you going to bring a date to that little pumpkin festival? I still want to meet this girl of yours.”

Ugh. She wasn't dropping him finding his “Other Half” yet. The girl was obsessed with romance. “We... uh... didn't work out.”

“What?” She slapped the counter, looking truly heartbroken about his nonexistent breakup. “If I'd have known that, I would've brought a friend.”

Strangely, that might've been a good idea—not for Cole, but for herself. Glancing over at West, Cole could see that the man intended to completely ignore his gorgeous fiancée. Their father had come down the stairs to join them. Jase settled near Momma's side on the sofa, hovering protectively over her like a hawk watching the nest.

“How about we enjoy a holiday for once... without making it about your momma being sick,” their old man said.

West straightened with indignation. “I'm not going to ignore what's staring us in the face. It's been another three months and nothing. This is getting dangerous now. I just talked to a friend who says that he has another lead we can follow up on.”

“Honey, how about we follow up on this *after* the holidays,” Momma said.

“We wait”—West scooted closer to her—“and we might not be able to celebrate another one with you.”

“Back off!”

Eva jumped at their father's rough command. Obviously, she wasn't used to witnessing a full-scale argument in the Slade household. Things got heated, especially when it had to do with Momma's illness. Cole recognized his father's desperate look. Their old man was on edge.

Cole understood. He'd been worried about this surgery from the beginning. The doctors had always said that she'd never survive a heart transplant... until one day West pulled a few strings and the board decided that she could.

That wasn't usually how these things were supposed to work.

"Just hear me out," West said.

"I don't want to hear another word," their dad said.

"What are we going to do this Thanksgiving anyway?" West asked. "Lay around, watch TV, eat too much, drink too much...?"

"Cole!" Momma sang over to her youngest. She must've sensed the upcoming storm, and somehow her tone turned sweeter, gentler, as their dad's turned angrier and blunter than a sledgehammer. "Why don't you take Eva to the pumpkin patch, dear heart?"

"Now?" Cole flushed. There wasn't much that he wouldn't do coming from his momma, and yet... his eyes went to Eva's sandals then traveled up those long legs to those ridiculous shorts. "I can't..."

"You think I drink too much?" their pops roared at West.

The frayed tempers were enough to change Cole's mind. He snatched Eva's hand. "We can use Momma's boots in the mud room."

She quickly complied and shuffled on the boots through the argument. The mud boots reached her knees. Was everything too big on her? He glanced over at her as he got his own boots on, trying not to let out a grim laugh. This girl was going to be the end of him.

He ripped his keys to his truck off the key holder, praying for strength.

He'd take her away for an hour. He could fend off her matchmaking until then.

Chapter Nine

Rain splattered against the windshield as Cole drove Eva through the country roads leading to the pumpkin patch. The water, mud, and dust swirled over their pathway in a black mess that covered the truck in grime.

They'd escaped barely in time. Cole had tugged Eva out the door only moments before getting caught in the explosion that was West and his father. Those two were like a match to dynamite.

"Number one rule in our household," Cole said. Swinging around, his rain coat crackled with his movements as he gave her a conspiratorial grin. "Never get in the way of a Slade when they're fighting."

"I'll remember that." She studied his face, noting the similarities between Cole and West. He'd carelessly stuck a stocking cap on under the rain, and it pushed all that hair off of his expressive forehead, so that she saw he had a widow's peak.

Adorbs.

Would her kids inherit that? She cleared her throat, realizing that she should create a bond with this man. After all, he was going to be her brother. "So... things didn't work out with that redhead?" she asked.

He held up his hands. "Second rule. No more trying to set me up. Let's find other things to talk about besides my love life, you know, like normal people do."

"LOL," she cried out. "By all means, teach me how normal people talk."

His nose wrinkled and he burst out laughing. "Uh, for starters, they don't actually say LOL. if they're not texting."

She snorted and dissolved into giggles. "The school of Cole. Do you have a rule for everything?"

His lips curved and he turned to stare out the windshield. "Yeah... unfortunately."

At least he was honest about it. Probably why his brother West trusted him with her so much, *even* after they had kissed. At first she'd been insulted that West didn't care enough to be jealous, but soon she realized that it was because Cole was kind of a stickler.

His uptightness was kind of cute.

Of course, that hadn't explained why Cole had actually kissed her *back* that day... but then again, he'd been so convinced that there hadn't been anything going on between her and West... until there really was.

Even she had been surprised when West had asked her to marry him, almost like a fairy had waved a wand and granted her everything that she'd ever desired.

She'd been so shocked that she'd almost been torn on her decision, but that went away as quickly as she met West's provocative blue eyes. They were like sapphires. And she was a sucker for jewelry.

That's all there was to it.

Just like she was a sucker for these breathtaking autumn leaves on the Slade Ranch. Wow! They were like jewels too. Her gaze riveted to the view outside. The trees painted the velvety green pasture with vivid rubies, amber and gold. Slade land was a treasure trove of beauty and—and... hot

men.

She almost snickered, but stopped herself.

LOL.

But people didn't say that. This time she let out a laugh... out loud.

Cole looked over at her. "What?"

Quickly reviewing her thoughts, Eva decided they wouldn't be funny to present company. She quickly changed the subject. "So... uh, how did you get talked into doing the kiddy pumpkin event?"

He rolled his eyes. "The same way I get put in charge of everything... I'm the only one who says yes."

That made sense. She leaned back into her seat, enjoying the view of the rain-soaked world. The colors were brilliant against the darkening sky. The windshield wipers gave her about two seconds' worth of Harvest Ranch's beautiful (though soggy) outdoors before the storm covered it from her again. No wonder the meadows on the range stubbornly stayed so green.

When it rained here, it poured.

"Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice," she said. "Is the festival just for one day?"

"Yeah, the day before Thanksgiving and then we're free."

Cole might not be enthused about the project, but Eva felt invigorated at the idea. Maybe this was something that she could actually help with? She couldn't cook or bake worth a lick, West was busy, and the kids were gone. Lily's suggestion that she might be useful to Cole was actually pretty brilliant.

If there was one thing that Eva knew how to do, it was throw a party.

Cole turned off the country road and entered a gravel one that led to the biggest barn that she'd ever had the pleasure of coming across. The classic frame belonged on the set of one of those Amish Hallmark movies... with one exception. The rough lumber was painted gray. "That barn needs to be red," she decided.

"Okay, get on that," he said jokingly. "We've been looking for volunteers to paint it."

That would take weeks... maybe months. She cracked a smile. "No, actually, gray's good."

"Let me know when you change your mind. I can order some red paint."

She flashed him a sarcastic smile to match his tone. *Not happening.*

Puddles splashed up against the windows as Cole drove up to a larger-than-life barn door. Above that was an open hay loft door. Eva noticed pulleys hanging from a metal arm. She rubbed her flannel sleeve up against the foggy window to see the rustic building better. The barn might be a little warped. The years had tilted it to the side slightly, but of course, that only added to its charm. A patch of plump orange pumpkins lay scattered across the dark mud. The pumpkin patch surrounded the barn like the scene belonged to *Sleepy Hollow*.

Oh, this place was gorgeous!

Eva rolled down the window and snapped pictures, seeing that the rain and the drifting fog gave her photo an ethereal, otherworldly effect. Reality at the ranch was better than any filter.

"Are those pictures going to end up online in a few days?" Cole asked.

"Oh please." They'd end up *this instant* on Showoff-Pics if she wasn't keeping a low profile. He'd pegged her, but there was no way she was admitting her obsession. She eyed the circular gated area. "Cool race course."

"That's a horse corral," he said with a smirk, "so... not a race course."

"You *should* make it into a race course."

"That would be the smallest race course in the world," Cole said. He parked. His slicker

tightened against his muscular arm as he shoved the gears down and the clutch up. Everything Cole did reminded her of a rough and tumble cowboy. He even kept sunflower seeds on his dashboard.

He leaned back in his seat, staring out the window at the pumpkin patch. The rain landed against the windshield in an unsteady rhythm. "Well, now you've seen it," he said.

Not really. There was so much to explore!

They sat in silence for a mere second before he was shifting uncomfortably. "You ready to go?"

"Go?" she cried. "Not yet! I want to go inside that barn. It's so cool."

He seemed confused by the request. His eyes ran over her like she was at the spa, waiting for her nails to dry. "It's raining."

"What?" How fragile did he think that she was? "Do you think I'll melt because I'm the Wicked Witch of the West?"

His lips quirked up, almost reluctantly. "Huh. Yeah, clever."

She realized what she'd just said. Yeah, she *was* West's little wicked witch. Clever. Accidentally so. Her hand went to the door. "Let's do this."

He sighed as if the heaviness of the world weighed down his shoulders. "Fine." Launching from his seat, he ripped open the door and slammed it behind him. The next instant, he had hers open, standing over her to help her out.

Eva gaped at him. She actually hadn't expected him to get her door. The rain slid down his face to his strong neck. She noticed the droplets collecting against the thick lashes framing his almond-shaped eyes.

The next instant, she called back her wits.

The guy was going to be soaked if she didn't get out soon.

She pulled from the dryness of the truck's cab, but Cole's gallantry didn't stop at getting her door. He grasped her hand to make sure that she didn't slip in the mud.

Dang, the Slade momma had taught her boys well.

Eva would think that he was putting the moves on her, but she knew him a little better than that. Tearing her gaze from his, she rushed to get inside the dry barn.

He stalked ahead of her and inched open the loudly groaning wooden door. Looking back at her, he reached for her hand to tug her inside and out of the rain.

The barn was dark and musty. Immediately, Eva regretted her fashion choices as she snuggled into her flannel jacket for warmth and wished for longer pants. At least Lily's galoshes were nice and tall, but she was still cold.

Short of stealing Cole's stocking cap, there wasn't much that he could do to keep up her body temperature. She gingerly stepped over the warped floorboards, using her cell phone to light her way. Hearing a scuttling sound above her, she switched directions and spotlighted the high rafters.

Her heart was in her throat, but why?

A part of her hadn't really recovered from Lynch pointing that gun at her at the fairgrounds when she'd tried to stop him from taking off with Cadence. It was weird actually, because the movies never talked about something so underwhelming being so traumatic. Her mounting fear was just another thing that she hadn't confided to West. She didn't want him to blame himself for those nightmares that she kept having.

At the same time, she didn't want him to *not* care either... and so she kept her mouth shut.

It wasn't the first time.

Eva actually had a bigger filter than anyone would ever think of her, considering what she *did* let spill out.

A loud crash echoed on the far side of the barn. Her mind immediately went to her stalker, and she jumped again.

Cole's hand went to her back to soothe her. "Relax. Probably just a raccoon."

She nodded. "Yeah." Raccoons were cute, right? She hoped that he didn't care that she was leaning a little closer to him than before. "This is so creepy."

And she loved it... well, sort of. Fears of stalkers and Lacy Lynch were getting in the way of her natural inclination to glom onto anything remotely fun like True Crime or spooky barns. Anything with a mystery or an interesting history attached to it, she ate up, but not so much when... when she couldn't clear her mind of other things.

It was no way to live. She'd face her fears if it killed her.

Eva took a rallying breath. "You sure that you don't want to turn the pumpkin patch festival into a haunted house instead?"

Cole grinned. "Halloween's over, and believe it or not, we can make the barn less... uh... creepy. We've even had weddings in here."

"Really?" She stilled. Images of her wedding to West actually swallowed her earlier panic. "How did you manage it?"

"No idea. It wasn't *me* getting married."

His joking was enough to extinguish the rest of her fears. "I guessed *that*, silly, but how was the barn decorated?"

"Well." He led the way through the dark shadows. "We put in a lot more lighting than this, brought in some heating lamps, bales of hay. There were fairy lights everywhere."

Eva couldn't help it. She picked up her phone and started taking pictures. Forget planning out a one-day kiddie festival, this could be where she got married. The columns holding up the hayloft could be where they cut the cake. Cole pointed out an empty room in the back, and she snapped more pictures. That could be where the caterers set up.

And that shadowy crawlspace in the corner? They could cover that up.

She whipped around to smile at Cole. "I love it. Who did they hire to decorate the place for their wedding?"

"Themselves, but... are you thinking of getting married here? I don't think that you want to actually..."

"I do!" she said. "I do! We could always bring in a decorator from Nashville, and it wouldn't be like..."

"West's ex got married here," Cole brutally cut her off. She stiffened. "Liv and River... you know them. Anyway, so I'm pretty sure that West wouldn't want to follow in their footsteps. Besides, he and Liv used to sneak out here when they were in high school..."

She shook her head to stop him from saying more. "Yeah, it's better as a haunted house." Maybe the fact that West's ex got married in such a quaint barn was the reason for his reluctance to do the same thing, but why hadn't he told her? That would've saved her some unneeded drama.

She wandered to the crawlspace, seeing a trapdoor at the edge of it. Her spine turned all tingly. "What is that?"

"Oh, we used to keep goats down there. You picking up that weird decaying smell?"

"Yeah."

"That's where that comes from. No matter how much bleach we take to it, it's pretty sickening... especially down there."

Her eyes latched onto the solid oak boards. For some reason with Cole at her side, she felt

braver, and her curiosity was quickly overtaking that caution that she hated so much. "I want to see."

"Not if you want to face down another raccoon."

"I'm *not* afraid of raccoons."

"You aren't?" He turned from her, but not before she saw his grin.

Her heart lurched. He thought that she was a scaredy cat. She wasn't! Okay, maybe she *was* right now, but it was a temporary condition. And besides all that, he was big and strong, and it wasn't as if he hadn't been down there before, and she was super intrigued. What better way to overcome her fears?

"C'mon!" She tugged on his jacket. "Come down with me."

"No, no, you're playing with fire. Nash and Porter trapped Hudson down there once, uh... with Mimi. It was not cool."

"Well, I can't let Mimi have all the fun." She winked at Cole to show that she was joking and grabbed the handle, just to see if she could get it open. It wasn't budging, though she wasn't worried. If she worked on prying it open long enough, Cole would help her. "If Mimi can handle it, so can I."

Strangely, Cole wasn't even trying to lend his assistance.

With another yank, she wrenched the trapdoor open herself.

She gulped and turned to Cole. "Please?"

"After what I said? Why would you even want to...?"

"Porter and Nash aren't here now." Unless they'd dropped their honeymoons in the Caribbean just to play a gag on their youngest brother, they were safe. She brought her hands up in pleading. "It'll be fine."

Grumbling out his complaints, Cole dragged off his slicker and wedged it over the latch where she guessed that it had locked in Hudson and Mimi before. "That had better do it," he muttered.

She clapped in her sudden excitement and hugged him then scrambled back. "Oh, sorry." She wiped at her hair, hoping she only looked like she'd stumbled over him.

Luckily, he let her usual recklessness go. He bit his lip, teetering near the black hole where the ladder led down below. He glanced over at her, his jaw tightening. "You trust me enough to be alone with you in the dankest depths of the haunted barn?"

"Of course I do." What a silly question. They were almost sister and brother. "You're like the most trustworthy guy I've ever met."

His mouth twisted, like that was an insult. "*Ever* met?"

She nodded.

A slow smile took over his lips, and she realized that she'd probably challenged him into giving her the scare of her life.

Exploring down below was so worth it.

Chapter Ten

“It’s absolutely perfect!” Eva flashed the light from her phone over the feeding troughs. “It’s as creepy as I hoped it would be.”

Eva worried Cole sometimes... when he wasn’t busy hiding his amusement.

She was mesmerized by the goat cellar, and she edged past the sunken stalls. Tiny slanted windows let in slits of fading light from the rainstorm outside. Somehow it smelled mustier down here in this bad weather. Nothing could ever get rid of the stink of goats.

The barn was built on a hillside, so that one side of the cellar was underground, but the other end led to a sliding door that had been used to haul in their equipment. It had long since been boarded up, along with the bigger windows to keep out the critters.

After Hudson and Mimi had gotten stuck down here, they should’ve taken crowbars to the barred windows and ripped off all the boards from the escape exits.

But once again they were too low on hands to get anything done around here.

“That is incredible!” Eva pointed at the hay chute. It was an industrial tube wedged through the ceiling that turned into a slide at the bottom. In theory, the opening through the floors was meant for throwing down the hay and feed from above. “What’s that?” she asked.

“A disaster,” he muttered. The twins hadn’t measured the tube before installing it, so none of the hay bales actually fit through. By the time they’d bought a replacement piece, their old man had sold off their goats... much to everyone’s relief. The hay chute was a total trash heap.

Eva admired it like it was a masterpiece. “You probably had a blast sliding through that when you were younger.”

He snickered at the thought of joyfully pushing his brothers aside to be the first to go down the slide. “Why would we do that when we have stairs?”

“Oh, well, I was thinking about Hudson and Mimi getting locked down here. That could’ve been a way to get out.” She ran her hand over the hard plastic slide. “I bet I could fit.”

His eyes traveled over her. Eva was small, but not *that* small. Her hips would stop her from getting through, if anything. She was curvy. She’d been in his arms long enough for him to know that. He flushed. Pushing all thoughts of those times from his mind, he cleared his throat, instantly thinking of a way to distract her from getting stuck. “Yeah, but the spiders.”

“Ew!” She stepped back, almost running into him. He jumped to the side to stop that from happening. The last thing he needed was an armful of Eva again. She aimed the beam of her light up the tunnel, her movements jerky. Her blonde hair whipped over her shoulder, so she could peer at him. “You think?”

“Definitely, big fat juicy spiders,” he said.

“Stop!” She grabbed his hand to squeeze it as punishment.

Her hand was too soft. He pulled away, pretending to fix a board on a stall. He shoved it back into place.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Are you fixing this up for the festival?”

“No, no!” he said. “We don’t want to scare the kids away from Thanksgiving forever. We’re just having them wander through the patch in the meadow under the bright light of day. They’ll pick out

their favorite pumpkins. Then we'll give out pumpkin pies and bread and cookies. The usual."

"That's all?" Eva made a face that by all rights, he never should've seen, except she'd stepped into the brightness of one of the barred windows to the side of them. "Where's the excitement, the thrill?"

He broke into a grin. "It's for kids, not you. We'll save all the spider webs down here for you."

"Ah, thanks! But seriously, even kids need a little fun... I think I can help you with improvements."

He froze, not liking the sound of this. "What kind?"

"Oh, I don't know." She stopped at the tube, peering up the heavy-duty plastic. "Maybe you can have the kids jump through that tube and go down that slide into the hay."

"That's a hay chute," he said. He'd better correct her idealistic daydreams of the Slades gleefully sliding down the tubes before someone got hurt. "It's not meant for playing."

"Hmm, the hay chute does *not* have a ring to it. We should call it a farm slide or something."

Definitely not a safe festival activity. She had to be teasing him now. "Sure," he said, lathering the word with all the sarcasm that he could muster. "We're hurting for money as it is, let's just add some lawsuits to our debts when the kids from town all end up with broken arms."

"Broken arms?" she scoffed. "I've never gotten a broken arm from a slide."

"By all means, be my guest," he said. "Why don't you test out the spider slide for the kiddies?"

"I just might." She hesitated, staring up at the opening of the tube above her. Fortunately, the threat of spiders had definitely gotten to her. She straightened. "Really, you've got to live a little. Let's use that—that thing outside that looks like a race course, but it's not."

"The horse corral?"

"Yeah, we could put on some races."

Now, he was the one almost LOL-ing. He grabbed the railing against the stall. "What? You want to kill our ponies?" That corral was tinier than most. "They'd have to take forty laps to even make the race last longer than thirty seconds."

"We'll use smaller animals then... like raccoons."

She was really in love with this racing idea. "Oh, I see, yeah, the kids could put up their life savings on their prize racer," he said. "We could make a killing. Real family friendly stuff."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, that's one way to fight off the loan sharks." His stomach clenched when he realized that he'd passed on a family secret that he *never* should've given up. "How do you think my daddy made his fortune?" she asked. "I'd turn things around for you in no time at all. Just say the word."

He knew exactly how her family got rich nowadays—it might tempt West, but he was made of tougher moral fabric. He ignored the *kind* offer. "I should've guessed that you were from a long line of bookies," he muttered. No wonder she loved this gambling idea.

"Something like that." She shrugged. "My family started out as gangsters from the prohibition era. That's what the Trouts do! We think outside the box. I mean, c'mon! We only have a week to put this together."

"We?"

She had really taken his momma's suggestion to help him out seriously. He should've snuffed that out from the beginning. She snatched at his arm and shook him. "Yes! You need me."

With difficulty, he did his best not to show how much her every touch scorched through him. He tried to disentangle her from his arm.

"The festival needs something more," she said. "More pizzazz or something. Maybe shooting

games.”

Now he was laughing while trying to free himself from her perfumed grip. Heaven help him! She smelled like gardenias again! “You’re putting guns in these kids’ hands?” he asked. “You want to add pole dancing too?”

“Ha, Cole!” She poked her finger into his chest. “You know that’s *not* what I’m saying! They’ve got to do something more than picking out pumpkins. If I were a kid, I’d want some excitement.”

“You *are* a kid...” Did he really just say that?

She bumped him with her hip. “Maybe I am at heart, that’s why you should listen to me. Anyway... let’s go back to these races. I think we’re onto something here.”

“No, we really don’t have to.”

“You’re such a pearl clutcher! Cole, how do you live with yourself?” She nudged him with her arm.

The words coming out of her mouth could just as easily have come from the twins when they were working every angle to get him to play along with their latest schemes, but her every move belonged entirely to her. She was far more convincing than Nash and Porter could ever be! Seeing the danger, he edged away, still never managing to get away.

“I was thinking more friendly wagers actually,” she said, “like betting cupcakes or something.”

“You realize six-year-olds cry when they lose a balloon, right? Think Pip.”

“Right... hmm.” Her hand tightened over his sleeve while she thought. “Well, how about we work it more like a contest then? We make them little go-carts shaped like pumpkins.”

“Or we don’t and we keep it simple.”

“And boring, I get it... let’s go back to this farmer slide.” She pushed her phone into Cole’s hands. “Light my way, will you?”

He turned uneasy. She was going to try to climb up the slide to get into the tube. “You’ll get stuck.”

“You calling me fat, Cole?” She was enjoying this far too much. “I’ve got your number now, Cole. Your problem is that you always say no.”

That wasn’t how he remembered it. “No... I always say ‘yes,’ and that’s why I’m in charge of the pumpkin festival.”

“But then you say ‘no,’ because you don’t put your heart into it.”

“Hey!” Irritation flooded his veins. “If you want to build these go-carts yourself, or get West to do it, then I’m all for it, sweetie.”

“Sweetie?” She laughed. “Oh, I got to you now, haven’t I? When is the last time that you really put your heart into something, Cole?”

“Wait.” How did she reach that conclusion? *Any* of her conclusions? “Since when did the festival suddenly represent my life?”

“Since now!” Her hands landed on the sides of the hay chute, and she started climbing up the slide. As long as she didn’t reach the tube, she’d be fine, even if she slipped and got rug burn on her way down. And if she broke her arm, then, well... at least he could say that he was right.

But... he didn’t want her to get hurt. He stiffened, not sure how to catch this dancing cloud to pin it down. She wasn’t a cloud anyway, more a sprite.

“If you want to put the minimal amount of work into this, fine!” she called to him over her shoulder. “You can keep doing the same thing that you do every year, go to the same country dances, meet the same people, buy the same jeans.”

Wait. Now she was insulting his jeans? “What’s wrong with my jeans?”

“Nothing, you look hot in everything that you put on,” she said airily.

Eva gave compliments like they were free, and in a way, she was right, but some things people didn't say. And still, he was beginning to understand that she meant nothing by her bluntness. She just called absolutely everything how she saw it. And though he didn't approve of how she lived her every moment on social media, he guessed that her honesty was how she had such a huge following.

Cole was surprised that she wasn't livestreaming this now.

He could only be grateful.

“All I'm saying,” she said, “is that it's time to spice up your life a little and try something different.”

He prayed for patience. “It seems to me that you're just trying to give me more work.”

“Fine,” she said. “I mean, I don't know what you have against being a little fun, but... we don't have to build anything, Eeyore.”

Eeyore? Insulting. If he was Eeyore, then she was Tigger! *And she just gave me an out.* “Good,” he said. “I'm glad we can agree on something.”

She brightened. “We could race turkeys, instead... and little piglets.”

What? Piglets? She wasn't giving up, was she? “So we're racing our Thanksgiving dinners before we eat them?”

Her laughter rang through the old goat cellar. “This is a fun game,” she said. “I suggest something and then you find a way to shoot it down.”

Did he? But she was suggesting such crazy things. It felt like she was setting him up.

“But get this,” she said, “—the winners of the races get to settle on a wildlife preserve.”

“Where the wolves can have a go at them, and then we eat the losers?” She made being contrary too easy. “You're savage, Eva.”

She whipped her hair behind her shoulder to peer back at him from the slide. “You're playing with me now.”

A grumbled laugh escaped him, despite his best intentions to stay cool in the face of her obnoxious enthusiasm. “A little bit, yeah.”

“We'll catapult pumpkins!” That came out a little breathless as she reached the top of the slide where the tube was. “*Then* we can see how far they'll go. Everyone chooses their prized pumpkin to be their champion at the catapult.”

The girl was chugging out ideas faster than he could shoot them down. “And you're going to want me to make this catapult?” he asked.

“How hard can it be? We'll Rumble it!”

“Rumble it?” What was she talking about?

“We'll just find a video that'll show us how to make it online,” she translated. “It'll be easy.”

There was that *We* business again.

She'd stopped at the top of the slide where it met the tube, looking stumped on how to proceed. Taking a deep breath, she pushed up into the tube head first. His mouth opened and his warning died on his lips. She'd accuse him again of being the guy who said “no” if he tried to make her see caution. And still, he couldn't keep his mouth shut. “Watch out for... small furry animals.”

“Oh, you mean cute, furry animals that are more afraid of me than I am of them?” Her stubbornly cheerful voice echoed through the tube.

Exactly. He winced as she wriggled her way up. She wasn't doing so bad, but honestly, the thought of spiders and other angry animals would've stopped *him*... maybe the danger of getting caught in narrow spaces, too.

Yeah, he *was* a pearl clutcher! Just like she said, and still he'd rather die than go through that chute after years of rodent and spider web accumulation.

An instant later, she let out a grunt and then a shout. She kicked her legs. "Cole!" Her voice sounded like it was caught in a kettle drum. "Um... come here for a second."

She was stuck, wasn't she?

He shoved her phone into his pocket and made his reluctant way over to where she struggled to free herself. He strangled back the laugh that tried to escape his throat. "What's the problem?"

"Um, well, my hips."

Yeah, he'd thought those would be the culprit. With difficulty, he kept himself from staring, even though he definitely couldn't stop from laughing. "So why can't you just slide back down?" he asked.

"It's not funny! I don't know what *you* did with this tube, but my jacket got caught on a nail."

"A nail?" He felt like a parrot repeating her dumbly like this, but he was about to be forced on a rescue mission that he didn't want to carry through, and if he could get out of it, he would. He took a deep breath to stop laughing enough to direct her on how to untangle herself while still keeping a safe distance from below. "Can't you reach it?"

"No, I'm all twisted around. I can't move my arms."

"Can you get out of the jacket?"

She grunted and wriggled around and finally gave up with a shout. "Cole! I'm starting to freak out here. Get up here! Do you want me haunting you for the rest of your living days? Save me!"

Suddenly she screamed.

He stiffened in sudden worry. "What?"

"I'm just thinking of those cute furry animals!" She let out another shriek.

Grumbling and snickering all at once, he jumped on the slide, feeling strangely like a kid again as he inched his way up the metal to the tube where she kicked those incredibly long legs of hers.

Why'd she have to wear those shorts?

He'd have nothing to grab onto but skin. West might take his head off after finding out about this.

"Okay, hold still," he said. Grabbing her phone from his pocket, he shone the light up the shaft and only managed to see legs and lots of flannel from the jacket.

"That's it!" she cried. "You're going to have to cut me out!"

He flinched. That would be harder than trying to muscle her out. "I'll just push you up further and that'll get the nail to let you go."

"No!" she cried. "I tried that and my hips got stuck. I'm already wedged in here. If I go up any further, you'll never get me out." Her voice broke. She was panicked out of her mind.

"Okay, okay, relax. You're going to be fine. I'll get you out. Where does the nail have you?"

"At my back! My lower back. It's just twisted through the jacket though, so... at least..." the rest of her words were lost in anguished shrieks.

He scanned over the shaft with that cellphone light first, not seeing any sign of a nail on the outside. Ugh. He was really going to have to get nice and close to Eva, wasn't he?

Steeling himself, Cole wedged his foot against a beam to the side to get better leverage. And then taking a deep breath, he wriggled his hand through the tube to find her jacket. She yelped when he accidentally got the skin at her back. "Sorry," he muttered. He was going to rip that nail out as soon as he could find where it was. His fingers brushed past the catch on her jacket. That's where the nail had her. He bunched at the fabric, hearing the rip. "Sorry," he repeated, but he didn't mean it. He tugged again, harder this time, tearing her jacket free.

Now for those hips.

“Can you move at all?” he asked.

“No,” she moaned.

He tried to figure out his best strategy that didn't end with Trout forcing him to marry her after they were all through. His eyes traveled over her legs, and he finally settled on her knees. She let out a gasp when he wrapped his hands around her soft skin. “You ready for this?”

“I guess!” she cried. “Don't tell West about this, okay? He already thinks that I can't take care of myself.”

Their lack of communication was getting disturbing, but considering his hands were all over her legs, Cole decided it was for the best. “He won't hear it from me.”

Those words were beginning to sound familiar.

He wrenched at her legs and she let out a shout, but she didn't budge. “Are you okay?” He didn't want to hurt her.

“Yes! Yes! Just get me out.”

He put more muscle into it and yanked again. Sounds of distress followed his every movement. This wasn't working. His hands went back into the chute and he grabbed the ends of her jacket. Maybe if he got that off or managed to slide her out that way? He jerked at the flannel and he felt her drop. The next instant, he saw her messy blonde hair fly out of the tube with her.

Her legs knocked him off balance. His knees buckled and he lost his footing on the beam just as she slid under him. Barely having time to think, he grabbed at her arms, trying to slow their descent.

Nothing did.

They both slid down the hay chute together and landed hard on the ground below.

Hay crackled beneath them and billowed out, even as Eva let out an “Oof.”

Oh, no, no, no. The poor girl had completely absorbed their fall. She was caught under him. Cole could barely see her after losing her phone somewhere beneath them, but her nose was in his neck and all that silky hair was against his chest. He tried to get off her. She grunted when his knee landed into her leg.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry.” He was only half aware of what he was saying. He'd never apologized to someone so much in his life.

Cole was only glad that she couldn't see his face. He knew he was red because he was burning up. Trying to disentangle himself from this embarrassing situation, he finally slid his arms under her back and rolled her to the side. She let out a gasp for air.

“I didn't crush you, did I?” he asked.

“No... no...” She released a shaky breath, and it got caught on a snigger. “That was so... cool.”

He froze. She had to be kidding right?

“It could've been so much worse,” he said. “You're lucky you got away with only me landing on you.”

“Totally,” she said. Somehow it made it worse that she actually agreed with him. “I kept imagining some small furry creatures coming after me and making a nest on my head when they saw how helpless I was.”

She was impossible. She really wasn't taking this seriously at all. The light from her phone escaped past her hair, showing him where it had fallen. He reached for it, his fingers brushing past her cheek. She stilled, her eyes snapping to his.

He struggled to control his breath when he got caught by her sudden intense scrutiny. He froze. No, no, he hadn't meant to make her think that he was... uh... well, what did she think?

That he was about to kiss her?

Was he?

He groaned. He'd better not! And then as if in direct rebellion against his every good intention, his gaze was drawn to her full lips.

He knew exactly how they felt against his.

He scrambled back from her, brushing the hay from his arms, seeing that it was all over her too. He turned from her, feeling his tongue twist over itself as he tried to distract his thoughts away from her. "Yeah, glad you tested out the hay chute for the kids. That went great."

"Farm slide," she corrected. "And we *could* tweak it a little, make it more childproof."

His attention shot back to her in his dismay. She smiled up at him from the hay, resting her cheek against her hand. What was she still doing there? The light from the hay haloed her blonde hair with its glow.

His heart dove out of his chest. This was getting ridiculous! His hands went to her wrists and he helped her up, so that she was sitting next to him—anything to get her away from that angelic glow of her phone.

"Absolutely not," he said. "No Hay Chute or—or... Farm Slide or whatever else you want to call it."

She clicked her tongue at him like he was the one who'd lost his mind. "Don't worry. Now that I've tested it out, we know what can go wrong. Of course, I'll try all of our improvements out first."

"Is it too much to ask that I'm not here for it?"

She let out a guffaw. "Fine, Mommy Doomsday! You win. No farm slide."

"Mommy Doomsday?"

She was seriously calling him that now? Maybe not. Her sheepish grin under a stream of her tousled hair gave her away. He wasn't sure how long she'd been teasing him about doing the farm slide after he'd saved her, but it might've been from the beginning.

He'd fallen for her joking hook, line, and sinker. It disturbed him that she already knew how to play him. "You're evil, you know that?"

She reached out to him and patted his arm in her friendly way. "Hey, thanks for helping me out. I guess that was pretty stupid, but..." She arched a brow at him with the same wheeling-and-dealing look that he'd seen on the infamous Devlin Trout during his many political press conferences streamed on the news lately. "At least put in a pony ride or something... or a hay ride..." After getting nothing in the affirmative from him, she sighed. "A petting zoo? Like the one you showed me over the summer?"

Was she really going to remind him about that disastrous day right now? "Yeah, sure... sure." He'd agree to almost anything, just to stop this conversation.

"Really?" She jumped up with glee. "I came up with an idea that you like?"

"Yeah, of course, I love it." He ran his hand through his hair, realizing that he'd lost his stocking cap somewhere in the hay, too. He searched around the hay with his hands, and not finding it that way, he reached around her to get her phone for its light.

As soon as he got it into his hands, a message flashed over her screen: "It won't be too hard to find out where you went for Thanksgiving. I have a few guesses..."

But it didn't end there. His forehead wrinkled when he read the expletive at the end of that strange message. He quickly read the name of who sent it to her. Stalker.

Stalker?

She snatched her phone away from him. "Oops!" she said. "These texts just keep coming in."

Chapter Eleven

“It isn’t who you think it is,” Eva said.

It was that horrible TalkieTalk creeper, so it really *wasn't* what Cole was thinking... if he was thinking anything, except if he wasn't, now he might be. His head was tilted at her.

Ugh, she was making this worse.

“Those texts are so annoying,” she said, realizing that she was saying far too much, but that’s what happened to her when she was nervous.

“Your phone said it was your stalker.”

“Yeah...” She gulped. He saw that, huh? “I had to rename my friend that after—after... whoo!” She brought her hand up to her chest. “What a crazy fall, huh?” She scrambled to her feet.

Her heart wouldn’t stop pounding after she’d caught a glimpse of that threatening message. Already, she was having a hard time catching her breath after her little adventure with Cole. Why, oh, why did everything embarrassing have to happen to her while he was around?

Of course, Cole had to be the first to stumble on those threatening messages.

She tried to cover up how mortified she was, just as she’d done after he’d popped her from that hay chute like a cork shooting out of a wine bottle. Eva had never been that convincing at lying. She’d bring up more ideas for the kid’s festival to distract him, but she was sure that she sounded absolutely crazy by now.

She still didn’t understand why he refused to brighten up that cute little kid’s event. She’d only been trying to be helpful, but then when he’d turned her every idea down flat, she’d turned into an absolute nutcase trying to prove him wrong.

Eva had only ended up proving him horribly right after getting stuck. He must be pretty pleased with himself, except he didn’t seem like it.

His eyes shifted to her phone.

She knew how to cut off his interest like a knife, and feeling slightly guilty, she used her newfound weapon without mercy. “It’s from Ashley.”

She was right. He winced in actual pain. Eva glanced down at the message again, her skin tingling with panic as she read it: “It won’t be too hard to find out where you went for Thanksgiving. I have a few guesses...” And then he’d called her some awful name that people liked to call her on social media.

Anyway, it didn’t matter.

No way could some pathetic stalker ever guess that the daughter of an oil czar would be... here. She glanced around the shadowed basement. The goat cellar that had seemed so quaint before with its musty smell and corroded stalls transformed in an instant to something quite terrible, even with Cole’s comforting presence.

Eva shoved her phone into her pocket. She shouldn’t even take it with her anymore... except she loved taking pictures.

Her breath hitched at the sudden fear that crept over her like an encroaching shadow.

What she wouldn’t do for some fresh air. The last thing she cared about was the rain anyway. She needed to get out of this cramped space, prove to herself that she’d never be intimidated by some

creep. She had to be free of this panic that began to consume her.

Eva turned to Cole. "Race you to the top."

She took off for the stairs, feeling like the devil was at her heels. Cole followed at a more leisurely pace. He certainly wasn't buying into anything she was saying anymore.

The sound of her galoshes squeaked and banged in an echo that resonated through the old creaking barn as she rushed over the shuddering floorboards.

The rain had become a heavy downpour while they'd been gone in the cellar. Hesitating for a mere second, Eva fled outside into it.

Ah yes, here it was. Freedom!

The coolness felt absolutely heavenly against her feverish skin.

Everything was going to be okay. Her stalker wanted to trap her in a maze of fear, make her feel like she was being hunted everywhere she went, but she wasn't. She was safe. This guy wasn't going to ruin her vacation. He couldn't control how she felt.

"Eva?" Cole was after her in the storm. She twisted around with a cry. He was missing his stocking cap from before. Those jeans he always wore were plastered to his muscular thighs like a second skin under the rain. "You're getting all wet!"

"So are you!"

A part of her realized that he'd only come out for her. She tried to save him from his need to rescue her. The guy should've been a firefighter. "I'm fine," she said. "Go back in if you don't want to get drenched."

A wry grin traveled over his lips. "I don't think I'm going to get any wetter."

That was probably true.

He hopped over a few round pumpkins to reach her in the mud. When he finally did, he watched her with some concern. "Why is Ashley acting so weird?"

"She..." Eva took a step back and slipped in the mud.

Cole reached out to get her, slid, and once again, they were headed for another disaster. She tried to stop it from happening again. She clutched his arms. Between their combined efforts, they stayed steady. Eva wasn't sure who was keeping who up.

She let out a laugh. "That's it! We need to stop hanging out together. I'm completely accident prone when I'm around you."

"You're not usually like this?" He cracked a smile. "Weird. I feel like I barely know you then."

Now he was teasing her. There was always a grain of truth to everything he said that cut her to the quick, though at times like these, his steady gaze on her felt like the guiding hand that steadied the boat in the storm.

She was always in a storm these days.

Strangely, the strength she felt through their clasped hands made her feel even more swept away, but... no, that wasn't right. He was only looking out for her. It just felt unfamiliar when his brother kept forgetting to do that.

And those traitorous thoughts weren't fair to West.

West had a lot on his mind, secrets that she needed to root out so that she could help him untangle them... like Cole's fingers through hers.

Oh, I need to release him.

She cleared her throat. "Are we good now?" she asked.

His mouth fell open, almost like he hadn't been aware that he hadn't let her go yet. "Yeah, yeah." He stepped back. Their hands parted... not a moment too soon. A sleek silver Lexus drove down the

muddy country road towards the pumpkin patch.

They'd taken too long to return. West was coming for them.

Taking a deep breath, Cole leaned down to inspect one of the pumpkins. "You need to pick out your own pumpkin to take home with you," he said. "I'll show you how fun it is, so you can stop worrying about all those poor bored little children." He arched a brow at her. The rain poured down his wrinkled forehead.

She wasn't going to lie. He looked really good soaked through.

Stop being weird.

She turned in determination. Her hands clasped together when she looked over the pumpkin patch. Cole was right. Selecting a pumpkin of her very own really did feel thrilling. Her attention was drawn to West's approaching headlights. "Ooh, West and I can take the seeds out and—and make a Thanksgiving pie!"

She'd definitely need a how-to video on Rumble to figure out that one.

Cole ran his hand over his wet face. "Yeah, yeah, that would be good. West needs to get his hands a little dirty, too." He looked over at his brother's car, starting to mutter again, "It's about time he started to care about things that are important."

She laughed. "I heard that, boo! You're too hard on him."

He swung back around. His brow arched up at her. "You're not hard enough."

Maybe.

She noticed West had parked next to Cole's truck, though West didn't immediately jump out into the rain to be with them. The wipers slid sleekly across the windshield. The headlights cut through the misty air. She listened to the voices inside his car as he finished up a call on speaker phone. Though she couldn't make out the words, the conversation sounded intense.

She shivered, not realizing how cold she was until now. At least it would be warm in West's car.

West rolled down his window and shouted over at them. "Why are you standing out there? You're getting all wet!"

To Cole's credit, he didn't immediately put the blame on Eva for running outside. He shrugged. "Why don't you come out here and rescue your fiancée?"

West glared at his brother.

Eva dashed over to his car to stop them from fighting. "West! Help me pick out a pumpkin! I want the roundest, biggest one that I can find!"

West didn't seem impressed, but then again, he'd grown up with this stuff. It was brand new for her. He stayed where he was.

She tried to drum up some enthusiasm from him. "I have a few ideas for the pumpkin festival... I mean, some of them weren't too brilliant."

"Of course, they were," Cole said quickly... and after he'd shot down every single idea that she had! Her heart skipped at his unexpected defense. He strolled through the storm to reach them, looking like a sailor who'd been dunked and tortured at sea, and still he kept a calm face. "She wants to make a pumpkin catapult," he said. "I'm sure you can help her out with that, West."

West sneered over at him from the safety of his vehicle. "I can't quite picture that, but as soon as the two of you put it together, I'm sure I will."

"No, no," Cole insisted. "You've got to do it. It's Eva's brainchild. I'm sure she'll show you exactly what she has in mind when you work on your pumpkin."

Eva rolled her eyes. It was obvious that none of them saw her vision, but once they built the catapult, it would be a *pumpkin smashing* hit. She grinned at her hidden genius... her *very* hidden

genius. "I promise," she told West. "It'll be so worth it!"

West sighed. His eyes scanned over the acres of pumpkins. "How about you pick out a pumpkin, Eva, then we can get you out of this rain?"

She should've known better than to think that he'd get overly excited about helping her find the perfect one, and still, she wasn't about to let him dampen her enthusiasm. She bumped Cole's arm with her elbow and pointed to the biggest one that she could see. "Help me get that one into the car."

Cole's lips twisted, and after a backwards glance at West, he nodded and headed for the pumpkin. He dug a pocket knife out of his soggy jeans and began hacking at the vine to free her pumpkin for her. Her heart warmed at what he was doing for her.

That was about the only thing that was warm. Maybe her feet. Lily's galoshes were her sole protection. Water streamed down her bare legs, her hair, her lips. Eva shivered from the chill and crossed her arms to conceal the fact that she was starting to shake. Once she started, she'd never stop.

As soon as Cole cut the pumpkin free, she leaned down and tried to take it from him. "I-I-I've got it!" Her teeth chattered.

He shook his head at her. "That's a no. This thing is almost as big as you are." He heaved up the gargantuan squash in his arms and surprised her with a look of concern. "We need to get you dry." He turned West's direction with an annoyed expression, and seeing they'd get no help from those quarters, he brought the pumpkin to West's car himself.

West quickly locked the doors against them. "Put it in the back of *your* truck. That thing is filthy."

Eva glanced down at herself—so was she. "Do you want me to go back with Cole, too?"

Cole's forehead wrinkled, and he stopped West from actually replying. "No, you'll need his heater. His car is all warmed up and you're freezing. Just a second." Cole dumped the pumpkin into the back of his truck. He went to the bench seat of his cab. "I've got some blankets. I'll put them on your seat. West's precious car won't get a mark on it." His fierce gaze dared West to object, and surprisingly, his older brother didn't seem as bothered by the thought of taking in the "filthy" Eva as he was her pumpkin.

Cole brought the blankets to West, who obligingly unlocked the passenger's side for his brother. Grimacing, Cole arranged the blankets for Eva, so she could sit.

She could hug him for his kindness!

She stopped herself. No need to embarrass the poor guy for doing her such a good turn.

There were other ways to pay him back, like those jeans for instance. He needed new ones over those worn, faded ones, definitely...

Eva carefully lowered into West's car, feeling her wet jacket slosh against the fabric. Her back arched against the cold. She quickly peeled it off. The warmth from the heater blew against her knees. That was a start! She smiled over at Cole. "We'll t-talk festival plans when we g-get back."

How embarrassing, her chattering teeth ruined her small talk.

Cole grimaced. He shot his brother a stern look, like he was the older, more world-weary one. "Get her warm, West." He closed her door before going to his truck.

She spread her fingers over the heater's vent. "I'm f-f-fine!"

West's brows went up and he growled in sudden protectiveness as he got his jacket off. "Get that on. You're freezing."

He'd astonished her with his thoughtful gesture. "Th-th-thank you!"

Maybe she shouldn't talk. She sounded like an idiot. West's lips curved up.

Cole peeled out of the muddy parking lot and shot through the roads ahead of them. His truck gave him the advantage over them in their sedan. He left them far behind in a spray of mud.

Show off!

The roads were even worse than before, but considering that West was in a Lexus, he navigated the slick pathway easily. After all, he'd done it his entire life.

Taking one look at West's profile chiseled with disdain and hurt pride, her mind was consumed with what Cole had told her about his ex-wife getting married in the old Slade barn. Besides ruining Eva's plans for her own cute little country wedding there, her soon to be in-laws had pulled a pretty jerky move by hosting that event for Liv. No wonder he fought with his family all the time. They weren't very thoughtful when it came to his failed marriage.

Neither was she.

They neared the house before she stopped shaking. She finally trusted herself to speak again. "I'm sorry about trying to pressure you into getting married in the barn."

He turned to study her face, though his vivid blue eyes held only slight curiosity. "Why do you say that, babe? What happened in the barn?"

Her face quickly lost its earlier frigidness as her embarrassment seared through her at the sudden memory of his brother's hands all over her when he'd tried to pry her from that chute. "N-nothing!"

Great! She was back to stuttering. Now West watched her with more interest.

She gulped, doing her best to distract her mind from his brother's strong fingers. "I was asking Cole about decorating the place, and he told me that someone else beat us to it first."

West glanced back at the road, his jaw tightening. "What Liv decides to do... or *not* doesn't affect how I live my life. If I wanted to get married in that gross old barn, I would, but..."

"Tropical paradise," she whispered.

"Yeah," he muttered.

He'd mentioned that before. Maybe she should listen to what he really wanted, instead of going off on her own excited ideas. She had a tendency to do that.

He kneaded his forehead, looking pained. "I really *need* to get out of here. Let's just get this week over with and fly out as soon as we can."

She straightened as she began to realize what he was saying. "Where will we go?"

"Anywhere."

She smiled brightly. Yes! This was the reckless and thrilling side of West that she liked. "Some place tropical?" she hazarded.

Both of his hands went back to the steering wheel and tightened. He parked next to Cole's truck. His brother was long gone. That oversized pumpkin sat on the porch dripping with rain and mud. Cole would be in the shower by now. Eva should catch one, too, but turning, her breath caught at West's probing gaze. Her hands loosened against the jacket he'd given her.

"You don't look half bad... as a drowned rat," he said.

Amusement flooded through her at his compliment, along with a happy, tingling sensation that he'd finally noticed her, because even though his words were casual, the way he watched her was certainly not. He looked riveted.

"Oh really?" she asked playfully. "You like my makeup washed off and my hair stringing all over my face?"

"Yeah." His fingers slid through that wet hair, sending tremors all over her that were far superior to what the cold had caused. "You're beautiful no matter what you do." He almost sounded resentful of the fact, but that was before he leaned into her.

She felt his lips brush against hers.

His unexpected touch shot her brain all over the place so that she couldn't think too much about

his tone... or care. Wow. Yeah. Anyone could say what they wanted about West's dark moods, but the man could kiss!

When he put his mind to it, he had a way of making every part of her feel attractive and exciting. His lips were both demanding and gentle and left her feeling all soft and gooey like a warm and happy marshmallow as they trailed from her mouth to her cheek and back to her mouth where he completely captured her in a kiss so filled with the essence of West's turbulent soul that it made her practically swoon from the joy of being with him.

He captured her heart again and again with his Slade charm.

West drew back from her.

She scrambled to collect her thoughts from her misfiring brain, but he didn't give her enough time. His breath caressed her cheek seconds before he placed another lingering kiss against her lips.

Rockets of giddiness exploded through her. Forget being chilled. He'd heated her up in seconds.

The guy was a microwave!

The doubts torturing her nights as she wondered how much he truly loved her had evaporated. His hands tightened over her as he brought her closer against him, like she actually belonged to him. He lifted her off her seat as easily as Cole had rescued her from that tube.

And West is never finding out about that!

Either way, the Slade strength always surprised her. Her knee ran into the console as West conveyed exactly how much passion he felt for her, in a way that he hadn't been able to do with his words for the past few days... weeks.

"I don't know about you," she said between their kisses, "but how about we set sail for this island *today*?"

He laughed, sounding almost at peace with the idea.

Was he?

She opened her eyes, noticing the turmoil that had wracked his expression from earlier had calmed from the frothy waves of the sea into the serene surface of a lagoon.

She wanted to get to this tropical place stat. No joke. "What are we waiting for?" she asked. "We can carve out pumpkin seeds on the beach."

"Let's not rush a good thing, okay, babe? But yes... we'll get you married some place tropical."

It was the most planning that she'd ever gotten out of him for their wedding. She brightened at the small victory. They had an agreement *and* a location. The only thing left was a date!

Her fingers landed over his. "How about we go to our tropical paradise for Christmas?"

He blinked. His thick lashes beat together as if awakening from a spell, but still, he pulled her closer, resting his stubbled cheek against hers. "Honey, I want your wedding to be everything that you dreamed, and I can't do that when all these problems from work keep piling up, but..." he pulled back so that he could devour her with his smoldering gaze. "I promise that as soon as I get them taken care of, I will spoil you like you deserve."

She didn't want him to spoil her. She just wanted him to be present, and obviously that wasn't happening when her daddy kept taking him away from her. Eva didn't know what was going on... if somehow West had taken on more than he could handle or turned against the wrong people, but it had to be terrible by the way West was acting.

"What is it?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

His hands loosened over her. "Yeah. Of course. What about you?" He smoothly switched the topic from himself like he always did. "Why weren't you livestreaming your pumpkin finding adventures like you always do? It's hard to keep track of you nowadays."

She hesitated and sat back.

What a pair they were. She knew that he was lying... just like she wasn't telling him about the troubles that she'd met online. She hated how he kept things from her, so maybe she should stop this hypocrisy and make herself vulnerable for once by telling him the truth.

But how to break to him what was happening while minimizing the danger to herself?

"I haven't been using TalkieTalk as much as normal," she said. "Too many creepers and stalkers on there."

"Hmm," he murmured.

He watched her like he truly cared, and she took a deep breath to confide the rest to him.

He licked his lips. "Can you do me the biggest favor in the world?" he asked. "You think you can handle being on your own at my family's for a bit? There are a few things at work that are calling my name."

More than he thought they would? The announcement cleared her mind of everything else. "You're leaving?"

"No! No... just lots of phone calls. I've got some clean up... but..." He chuckled. "These tough guys need to take off *some* family time for Thanksgiving. I'm sure I can scrounge up a few minutes here and there to-to..." He professed to hate everything about this holiday, and so she wondered what he'd come up with "...uh... wash dishes."

She erupted into a laugh, though it sounded a little hysterical. When would they ever find time together? Normally, she'd use social media to grab his attention, but even that was denied her.

He rubbed his thumb over their clasped hands. "You might have to carve that pumpkin yourself, hon. Will you be okay?"

Something about his tone rubbed her the wrong way. "I'm not a child... you don't need to make sure that I'm entertained." That wasn't the point anyway. She just wanted to spend time with him, but she didn't know how to say that without sounding clingy.

Before she could figure out a way, he was kissing her and revitalizing her lagging spirits with all sorts of fiery sparks. "Oh, but I *do* have to keep you busy," he said as his hungry lips left hers. "I want to make sure that my baby has a good time."

Did he really mean that?

Staring up at the sincerity of his blue-eyed expression, she decided that he did.

Chapter Twelve

Cole scrubbed the toothbrush against his teeth. A week! He was going to have to put up with this madhouse for a whole week.

He couldn't wait to get back on the range this morning and face down coyotes, bears, wolves, *anything* other than Eva. He'd awakened at the crack of dawn to escape this wretched house. West's fiancée was like a beam of light glittering off the moon, impossible to catch and stuff back into the deepest recesses of his mind to stay forgotten. She'd become moon madness—once seen, she couldn't be unseen. She wouldn't leave his thoughts.

He didn't believe her about Ashley.

So who was this stalker? An old boyfriend?

It isn't any of my business! West is taking care of it. He takes care of everything, even down to asking her to marry him when he doesn't love her.

He gulped. Was he so sure that was true anymore? Cole's blood boiled when he saw West brush off her efforts to hang out with him, but there was a new possessive glint in his brother's eye when West checked her out. Cole spit the toothpaste out, running the water down the sink. He clung to the idea that they could be happy, but if West hurt her...?

This was so stupid!

Cole was just as bad as his brother. He couldn't keep his eyes off her, either. How could he save her?

He took off barefoot down the hall, still in the ragged tee shirt and shorts that he used as his PJs while company was in the house. He headed for the laundry room. He'd thrown his clothes from the washing machine into the dryer last night. They should be ready for him.

Eva's commentary on his clothes made him roll his eyes. What kind of jeans did she want him to buy, something with embroidery on the pockets like he'd seen at the rodeo? Embellishments? Tight, high-waist urban cowboy wear that his old man liked to wear in the '80s? Or was she thinking of something more like what West liked to put on? A \$1,000 pair of designer jeans that looked the same on as the ones from Harold's?

Either way, she could forget it. The cattle couldn't care less what he wore. His worn jeans did the job and they were twice as comfortable as what people flashed around the city when they were trying too hard.

West's bedroom door ripped open, making Cole strangle on a shout on his way down the hall. What was his brother up to at this early hour? Cole peered up the silent stairs, hoping he hadn't woken up the entire household with his nerves.

"What are you doing up, West?" Cole hissed.

"Well, you're jumpy!"

Of course, he was! He'd gotten that way a few months ago after Porter had been so bored with his twin missing that he'd taken to leaving some ugly Halloween bridal skull lying around to scare him. Cole made a face at his older brother and kept on heading for the laundry room.

He'd had enough of his brothers' mischief.

"Wait," West whispered. He was pulling on his clothes while he chased Cole down the hall.

This could only mean trouble. Cole hurried on. "Why are you leaving so early?" West called.

He didn't want anything to do with West and Eva anymore. Wasn't it obvious?

Maybe it was.

West followed him like a cat on a mouse. "Wait. I want to talk to you."

"No time, West," Cole said. "Dad has a huge list of chores that can't wait for me this morning, and..."

"When will you be back?"

Never.

"Not sure." Cole dove into the laundry room, flipping on the light. "Why?"

"You showed Eva a good time yesterday."

Cole froze. Was he about to get punched? "I was only taking her away from that argument you and Dad got into," he said. "That was it."

And the rest was just damage control. He wasn't sure that West would give him time to explain, and so he just pretended that he was oblivious to his crimes. Cole sifted through his clothes, but he couldn't find a single pair of his jeans. He didn't have time to wonder how that had happened.

West cornered him. "I need you to do it again."

This might be worse than getting punched. Cole dropped his clothes back into the dryer and turned away. "Forget it."

Now was the time to bolt, but Cole was still missing his jeans. He turned around the room to see if their momma had tried to be helpful and folded them away. He wasn't catching sight of them anywhere.

"C'mon," West said. "I've got to take care of business. It's an emergency."

Everything was an emergency with West. And there was no way that Cole was going to get in the way of that dysfunctional relationship again. Yesterday was a disaster. "You really trust your fiancée to another man?" Cole asked. "Were you born yesterday?"

West laughed. "Do you still go to Bible study every Sunday?"

"Yeah." What did that have to do with bailing out West again? Cole pushed past him, searching through the folded clothes on the shelves for his jeans.

"You still help the pastor put in irrigation pipes for the old folks in the county and mind your momma and take her canned jams out to her friends?"

Cole turned, irritated at the line of questioning. "Yes."

"Yeah, I'm not really threatened by you," West said bluntly.

It didn't matter what his brother said. Cole saw the danger, even if West wanted to be an idiot. "Maybe you should be."

West startled at that.

Cole grabbed a pair of old castoff jeans folded up in the corner, hoping against hope that they didn't belong to their old man because his were worse off than Cole's. Still, he was desperate to end the conversation. Cole made a beeline for his room.

West hunted him down. The guy could never take "no" for an answer... which was probably why Cole couldn't put his heart into anything, not when he'd been wrestled down into doing all the things he didn't want to do.

West, on the other hand? His manipulation took him far in life!

"She's going to be your sister-in-law," West said. "You're going to have to be alone with her sometime. Stop being such a prim little princess."

"You're not really helping your case."

"I'll pay you," West said. His hand landed on the door so that Cole couldn't slam it on him.

Seeing that his brother wasn't about to give him any privacy, Cole dressed anyway, having every intention of bolting out the door as soon as he was done. Sleipnir would be waiting for him out in the barn to help him make his escape. "I'm not interested in your money."

"You sure about that?"

Cole hesitated. What kind of money was he talking? Did it matter? No!

He threw his foot into the leg of the castoff jeans in his rush to escape West's forked tongue. As soon as he wrenched them up to his waist, he realized that they were his dad's oversized overalls. It was too late to go back now.

West sneered when he caught sight of them. "You're wearing those?"

Cole didn't answer. He'd grabbed a shirt from the laundry room too, but he saw it was from Nash with the sleeves cut away. As a rule, Cole generally liked more protection on the ranch than his brothers did. He dragged the desecrated shirt on anyway.

"Just for today," West said. "You can take her along with you to go check on the cattle or—the calves. She'd like that. You have any more baby chicks for her? You could work together on that pumpkin patch. I don't care as long as she's happy."

At least West seemed to care about that. Cole was beginning to wonder if his brother had a heart. He found his boots.

West closed the door to his room. He lowered his voice. "She shouldn't be on her own, and the way I see it, you're the key to whether she has a good time this Thanksgiving or not."

"Me?" Cole's head popped up from his boots. "Me? No, you, West. It's up to you. Why can't you actually spend time with your own fiancée? A normal person would want to."

"I do! I have to work. My hands are tied."

Were they? Or was this about something else? Suspicion ran a burning trail down Cole's neck. "Are you trying to get Eva to dump you so that you don't have to do it? You think her daddy won't blame you if she's the one who gets cold feet?"

A pregnant silence followed that.

Cole didn't expect West to confess the innermost workings of his mind, but in the next moment, his brother sneered. "You think her daddy won't make me suffer no matter who calls it off? Trout happens to be my paycheck, but he can do far more damage than that, so no, you've got it wrong, Sherlock. I'm not getting her to dump me."

Cole's shoulders tightened. He wasn't surprised, really, though he was *somewhat* surprised at his own disappointment. A part of him had hoped that Eva meant more than just money and power to his brother. "Well, what a relief." The anger welling up in Cole came out as sarcasm. "Your happy home is saved again."

"Knock it off. Just hear me out. I can't leave her alone for any reason. You got that? There are other things happening that I can't talk about... but if you could just show her a good time this Thanksgiving. That's all she wants, and it's all *I* want. I can't have her tattle on me to her daddy and getting everybody all riled up."

"I can't help you." Cole pushed past West to get out of his room. This time West let him go. It felt like a black cloud followed him out to the barn anyway. He thought Thanksgiving was going to be bad, but this felt worse than he imagined.

And it had only been a day!

Cole opened the door to Sleipnir's stall. The paint let out a gentle snort at seeing him. The horse was a docile animal, but with enough energy to take Cole as far away from the house as possible.

Cole would go to the north side near Funches's land at the swamp by the old, abandoned Burro Mine. He'd been meaning to take down beaver dams over there and herd out whatever cattle had wandered too far from the herd.

Lizardman trotted over, looking curious. One fuzzy ear flopped over his head—another poor creature that had been abandoned by West's carelessness. At least Cole could take the puppy along for an adventure without fearing what might happen.

And what did Cole fear from Eva?

A memory of her mischievous smile flashed through his mind, her long blonde hair, her snappy retorts, their kisses.

His heart constricted.

Yeah, he had *everything* to fear. West had one thing right. No one could play with Eva Trout without serious consequences.

Cole had never saddled his horse so fast, but it wasn't fast enough for West. His brother came around the bend, dressed a little more hurriedly than usual, but still looking sharper than Cole did in his getaway outfit.

"Five thousand dollars," West said with a level look at his brother.

Cole tightened Sleipnir's cinches. He shook his head.

"I'm not finished. I'll give you five thousand dollars every day. And I promise to carve pumpkins with her when you get back today. I'm going to make this very easy for you. It won't even feel like you're working."

Of course, it wouldn't. This was Eva. His brother didn't know what he was asking.

"No." Cole shoved his foot in the stirrup and jumped onto Sleipnir's back.

He rode off without looking back.

Chapter Thirteen

“So, Cole really needs my help?” Eva asked.

West grunted out in the affirmative. “He’s been crying about never having any extra hands since we all left to live our lives.”

She looked over at West as he drove them over the country road that morning in his daddy’s pickup. Lizardman crawled over the bench seat, wriggling and barking out with excitement. She wrapped her arms around his scrawny back to hold him still.

Everything was muddy from the storm the day before, but West had taken off with one of the farm trucks, so they weren’t even restricted to the roads anymore. It was a strange feeling riding over these meadows. “You don’t hire any extra hands?” she asked.

“Oh, we do, but you know... it’s hard to find help during the holidays.”

Eva thought over what West *wasn’t* saying. His family had financial troubles. They could easily get help from West, but she had a feeling he’d already offered. They didn’t take charity, did they?

Would her help be considered an insult?

She clicked her heels together in her nervousness. Eva had bought her boots from the famous designer Sandbarrel, and had even packed six pairs of them because she’d been so eager to fit in at Harvest Ranch. These ones were black and matched with the cute cowgirl hat that she’d scored from one of her daddy’s rodeos. She usually paired them with a short, flirty dress, but on the off chance that West was serious about her actually doing some good here, she put on her cutest pair of jeans instead.

Just because she was on the range didn’t mean that she couldn’t make a fashion statement.

“Anyway, don’t mind Cole,” West said. “He won’t say it, but he’ll appreciate all the grunt work he can find.”

Well, that didn’t sound like the Cole that she knew, but then again West wasn’t exactly observant. Lately, it seemed he wouldn’t notice a bear if it jumped out at him wearing a leotard and turning cartwheels.

“There he is.” West pointed. “I figured ‘the baby’ would be hiding out in the farthest part of our grounds today.”

Eva straightened in her seat, spying Cole fixing a gate out on the marshland. His black tee had the sleeves yanked off. His muscles strained against the post as he pushed it back up. She jumped when she saw that he was wearing humongously baggy overalls. He’d rolled down the bib, and tied off a makeshift waistband with some rope.

She hid a laugh. Eva might have something to do with his strange getup. He’d left the house too early for her to tell him her plans for his wardrobe.

If she didn’t make it up to him, he’d never let her live this down.

“We’d better park back here,” West said, “or we won’t get this pickup out of the mud.”

West drove to the edge of the marshland before turning off his engine. The grass was awash in autumn colors with oranges and reds and yellows and greens. The lake in the middle of it all was swollen from the storm. It washed out over the banks, making its own little tributaries that overflowed into the reeds to form still ponds.

It would be a mosquito jungle out there.

West slid out of the truck. Lizardman followed with a happy bark. Eva jumped out her side. The ground was slick from the rain last night, and she carefully picked her way through the mud and rain puddles. The swampy marshland sucked at her new boots.

West dragged out the shotguns from the back of the truck. He'd promised Eva they'd go shooting this morning before he left her with Cole to make more calls.

She winced at the thought. Cole wouldn't want her around after yesterday's fiasco, but she'd do anything to bond with her new family, even face brutal rejection, and if that happened? West would have no choice but to let her hang out with him for the rest of their time here.

That could be good.

West handed her the shotgun while he settled the strap of a bag carrying the shatterproof bottles for target practice over his shoulder. "You know there is an abandoned mine over here," he said.

That sounded intriguing. "Is that so?" she asked.

"But you probably shouldn't go over there. It's haunted."

Her heart skipped. Now it was doubly intriguing. "No! Really?"

West grinned. Of course, he knew exactly what would happen when he brought up the most interesting thing about the place. No one could stop her from exploring now. She was far more curious than Curious George could ever be.

West kissed her forehead. "Well, if you can believe Porter, it's haunted... so that doesn't mean much. Burro Mine is from the pioneer times when our place was first settled. They excavated a limestone quarry there, I think. You can even find an old wagon stuck in the mud out there."

Eva grabbed West's arm. "Let's go!"

He laughed. "I'm not sure if I can find the time, but you should definitely see it. Get Cole to take you. He knows the area like the back of his hand. Our pops couldn't pry him from there when he was a kid."

But Eva wanted West to take her! She'd find a way to make it happen. She leaned into him. "Yes, but who will protect me if you don't come?" she asked.

He made a noncommittal sound as they approached Cole. His younger brother stepped back like he'd just seen the ghost of their quarry mines. "West." His voice sounded like a warning.

"What?" West's eyes widened too innocently. "I'm taking Eva shooting. Try to stay out of the way. It's her first time."

Or hundred-and-fiftieth time, but who was counting? She had to find some way to convince West to show her around the place. And if he tried to teach her how to shoot by putting his arms around her? Even better.

I'll be his finest pupil.

She smiled over at Cole. "I'll be a country girl after West is through with me. Just point me to a horse."

Cole's eyes ran to her legs. "Nice boots," he muttered. "Those will be perfect for the mud out here." Judging from the way he said it, they wouldn't be at all.

He could be nicer!

At least she wasn't wearing those stupid overalls of his... which were kind of attractive. She liked the look actually. Eva immediately decided to buy some of her own. Unfortunately, she'd left her phone at home to avoid that stalker.

Instead of fessing up to taking his jeans, she decided to tease him about it instead. "When I said to change up your look, Cole, I didn't mean for you to turn into a hick. You look like Jed from the Beverly Hillbillies."

A crease of amusement pressed against his cheek, though he shook it away. He pointed out to the hillside. "Keep your shooting out there by the mine. There are cattle out in the marshlands that I'm trying to herd out."

"The mine?" She glanced back at West. "I seriously can't wait to see it."

West's eyes turned considering on his brother. "It's been years since I've been down there. I don't know where the entrance is. You'll have to ask Cole. The mine's his favorite place."

"Yeah, when I was twelve." Cole headed back to the post, picking up the wiring to get the fence up. "I don't have time to go down there anymore."

"Are you saying that you don't have enough help out here?" West asked.

"You offering?" Cole asked. His lip curled up at the effort of bringing up another fallen post. The whole fencing had been trampled or blown over by something. It must've been the storm.

Eva got ready for West to nod and offer her services, but instead he pinned his brother with a hard look. "I told you I'd hire you more help around here. Why don't you take me up on that?"

Cole shoved the post into the soft mud. "We've got things handled."

"There are ways to earn the money from me... if that makes it better?"

Cole peered at his older brother over the fencing. His eyes went to Eva and darted back to West again. He shook his head. "Not really."

"There's nothing wrong with getting your hands a little dirty."

Eva squirmed with discomfort. She had a feeling that West was offering something else, and her stomach knotted. It was bad enough that West was getting in over his head with whatever secretive and shady connections he held in Nashville, but he'd drag his younger brother down with him?

She couldn't live with herself if she allowed anything to happen to Cole.

Her hands tightened on the shotgun. "How about we go and shoot some ghosts, huh?"

"I had something else in mind," West said. He took the shotgun from Eva and fired on one of the rotting cattle crossing signs across the way. The weathered wood split into two.

"Really?" Cole complained over the noise. "You're really shooting our signs?"

"How many of those signs do we need? Three is overkill." He handed the shotgun to Eva. "You try it."

"Why don't you go for that burnt corpse of a tree over there," Cole suggested.

It was twice as far. "You have a lot of faith in me," Eva said with a wink. But she'd spare his signs. She aimed for the dead tree, and hesitated when she remembered that she wasn't supposed to know what she was doing. She tossed her hair, looking back at West. "Aren't you going to show me the basics, babe?"

"Of course." West took the shotgun and aimed it at another cattle sign in the distance. It exploded just like the first one.

Cole groaned. There was only one of them left.

Eva took the shotgun back, surprised when West didn't bother to show her anything more. Two could play this game. She aimed for the black and twisted tree and fired, missing on purpose. She made a sound of distress.

And just like she'd planned, West's arms went around her. "Like this." His breath was warm against her ear as he adjusted her aim on the target. "Now shoot."

She shot and hit the tree's rotted corpse in the side.

Not bad. Of course, she could've done better without West's help.

West confiscated the gun and took aim himself. He got the branches to the side of the tree that had become their target. He turned to Cole. "See if you can't take it out."

“No.” Cole was a machine. He hadn’t stopped working on the fence since they’d gotten there. His jaw was tight with annoyance. He bent to gather more wire, and those funny bib overalls slid down slightly. He caught at them. The rope to keep them up wasn’t quite working.

“Maybe you should just buckle those bib overalls on, Mr. Oshkosh B’gosh?” West cruelly mocked him. “You don’t want to show off those chiseled abs to the world.”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Or *maybe* if someone didn’t follow me around like a stalker, I’d have my own jeans.” This was said with an accusing glare at West.

Eva squirmed. He was misdirecting his anger. She vowed to fix this as soon as they got home.

West switched direction and got the last cattle crossing sign. It exploded.

Cole wasn’t impressed. He crossed his arms over the post to stare up at them. “What am I supposed to do to get rid of you, West?”

“You know exactly what.”

“You’re running out of targets,” Cole said. He tapped the post, turning from them. “I guess you’ll have to try someplace else.”

They had a whole bag of shiny shatterproof bottles to shoot. She wasn’t sure why West was going for the signs anyway, except to drive his rule-abiding brother crazy.

Eva aimed for the twisted and black tree again. She hadn’t tried to get her target, but still the bullet hurtled uncomfortably close to it. She’d almost blown her cover.

Cole let out a sound of disdain. “You’re holding it wrong, Eva. At least...” He came up behind her and guided her fingers over the firearm like his brother had failed to do. “Hold it like that.” A musky cedar and citrus scent hit her senses full force as he gave her a full dose of Cole. The smell of him was far too captivating. She fidgeted.

“Not that way, like that, and lift it... there...” He breathed out heavily while he tried to rearrange her body into the perfect form for shooting. Cole tried to keep his distance—she could tell—especially when his leg ran up against hers. He pulled quickly back like he’d been stung by the contact.

A tremor ran through her, confusing her so much that she almost forgot what she was doing. Her fingers pressed against the trigger. No, no! She stopped herself just in time. If she hit the tree point blank, Cole would take all the credit.

She let the gun drift to the side and shot, safely missing the target by... a lot.

“It’s like you’re doing it on purpose,” Cole muttered. And then after a moment, he tilted his head at her.

Oh, the jig was definitely up. He suspected what she was doing, no doubt about it. But who cared? West still had no idea.

Yet...

She snickered. “One more round.” This time, they’d set up the targets that they’d brought along. The signs were completely obliterated, due to this strange sibling rivalry happening right now.

She had no idea what the brothers were fighting about, but one thing was certain. There was no way that Cole was going to take her up on her offer of helping anymore.

Chapter Fourteen

Eva was pretending to be a bad shot, but the question was by how much?

She should knock it off. West never cared about a damsel in distress—in fact, he was the type to put them all in that distress in the first place.

Cole usually had front row seats to all of West's devilish schemes.

“Okay, I guess we're out of things to vandalize,” Eva said with a laughing look at West. “How about we use the targets that we brought.” She rushed on ahead, placing brightly colored bottles in the branches of the trees.

West stepped back, fixing Cole with a grim expression as soon as she was out of earshot. “Look, I already told you. I can't leave her alone.”

Cole had known he'd get the third degree when West finally caught up to him. “And I already told you...”

“Trout has some dangerous enemies,” West cut through his arguments. Cole stiffened when he realized what West was saying. “I'm not even talking about the enemies that he's made running for office,” West said. “Lacy Lynch is out on bail, and there's word that he's got it out for us after what we did to him.”

Cole groaned. Was this the root of all of West's dark hints earlier about not being able to leave her alone? “You never should've messed with Lynch.”

“And what would've happened if we hadn't? Huh?” West was running low on patience. “They would've destroyed our family; they would've taken our land, all that we had. We owe Eva everything.”

By destroying her life with a loveless marriage? Cole didn't buy that West was being altruistic in the least. He was only out to help himself. “You expect me to keep Lacy Lynch away from her? Doesn't he have hired guns and enough money to put a bounty on anyone who bothers him?”

His brother rolled his eyes. “Nothing's going to happen. He's laying low. It just that... her daddy's worried, okay? I don't want to say anything to ruin her vacation, but... I need you.” West's frown tightened into a smile as Eva closed in on them. “Yeah, why don't you take her to the abandoned mine,” he said in a louder voice.

The town had made the mine the local make-out spot. The idiot.

But of course, West was banking on the fact that his fiancée didn't know that. “She'd love the old miner cart stuck in the marsh.”

“If I do this,” Cole hissed, “then it's just for today. Find yourself another way to keep an eye on her tomorrow.”

“Done,” West said.

“I've got the targets set up.” Eva came back with an excited skip. She was more than ready to pretend to fail again.

West wrapped his arms around her and brought her close. “Honey, I'm leaving you in Cole's capable hands. He'd love your help on the range.”

So, all West had been waiting for was Cole to agree to the deal and then he was back to running again? Cole's stomach twisted as Eva's face fell. West must've noticed too, because he tried to kiss it

all better. “Baby, I don’t know about you, but I’m so excited to dig into that pumpkin tonight.”

“West,” she stepped back, looking flustered. “You’re not staying for the next round of shooting?” Eva had that funny southern accent that came out when she was in the throes of deep emotion. “How am I supposed to show you up?”

Cole was quite certain that she could already.

“You’re lethal as it is,” West assured her. “I’m not sure it’s such a good idea to teach you how to shoot.”

“Hmm.” She squeezed him closer. “I’ll force you to make this up to me tonight. You know that, right?”

“I’m looking forward to it.” West caught her lips with his.

Cole pushed his hand through his hair, feeling like a third wheel—worse than that; he was a louse. He knew exactly how West was using her, and he felt helpless to do anything about it. His inaction didn’t sit right, but shoving his nose where it didn’t belong wouldn’t work either.

West and Eva were going to do exactly what they wanted to do.

And still, he felt miserable.

West turned to his brother. “Keep those shotguns on you, okay?”

Cole nodded numbly. Maybe he should accept the pay, too. He’d somehow become Trout’s hired gun.

West left Eva with more promises than he could possibly keep, and rode out of there like a NASCAR driver with the other competitors on his heels. He wasn’t about to give Cole a chance to change his mind about their agreement.

A yapping from Lizardman made him realize that West had left his dog behind too. Cole’s babysitting status was complete.

Taking a steadying breath, he glanced over at Eva. Her fingers tightened over the shotgun. She rested the barrel against the ground. He broke into a reluctant laugh. “You little fake. I bet you can shoot every single one of those targets right between the eyes.”

“Who? Me?” Her denial was too theatrical to be believed.

He’d challenge her to a duel of target practice, except he needed to get this fence up. The storm had blown over this section, and the cattle had done the rest, escaping into the marshland. So far, none of them had sunk into the mud, but it was only a matter of time.

Eva was hardly dressed to be out here. His eyes ran over her pretty little cowgirl outfit. She had the tight jeans and the flirty blousy shirt that made her seem like she belonged to the bleachers of the rodeo, instead of working at a ranch.

“Do those boots do something more than walking?” he asked her.

She burst into a smile. “They’d better—they cost me a pretty penny.”

Didn’t she mean they had cost her daddy? Whatever. “Okay,” he said. “Help me hold this post while I get this wire back on it.”

To her credit, she nodded eagerly. She set the shotgun aside and stepped forward in those sassy boots, reporting for duty.

He noticed her bare hands and grunted out his opposition. “Wait, wait... where are your work gloves?”

“It’s fine. I don’t need any.”

His eyes ran to her manicured nails, and he ripped off his own gloves. “Take these.” Her nose wrinkled. “It’s better than tearing up those fine hands of yours,” he said.

She snatched the gloves from him. “You think my hands are fine?”

Did he say that? He ignored the question, bringing the post up so that she could help brace it with him. She was small, maybe smaller than most of the girls that he knew, but she had spunk and her extra pair of hands made all the difference with helping him to balance this.

“That’s cool that you have an abandoned mine out here,” she said.

He shook his head. “It’s not as amazing as West makes it sound.”

“But it’s history,” she said. “I love taking a look into the past and just kind of imagining how things used to be.” She sighed. “You might as well show it to me.”

“Burro Mine is just a make-out spot.” Someone had to break it to her. She jumped, startled at his bluntness and he smothered his grin. “You should probably get your fiancé to take you there.”

She ducked her head with a laugh. “The make-out spot? Yeah, he’d better!” She pushed her knee into the post while Cole drove it into the ground. As soon as he got it into place, she touched the leather bracelet sliding around his wrist. “What’s that?”

He glanced down at the lettering. It said “Lily” for his momma. His sister-in-law, Mimi, had come up with the idea to show their support for their mother’s fight to keep her failing heart alive. “It’s for my mom. All the brothers wear one.”

“Even West?”

“He *has* one.” Judging by her surprised expression, West didn’t wear it. Cole wasn’t surprised. “He was never one for... uh... superstition, as he calls it.”

That was a nice way of saying that his brother was a godless heretic.

“He thinks it’s superstition to show his support?” Eva asked.

“He puts it right up there in the same category with ‘thoughts and prayers.’ He says put your money where your mouth is.”

Eva snorted. “Oh brother. Love the guy, but West needs to get over himself sometimes. I’m all for doing more than ‘talk,’ but it’s nice to know that people care, too. ‘Thoughts and prayers’ is just something that kind people say when there isn’t much they can do, but they *would* if they could.”

“Well...” Sorta, except Cole also knew there was more to it. That was just another difference between the brothers. He shrugged. “I believe in the power of prayer,” he said. “Sure, we accept God’s will in the end. If it happens to be different than ours, that’s harder, but... God also shows his love by granting miracles, too. And those come in many forms, even if it’s just comfort or strength beyond our own, or even just the knowledge of an eternal plan.”

“Oh?” she smiled, watching him like he was a rare butterfly in a field of crickets. “That is so sweet that you believe that.”

“You don’t?”

She giggled. “I don’t know what I believe, but I’ve never *seen* a miracle.”

He stared at her. They were everywhere if she opened her eyes. “Look in the mirror.”

Her nose wrinkled in that cute way of hers. “I’m a miracle? Cole, you *are* sweet!”

Cole didn’t mean for it to be sweet, but maybe it was. He grumbled out a laugh. “Life is a miracle. Hold this still, will you?”

She nodded and steadied the post as he began wrapping the wire around it.

“Listen to Hamlet’s monologue on ‘What a piece of work is a man.’ That should give you an idea,” he said.

“Ha! Hamlet now?” Her legs bent as she helped balance his work. “Can we even talk about Shakespeare when wearing cowboy boots and putting up a cattle fence?”

He chuckled and tried to remember what he’d memorized for his freshman speech class. “What a piece of work is a man,” he quoted. “How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and

moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god.” His eyes lifted to her perfect blue ones—they rivaled this majestic sky after a storm. “The beauty of the world,” he breathed, “the paragon of animals....” There was more, but it just went downhill from there. Shakespeare was trying to depict a man disillusioned by the murder of his father, after all.

“Oh, you’d better stop,” she said. That dimple was showing on her cheek again. “You’ll steal me away from your brother with that kind of talk.”

He grimaced out a smile. He hadn’t been trying to win her over, in the least, but one thing he was discovering—Eva was easy to talk to, even with her constant joking, or maybe because of it. Cole felt like he was out here with Hudson, talking deeply like they always liked to do.

Why not treat her the same as his brothers and give her the real Cole? After all, she was going to be a part of this family. “Well, Shakespeare was a Bible reader,” Cole said. “Everyone was back then, and I think he pulled his best work from there. Hamlet’s speech came from Psalms 8.”

“Do it,” she said, breathlessly. “Give me Psalms 8.”

He hesitated. “Give you...?” But he knew that she was asking him to quote it like he’d done Hamlet’s speech. She must think he was better than the search engine on her phone. Of course, she couldn’t know that Psalms 8 just happened to be the lyrics in one of their hymnals at church. They’d both lucked out.

“What is man, that thou art mindful of him?” He quoted the psalm as he clawed at another piece of wire. “And the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet. All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.”

“So pretty,” she said.

But they were missing his favorite part. “Oh Lord, *our* Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth, who hast set thy glory above the heavens.... When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained...”

He loved that part the most because he was out here on his family’s land all day *every day*, experiencing the beauty of God’s creations for himself.

He grabbed two ends of the wire now. “Take this.” He handed her the third piece.

She took it to keep it straight while he put the rest of the fence together. “Don’t get me wrong, Cole.” She supported the post with her hip while he worked. “I still have no idea what you’re saying.”

He couldn’t help his low rumble of laughter while he twisted the wires together. Eva was definitely asking for trouble if she wanted him to clarify. She was about to get more of Cole than she wanted. “All I’m saying is that miracles are everywhere,” he said. “You just have to look around to see them!”

The birds sailed over the still pond. The reeds swayed with the long grass through the marshland, even the colors were manufactured by heaven.

“This land we’re in? It’s a miracle—but *not* just because of its beauty, even though it’s *very* beautiful, but think of the wondrous way the earth works in that rare dance between life and death.”

At least that’s how his *momma* put it. He’d thought over her words on his long days out on the range. He’d expressed them often in his heart every time he witnessed the grandeur of a sunset or the power of a storm. The gratitude he felt always came out in a prayer on his lips.

“Everything is in perfect balance,” he said. “The chemical elements that make up the air, the tilt

of the earth and the distance of the sun in every season and the organization of every cycle so that we do not burn alive or freeze to death, the geothermal makeup of our world that retains heat, the oceans and seas that regulate our climate.”

She rested her cheek against the post to smile over at him. “And here I thought you herded cattle for a living. I can’t figure out if you’re a man of science or a man of God.”

He laughed. “I only know enough to make me dangerous.” He gathered up the piece of wire that she’d been holding. “Good thing that God has it all together, and it’s not on me. He’s the master scientist, and I just get to theorize on how he made this earth. But just think of the resources he’s put on our planet? Not just the fuels and forests, but the food and animals and plants. The soil that’s rich in minerals that our food soaks up to give us every nutrient that we need to stay alive—everything he’s granted for our survival... and more... because life is more than survival, isn’t it? He’s put things on this planet that bring us joy.”

It was only the complications of a fallen world that brought them pain, that and the agency of man—all necessary for growth and learning.

“But wait, wait, wait.” She held up her hand. “It could’ve just been that we had the perfect planet for life and so everything else came after that... naturally.”

“Without God?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

He enjoyed philosophizing with her. Her eyes were bright with interest and sincerity, so he encouraged her to say her piece. “How?”

“Say we have the perfect conditions because of the odds, right? There are an endless number of planets out there, and so it’s bound to happen because of all the boundless variables. Then boom, life also bleeped into existence... because if it’s possible, life finds a way to... be. It’s how nature works, always becoming, always reaching its true potential because of its DNA.”

“Who told nature how to be? Who made the map?”

“I don’t know. Does everything have to be planned? What came first, the chicken or the egg? That’s the question of the ages. I mean, how do *we* know how to be?”

He was impressed. Eva was as fun to talk to as his brothers. “Okay, even if you believe that everything happening here was all an accident or an anomaly, or even nature being nature,” he said, “for life to reach this kind of sophistication? That’s pretty amazing.”

“Maybe we’re not that sophisticated. You know, in comparison to other life forms that we haven’t encountered.”

“True,” he said. “I believe we have potential far beyond what we’ve reached—we are the children of God, after all... but still consider the progress that we’ve made so far, and how do you explain how we’ve survived on this planet for so long? Because let’s face it, if something goes wrong, just one thing messes up the balance of life... we’re out of here. We just go a few million miles further out on our orbit around the sun than we’re supposed to—or a meteorite hits or the waters dry up—and we experience worldwide famines or pandemics or any disaster of any serious nature, because... if you think about it, we have some competition on this planet for dominance from invading bacteria to viruses to predators, even down to mother earth. What’s to stop this world from treating us like the vermin we are and finishing us off with a tremble of her shoulder? Any thinking person at one time or another realizes that we’re in a very precarious situation here.”

“Well, that’s why we have so many people freaking out about climate change.”

“They think everything is on their shoulders,” he said.

“It’s not?”

“We have a stewardship and responsibility to do the best that we can, just like with everything in our lives, but... we are not in control here. To say that we are? We’re lying to ourselves. It’s vanity. We think we can be like Doctor Frankenstein keeping our monster alive... because... let’s be honest, we’re *so* afraid of the end... or of death really, so afraid that something is going to go wrong when we don’t have faith... but truly, none of us will ever see the bigger picture until we feel the smaller one—we have to feel the personal touch of Heaven in our lives to know how powerful God really is.” He finished tying off the fence, noticing that she was staring at him now.

He’d really gone off the deep end with her, hadn’t he?

He supposed Eva hadn’t really grown up with a religious background. This kind of talk might be foreign to her, when it was everyday talk to him. Once again, he was reminded of how much more Eva had in common with West than with any of the other Slades. But Eva and Cole? Not so much. He was sure that he sounded like a crazy man to her.

He let out a reluctant laugh. “Hey, now you know what happens when you get stuck with me in the pasture. That’s me doing Psalms 8.”

Her eyes crinkled up in the corners with her genuine smile. “Are you kidding me? I like the way you look at the world.”

Really?

He didn’t detect any sarcasm or discomfort in her manner, but then again, Eva had always struck him as the kind of person who was curious about the way people ticked and the world around her. She probably devoured podcasts, like she did everything that intrigued her. The girl never really seemed threatened by finding differences in people.

That was just one of the qualities that he admired in her. Once again, Cole wondered what kind of impact she’d make in West’s life if he let her.

That was the problem, wasn’t it? West would *never* let her in.

They worked on the rest of the broken fencing. This time, they kept their conversation light, though Cole still couldn’t help teasing her again about pretending to be a bad shot. “I don’t believe you’re that awful for a second,” he said.

“Oh yeah? What gave it away? *Not* that I’m saying you’re right.”

A panicked cry cut through the peace of the morning. Cole’s stomach dropped. He knew that sound anywhere. It was a lone calf. The young animal let out another squeal. It was definitely in danger.

Lizardman pulled upright, growling as he shivered with rapt attention. Cole’s gaze was drawn to the reeds blocking their view from the swamp. That’s where the bawling came from. The calf wouldn’t last long out there in the mud.

The scrappy little puppy let out a bark and dashed into the reeds to follow the anguished mewling. Cole stepped towards the sound too, hearing Eva follow closely behind. He turned to study her fashionable boots. They wouldn’t hold up in this kind of terrain. The swamp would swallow her like it had the calf.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’m going in.”

Chapter Fifteen

Did Cole really just say that? Just like a fireman. He was going in.

Eva smiled.

Cole disappeared through the reeds. The muscles rippled through his arms as he made his way through the mud. He looked like a knight wearing a tunic with those sleeves ripped off his shirt. It gave her a good view of his strong back and shoulders. Now this was the kind of man who rescued the weak and saved the hurting.

A hero. She couldn't be prouder of her future family.

The poor calf let out another cry at seeing Cole push through the reeds.

She heard some shouting, then splashing, a bit of coaxing before a large head crashed through the reeds. The rest of its reddish-brown body came charging over the same pathway that Cole had made. Mud ran down the calf's shoulders and legs as it whipped its head around in an agitated way. The poor thing bawled and cried out like a baby.

The lumbering thing *was* a baby! It came straight for the fencing that they'd fixed.

Eva grabbed the side of the barrier that acted like a gate and opened it to let the crying calf barrel its way through.

The calf paced back and forth on the other side until it eventually wandered back to where Eva stood. Its big eyes stared up at her like it wanted something.

"Hey there, little one." She had no idea if this was a boy or a girl.

Its mouth smacked together like a baby asking for milk, and then the clumsy sweetheart caught a hold of her sleeve and started to chomp at it.

She laughed and screamed and then scrambled away. "Oh no, you poor thing! Are you hungry? We don't eat clothes." She peered over the fencing at the reeds. "Cole," she called out. "You coming out or what?"

"Um... about that..."

"What's the problem?"

"I lost my overalls somewhere."

She covered her face, feeling her body ache with the effort of trying to keep her howls of laughter from reaching him. She was doing a poor job of it. Reaching over to pat the squirming calf on the top of its soft head, she puckered her lips. "Is that your fault... Dopey?" she quickly named the cute thing. He sure liked to eat clothes.

Though she knew who the true culprit was. After all, Cole never would've grabbed the overalls if she hadn't started this little war of fashion with him. She'd make this right. "I'm coming."

"No!" he tried to shout her back.

"Don't be a baby." She wriggled through the fence, making sure that Dopey stayed on the other side of it. "I can help."

"How?" he asked incredulously. "You'll make me a pair of pants out of mud?"

She giggled again, searching around for something, anything. She remembered that there was a dirty blanket that they'd wrapped around the bottles. She ran to fetch it, dragging it away from the rest of the target practice equipment. She tried to air it out by whipping it around. It was a little dusty, but

it would do the trick. "I think I have something you could use!"

"You really shouldn't come in here," he said.

"Now, now, you're a big strong cowboy." She followed the trail that Dopey had flattened in his escape from the swamp. "You shouldn't be afraid of a little missy like me." She dissolved into giggles again. Their roles were reversed from yesterday.

"No, I mean..."

She cleared her way through the reeds and took one step and dropped through the ground. She shrieked out as she sank up to her thighs in the mud. Oh! Eva finally figured out what Cole meant. She tried to wriggle out and felt her boots wrenched from her feet in one sucking motion. "My boots!" she moaned.

"Don't move! Don't move."

Looking to the side, she saw Cole almost chest deep in the water ahead of her. Lizardman dashed around the edge of the pond, whimpering pathetically.

"Lizardman!" she cried. "Keep away!"

"Don't worry! Don't worry," Cole said. "He's light. He won't sink."

"What is this, quicksand or something?"

"No, no, just mud. Stay where you are. I'm coming."

"What are you going to do?" He was already missing his pants. She snickered again at the thought. This was both hilarious and super scary. Clutching the blanket close to her, she threw the end of it at him. He grabbed it and wrapped the heavy wool around his legs before he started to climb his way out. Water drained from his chest and arms as he struggled to get to her side.

Once he reached her, he took her hand. It practically swallowed hers in its immensity, and then taking a deep breath, he made sure that the blanket was tucked in place before he turned to her. She let out a hysterical giggle. The man looked like a mud-caked Pict warrior in a kilt.

This was going to get interesting.

His beautiful eyes ran over her to figure out her predicament. The next instant, Cole's hands went under her arms and he tugged her up. She gasped at his strength, throwing her flailing arms around his neck. The mud surrendered her leg with a pop.

She was completely barefoot. "My boots! My boots." She tried to reach them.

"I've got it." He set her near the reeds where the plants gave her firm ground. He clawed around the mud, prying out one boot. A loud sucking noise followed his movements.

Where was the other one?

She inched closer and the slippery mud did the rest. It carried her down the small incline. She careened forward, falling face first into the cold mud. She lifted her head from the watery sludge. Her hair dripped with it.

By now, Cole was laughing so hard that he was having trouble keeping his own balance. He landed on one knee and lent her his hand. "Let's try to get out of this together. You ready?"

She nodded, concentrating with all her might to find some footing that wouldn't suck her under or make her slip. "Walk on your tiptoes," he said. "Don't plant your feet on the ground. That way you won't get stuck."

Eva tried to do it like he said. She reached for her final boot, but she lost her balance again and fell back into the mud. "Okay... you're okay." Cole's reassurances were lost in more of his amusement. "I've got you." His hands found her and she let out a surprised breath when he scooped her easily up into his arms.

She was pretty positive that they both resembled mud wrestlers at this point.

Eva searched for her boots again, this time catching sight of those overalls. “There!” She pointed. They’d drifted up at the edge of the reeds. “You’re in luck! You don’t have to wear a kilt.”

He hadn’t stopped snickering since she’d done a face plant in the mud, and he didn’t quit now. Setting her back in the reeds, he snatched at the overalls. “Turn around,” he said.

Eva covered her face. The blanket landed against her, and she caught it. When he finally gave her permission to use her eyes again, she burst out into laughter. If she ever did behold a redneck from the deepest parts of the Ozarks, there he was with one strap of his bib overalls stretched over those filthy muscular shoulders. The rough beginnings of a beard shadowed his strong jaw. The only thing missing was a piece of straw sticking from his mouth.

Also strangely attractive.

Not a surprise, since he was a Slade.

For not the first time, Eva wished that she’d brought her phone, so that she could capture this embarrassing scene with her camera. She shifted and sank deeper in the mud. Yeah, probably a good thing she didn’t—her phone would’ve been ruined in all this mud.

Cole watched her with a laughing expression. Her heart lurched at the brilliance of his blue eyes, made especially vibrant with that black mud dripping from his face and hair. His mouth curved. It was the most expressive thing about him, and he didn’t have to say a thing for her to know that he was getting ready to rescue her again.

Her attention was riveted on that mouth as he came closer. She remembered how electrifying his lips had felt against hers.

Uh, wait. Huh?

She stilled, trying to check herself. Eva shouldn’t be thinking about West’s brother this way. He was just becoming really dear to her after all their adventures together—that was all... like a brother.

A brother! Yes.

His hand wrapped around her arm. She noticed the lines of veins running up through his forearms as he tucked her against his chest. He helped her through the reeds. “Getting back should be interesting,” he muttered against the top of her head.

Her cheeks flooded with warmth. She’d forgotten about that little complication. West had dropped her off without a backward glance, but she’d noticed Cole only had his horse with him. Together, they struggled out of the broken pathway created by Dopey.

Lizardman let out an overjoyed yelp when they cleared the reeds and were back on firm ground. The puppy hopped up against Eva’s legs, almost overturning her again.

“Lizardman!” Cole shouted out. “Sit!”

Now it was her turn to laugh. The Slades calling out that ridiculous name never got old. She was probably hysterical, but she was having the time of her life.

The calf lingered near the fence, staring over at them with big brown eyes as they approached. Eva’s gait was uneven, since she was missing a boot. The horse let out a nervous whinny at seeing the mud people descend on him.

“It’s me, Sleipnir,” Cole reassured the paint.

The horse seemed to relax at the sound of his voice, though its eyes shifted worriedly to Eva. She tried to make human noises to put the animal more at ease.

Cole pulled his phone from his pocket. He cleaned the mud off of the screen while he turned to her. “What kind of noises are you making?”

“I’m trying to let the animals know that I’m a human, and not some mud monster come to devour them.”

“Huh.” He was only half paying attention. He was trying to get his phone to work again.

The human angle didn't seem to work on the calf, but the big baby wasn't exactly afraid of her, either. The calf went back to sniffing her stomach. He gummed the ends of her muddy shirt with its oversized mouth. “No, no!” She waved her finger ineffectually at it. She glanced over at Cole. “This baby is hungry. He's trying to eat me.”

Cole broke into another grin and stuffed his phone back into his muddy pocket. “My phone's busted. Did you bring yours?”

“No.” She grimaced in apology. “I'm really sorry.”

His eyes went to the calf. “I have no idea where this little guy's mother is. We need to take him back with us.” His gaze fell on Eva next, like he was trying to determine how to get them *all* home. “I guess you'll have to ride on Sleipnir with me.”

Her lips tightened. She didn't trust herself to speak.

Cole rolled out his shoulders, squinting against the bright sun. “Ah man, we're cursed.” He glanced over at her with a teasing expression. “You think you can keep your distance from me? You're covered in mud.”

She let out a giggle, even while her stomach twisted nervously at the thought of being in Cole's arms all the way back from the farthest part of the ranch. It had taken almost forty-five minutes for West to get here in his pickup. She forced her voice to stay light. “No problem, as long as I get the first shower when we get back.”

“The way things are going, we're going to have to hose off in the barn.” His eyes drifted to her bare foot. Her sock was also missing. “You want me to go back for your boot?” he asked.

“No, I have no idea where it went, and well... I can't risk you getting sucked up in that quicksand. You're my ride back, after all.”

He humored her joke with a tight smile.

Yeah, she got it. The ride back was going to be tough. No matter how much she'd tried to keep her distance from him, they kept getting thrown together.

Cole packed the rest of their supplies onto the back of his horse in silence. She grabbed the shotgun and he slid it into a holster against the horse's side. The calf tried to munch at her hair.

“Oh no you don't, little guy.” Cole looped a rope around the calf's neck.

Their extra traveler was going to slow them down a lot.

After getting everything in place, Cole held out his hand to her. She took it, feeling overcome with embarrassment as he guided her bare foot into the stirrup. She settled on the top of the paint's broad back and tried to find her seat just as Cole got on behind her.

He took her breath away.

Cole moved his arms around her to get at the reins. His sheer immensity overwhelmed her as she tried and failed to find something witty to say to lighten the moment. She was completely enveloped in his familiar cedar and citrus scent again. His musky fragrance was beginning to feel like coming home. She noticed that he'd wrapped the rope around the saddle horn, the veins of his muscular forearm standing out as he guided the calf tied to the other end. He tapped Sleipnir's side and they ambled forward at an awkward pace.

Yeah, this was going to take a long time.

Lizardman took the lead, occasionally stopping to bark at them to urge them on faster, but of course, they couldn't with Dopey who kept stopping to sniff the flowers and whatever else came along. Cole shouted out at the lumbering calf, trying to drive the baby forward with his cattleman calls that worked maybe half the time.

And with that strange caravan, they slowly made their way back home through the meadow.

Eva did her best to inch as far from Cole as possible, holding herself stiffly so that she didn't bump into his arms as they moved forward. Her shoulders and side began to ache. For just a moment, she slumped back and rested against his chest.

Oh, that felt so much better.

"You were supposed to keep your distance," he said.

"Sorry," she breathed. He'd been joking, but in a way she saw the wisdom in it. There was something about this moment that felt charged.

"Hmm, turns out your hair doesn't taste like strawberries. It sure smells like it though. It's in my face." He reached up and brushed the escaped strands away from him. The tips of his fingers caught against her neck and sent an odd tingling sensation straight through her.

She gulped. "Yeah, West doesn't like... eating my hair, either."

Ugh. She was horribly tongue tied all of a sudden. Taking a deep breath, she conjured all the times West had kissed her that she could, but the memories only felt like they were covered in cobwebs in the dustiest corners of her mind.

What was her problem? Her fiancé had kissed her goodbye only a few hours ago!

At that moment, Dopey decided to charge ahead. The horse stumbled. Cole let out a breath, and apologizing in advance, he seized Eva with one arm to stop her from falling and wrestled back the cow with the other. Her heart shot into her throat as Cole's strong fingers pressed into her stomach.

The horse shuddered in response, but Cole expertly kept his saddle. His legs rammed up against hers as he fought for control over the two powerful beasts.

By the time Dopey had returned to its usual lope, Eva was hopelessly lost in Cole. Her ear was jammed against the rough stubble of his neck. Struggling to untangle herself from his arms, her lips actually ran up against his firm jaw. His skin felt exactly how it had when they'd kissed in the barn.

She shot up straight, her spine stiffening into a pole.

That was it!

Eva was going home, and she was finding West. She'd force him to work on that pumpkin with her, and they'd do something cute like throw pumpkin seeds at each other and make pumpkin bread or pie or something amazing, so that she could feel her heart go pitter-pat at the very thought of him again!

She glanced back at Cole. He grimaced at her, arching a brow. "I guess this is just another thing we don't tell West?"

She laughed weakly. "He must've not realized that he'd left us with one way back."

"Yeah, normally, he's so thoughtful." Cole's voice dripped with sarcasm.

West might not be exactly thoughtful, but he wasn't dumb either.

What was going on with him? West *did* have a lot on his mind, but how heavy a burden was he carrying? She began to worry about what that was exactly. She'd been kept in the dark from it for far too long—whatever it was—because... something big was happening right in front of her nose for him to—to keep accidentally throwing her at his brother.

If she was just some normal girl, he'd lose her.

Suddenly, she was in a hurry to get home and beg him to tell her everything.

Chapter Sixteen

“Dopey? You named our calf Dopey?” Cole asked Eva.

Her delicate shoulders lifted in that careless way of hers. “It’s better than Sleipnir.”

“That’s it,” Cole said. “You’re walking the rest of the way.” Even as he said it, his arms tightened over her. He’d cracked enough lame jokes to keep her at a distance the whole way back, but now that the barn was in sight, he realized how reluctant he was to give her up.

West had a lot to answer for.

Cole did, too.

As soon as he’d realized that his brother had left them no other way to return, he should’ve headed for Funches to beg for his phone. Cole would’ve given West a scolding that he’d never forget. But no, Cole thought he was strong enough to handle a country ride with Eva... and through the stunning colors of autumn decorating their vast property awash in wild beauty, no less.

It turned out that he wasn’t.

Eva had set his blood to boiling with her soft skin and even softer smiles. She smelled good, even under all that mud with her strawberry-scented perfume... or was it her shampoo?

He knew better than to ask.

Was he absolutely insane? Even if she wasn’t his brother’s fiancée, she was still too dangerous to mess with. Eva was Trout’s only daughter. The tycoon protected her more shrewdly than he did the location of his tax shelters against the IRS.

West was being far too reckless with her. They were all asking for trouble.

The mud had dried over Eva’s cheek, flecking into chipped patterns. It was all over her, clinging to her clothes, her neck, her hair. He couldn’t get to it all, and still... without thinking, he wiped off a chunk from the side of her cheek with his thumb. She turned her head. He got the full impact of her jewel-like gaze.

He held his breath.

The sparkle in those eyes after their romp through the mud had deepened into something more poignant, and he wasn’t sure if *she* even knew how she watched him, but if she did, she’d laugh to know what a wreck she was making of his legendary reserve.

Her attention was addicting in a way. He understood why West insisted on keeping her around, even if he didn’t love her.

West was a fool.

Feeling the storm in her soul like it was his own, Cole almost groaned as the tragedy of West’s negligence struck him full force. This girl must be loved as deeply as she loved.

There is still time to talk her out of her obsession with my older brother.

Cole hadn’t realized that he was hatching such a foolhardy plan on their way back, but the more he got to know her, the more he couldn’t stand to see the train wreck that West would make of her life.

This wasn’t because he wanted Eva for himself. Well, he *did*... if he was being honest, but that wasn’t even a thing anyway, no matter how his heart raged against him. The reasons to stay away from her were too many to fight—the two of them were worlds apart... and still he’d see her happy if it killed him.

She cleared her throat. “You know, I should be able to walk from here.” Her bare foot dangled high over the ground.

What was this reluctance filling him at letting her go? Eva fit perfectly against his chest, but no, that wasn’t the reason... entirely. He shook his head, taking a firm hold against his building rebelliousness, even as he heard himself making excuses. “We’ve gone this far. We might as well get you someplace where you won’t step on an old nail from a horseshoe.”

Feeling like a bigger idiot than his brother, Cole brought her to the barn. Releasing Dopey, of course, wasn’t as hard. Cole’s arm was getting numb from wrestling with the bumbling calf’s makeshift leash, and so he dropped off the animal first. The oversized baby immediately found some straw to chew on.

Next, Cole clutched Eva’s waist with both hands so that he could lower her down from his horse. He shouldn’t have done that, either. He was touching her far too much, almost to the point that it felt weird *not* to touch her.

Their kisses were constantly flashing through his mind like an electrical storm. No matter how he tried to cut off those memories, they flooded through everything that he did.

Stop already. You’re a mess!

Cole set Eva down on the barn floor covered in sawdust.

Lizardman hopped joyously around her legs. She leaned down, petting the obnoxiously happy puppy between the ears. “Good boy. You were so fast, Lizardman!” She scooped up the panting dog and cuddled him next to her ear.

His throat constricted. She treated everyone in her life with that same affection. In some ways, she and that cute puppy shared all their best qualities—playful, energetic, innocent—well, in her own way. She was certainly deeply in love with West and had devoted her every thought to him.

She deserved so much better. How could he convince her of that?

He climbed down from Sleipnir and rubbed down his horse, directing Eva to find a stall for the baby calf. The awkward beast was overjoyed to find some hay, but Cole needed to make him up a baby bottle with some milk. They wouldn’t be able to locate the mother any time soon.

Eva tried to help Cole out as much as she could, staggering around in one boot. He thought about sending her off to that shower their dad had constructed in the barn, but the mud on her was almost completely dry now.

Momma’s house would be safe.

There was no reason to keep her hostage anymore.

“Why don’t you go inside and shower off,” he said.

“You’re probably right.” She ducked her head, cheerfully conceding. “We look like we just got done playing the turkey bowl, don’t we? West won’t even recognize me, I bet.” She stroked Dopey’s moving nose before she hobbled away. “Let me know how that big baby does.”

Cole watched her go, trying to shake off this strange new spell that was beating his mind into mush. Nothing was working.

As soon as Cole finished with the animals, he also made his way back to the house. Lizardman followed him inside. The first thing Cole noticed when he walked through the side entrance was the silence. His mother wasn’t at the counter, chopping away at vegetables for dinner.

That was odd.

“Hello?” his voice echoed strangely. The only sound was the water running from Eva’s shower upstairs.

Cole had noticed some cars missing in the front driveway. No one had told him that they were

doing errands today. Still, it wasn't a huge surprise. Their momma would need supplies for Thanksgiving, so she would've gone to Charlottesville, and of course, she was in no condition to drive, so that might explain West's absence. Their old man might still be out working the range.

This meant more hours alone with Eva.

Cole worked off his boots in the mud room, his thoughts in chaos. He really *did* want to help her out, but he'd have to rein in his heart in a big way, or she'd never believe his concerns were sincere about West. He just had to get Eva to see for herself that West didn't appreciate her like he should.

That shouldn't be too hard, right? All Cole had to ask is what his brother had actually done for her lately.

Actions spoke louder than words.

He wandered into the laundry room. Once again, his jeans weren't anywhere, or the rest of his laundry. Had his momma taken off with his load somewhere? But she certainly wasn't strong enough these days. His mind shot straight to Eva—she'd teased him about those jeans, and she certainly would've been bold enough to try to give him a makeover.

Cole saw that West had a load of laundry in the dryer. He dug out some blue shorts and an ugly sweater. He grimaced. This wasn't a makeover, it was a makeunder, but these would have to do until he found his own clothes.

He rushed upstairs and sagged in relief when he got off his mud-caked clothing. Stepping into the shower, he turned the knobs until he had the hottest temperature that he could stand. He gulped in grateful breaths as the heat sprayed off the filth from the day. The water massaged his shoulders, sinking deep into his tight muscles, loosening them, and performing miracles, as far as he could see, as it also washed away his worries from the day.

Cole might've taken a little long to leave the comfort of that shower, and by the time he did, his skin was red, but it had been so worth it.

He could face Eva now. Grabbing West's clothes, he tugged them on, grimacing at the soy boy he saw in the mirror. His brother was such a... hipster. And now Cole was! Ugh. There was nothing for it. He made his way downstairs in his bare feet.

Eva was at the kitchen island, wearing a soft pink bathrobe and pajama bottoms patterned in yellow ducklings. She was putting together a sandwich from the fixings in the fridge. His stomach growled at the sight. He'd forgotten to eat breakfast this morning in his rush to escape his fate.

Little good that had done. Cole was meant to talk some sense into Eva.

She glanced up at him when he reached the bottom of the stairs. Her wet hair curling around her back and shoulders swung as she stepped back. "Oh, look at you! Out of those jeans again." She let out a wolf whistle. "I likee."

He cracked a smile. "Don't be weird about it, embryo. Someone stole the last laundry load, and by the way... if that was you, Eva... I *will* have my revenge."

"What? Me?" She hurriedly slabbed mayonnaise against his momma's homemade wheat bread, only confirming his suspicions. "Is it possible to steal those jeans? I thought they grew on you like a second skin."

"Very funny." He shook his head. "You want me to dress more like West, is that it?"

"Uh huh." Her eyes twinkled at the joke. "I want to get you into a suit."

Cole rolled his eyes. "Forget it." He stepped in front of the fridge before she could get the mayonnaise back in there. "What will it take for you to give me back my clothes?"

"Hmm." She thought long and hard. "Agree to come on a shopping spree with me."

With what money? I'd never take hers. "Nice try. What else?"

“Teach me how to be a rancher.”

“You really want to be...?”

“Yeah, and I want you to take my pumpkin festival ideas seriously. You shot down every fun idea that I had.”

This was getting interesting. “So, we have to do all these things or just one?”

“All. Oh, and I want to set you up with Ashley.”

He groaned. “After those texts she sent you?”

“Uh...” She wrung her hands. “It wasn’t *that* Ashley... a different one... silly.”

He sighed. But maybe it was for the best. Agreeing to her matchmaking schemes might be just the distance that they needed so that he could set both of their minds at ease. “Okay,” he said.

She seemed surprised. “Okay?”

“Yeah, give me my jeans.”

“I will tomorrow... and more.”

“And more?” He was almost afraid to ask.

“I might’ve done some online shopping for you, but hey, you’re going to be my brother anyway. It isn’t such a big deal.”

His ears burned. Did she plan on dressing him like a doll? “That is probably the craziest thing that anyone has ever done to me.”

She dimpled. “I know.” She pushed him aside to get to the fridge.

He popped back in her way like a spring. “I’ll take that mayo.” He pressed his back against the door.

Eva let out a shout, stumbling over him. Her hand ran into his chest, seconds before she fell into him. Whoops. Fighting for the mayonnaise had dire consequences. The top of her head landed into his chest. He caught her and gulped. Her eyes darted to him in surprise.

Slowly, she handed him the mayonnaise.

He snatched it, pretending like being so close to her was no big deal. Seeing her in her PJs and fuzzy bathrobe and realizing that they were both barefoot, he became aware of how domestic this moment felt with her—making sandwiches and, uh... wrestling in the kitchen.

Her lips parted, but nothing came out.

Cole needed to change this strange new vibe around and fast. If he was being forced to play house with Eva, he might as well clear the air between them. “Okay,” he said, “about that kiss.”

Her cheeks turned pink. It was actually pretty cute... maybe because he didn’t think that he could ever embarrass her. “Y-yeah?” she asked.

“We won’t repeat that.”

“No, never.”

Bringing up their kiss only seemed to make the air between them worse. Wishing he could take back his words, he scrambled to fix that distressed look on her face. “Not that it was bad.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said with a decisive nod.

He inched away, his stomach nosediving. He just seemed to make everything worse with what he said. Going to the kitchen island, he attacked the bread with the mayo to make his sandwich.

“Where is everybody?” Eva asked. She was better at smoothing out his faux pas than he was. “Everybody cleared out while we were gone.” She bit into her own sandwich like she was in these kinds of awkward situations every day.

He shrugged. “They must be shopping. I’d ask, but...”

“Your phone is broken,” she finished for him. Eva took another bite of her sandwich then

swallowed. "I'll text West." She slipped her phone out of the pocket of her bathrobe one-handed and texted him. "He... uh... might not answer back right away. He isn't as glued to his phone as I am."

Sure, he wasn't. If she was West's priority, he would. Cole would bet his life that West answered his clients in an instant.

"I'm trying to go on a tech fast," she said. "No social media. No TalkieTalk."

Eva was the last person he'd expected to do such a thing. "Is that why you left your phone behind earlier?"

She hesitated then admitted the truth with a sheepish grin. "Yeah."

He was impressed. She probably had a huge following and made a pretty penny on her TalkieTalk posts. "Why?"

She licked her lips. "Oh, no reason."

His attention narrowed on her. She'd said that too flippantly—he was beginning to read her tells by now, and she had a tendency to underemphasize things by acting like they weren't a big deal. "Wait... this doesn't have to do with those weird texts you keep getting from that other... Ashley?"

She grimaced. "No, no..."

"Is Ashley a guy?"

"No!"

So in other words, yes! "Do you actually know this person or did they get your number from the black market somewhere?"

"Cole!" she shouted, flabbergasted. "It's not a big deal! I totally got it—got it handled!"

He was right!

"I just need to change my number," she said. "You know people. They're all talk."

This stalker was trying to figure out where she was. That's why she couldn't go on TalkieTalk. It would give away that she was at Harvest Ranch. "Does West know?"

"No!" She pushed her sandwich aside, no longer able to pretend that she was eating it through her sudden anxiety. "And he's not going to know because you aren't telling him. He has too much on his plate right now."

"Too much to keep you safe?" That was ridiculous. This was a good opening for him to make her see reason. "You won't tell him because you're afraid that he'll be too protective, or you won't tell him because you think he won't care?"

She flinched. "That's a horrible thing to say."

But true... and usually truth was horrible to hear. "I'm sorry, but you're clever, you're sweet, you're—you're stunningly beautiful." Her eyes widened. He ignored that. "It seems that you're with the one person who can't see that."

"Oh." She snorted like he was being incredibly silly. "He does!"

"Does he? That guy is constantly on the phone, and you're telling me that he can't answer your texts?"

She paled. He winced, feeling his guilt scrape against his stomach. This wasn't how he was supposed to do it, was it? He was supposed to get her to come to that conclusion on her own, not sound like a jealous suitor.

And was he?

"Cole?" Her eyes were bright and he could see that she was holding back tears. "Do you just not want me in your family?"

"No!" Why would she take it that way?

"Well, then why have you been trying to push me out since day one?"

“I...” He was at a loss for words. “I have no problem with you being a part of our family... if you married *any* other brother of mine, I’d be fine with it.”

She broke into a laugh. “You’re the only other guy in your family who’s single.”

“What?” He shifted, battling his conflicting emotions. “This isn’t about me. I’m not trying to break you up so I can get with you. We had to get back from that swamp somehow, and I don’t feel guilty about holding you close to me for three hours.”

Her chin snapped up at the surprising gaffe. Why did he say that aloud?

“Even if West was a better man,” he said, “it just kills me that he thinks that he can treat you like garbage.”

Her lips twisted. “This has nothing to do with me... it’s about you and West, isn’t it? You know what, Cole? I’m going to fix your relationship with your brother.”

He gaped at her.

How had she gotten that out of what he’d said?

The landline rang, startling him upright. He’d often wondered why his parents still had one. Normally, it was just their nosy neighbors wanting to know how his momma was, but this time he was desperate for the distraction from this disturbing conversation. He picked it up. “Honey, Cole! I’m so glad that I caught you.” He recognized his momma’s voice immediately. He straightened. “Momma? You okay?”

“Yes... yes...” She didn’t sound okay. She sounded like she did when she was trying to keep back her tears. “It’s only that we just got a call. We have a heart donor.”

His stomach roiled. “You’re kidding?”

There must’ve been something in his voice that got Eva’s attention because she wandered over with wide eyes.

“Listen, I need you to take care of things while I’m gone,” she said. “West just took me and your daddy to Charleston on his private jet.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

He tried to steady himself. His momma was getting a heart. That should be a reason to rejoice, and still he could barely catch his breath from the fear that gripped him.

Would she survive the surgery?

Their family had been working on their momma’s rehab tirelessly since West had landed her on the heart transplant list, but what if? What if it hadn’t been enough? What if West never should’ve pushed it? Months of their mother’s life—maybe years—could’ve been stolen from her if she didn’t live through it.

“Make sure those children get their perfect pumpkin festival,” his momma said, “no matter what happens.”

“Yes, for sure!” She was always thinking of others, which was why she could never know that West had pushed her in front of other worthy candidates for the surgery. Cole gulped, not sure if he had the strength to talk about what was closest to his heart without completely losing it, but if he didn’t have another chance after this, he didn’t want to kick himself forever. “Hey, Momma, I’ll be praying for you.”

“Baby, I’ll be praying for you.” She sniffed and he knew that she was crying. His throat tightened. “I’m so proud of all my boys. I want you to know that. Whatever happens in this surgery is God’s will. Can I count on you to accept that?”

Cole hesitated. That was a hard thing to ask of him, and yet? What choice did he have, except to face whatever happened? He might be tempted to blame West if something went wrong, but not God,

never God.

God was perfect. His brother was... hardly that.

He just wished that he had seen his momma's face one last time before she left... just in case things didn't go the way that they wanted. He tried to answer his mother's plea about accepting what was meant to be, but his throat was working against him.

"Honey?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

She knew him too well. "Of course." That came out too gruff for her to believe it. He tried again. "I love you." His voice broke.

"I love you so much," she said. "You were my surprise baby, but you became such a blessing to your father and me. I never knew how incomplete our family was until you came along, and I can only thank God that he gave you to us. You're the voice of reason, the one who is like a steady anchor in the roughness of the sea, trustworthy, good. I can only ask that you show compassion on others who struggle where you're strong. And in turn? Their strengths might be your weaknesses."

She was talking about West. She was always lecturing him to take it easy on West, but... his brother had caused her this stress that made a ruin of her heart, and he was still up to his old tricks. If not for the years it had taken West to perfect his charm, she'd know that, too.

"Charity will make you into the man that you are meant to be," she said, cutting through his angry thoughts. "Promise me that you'll see the good in those who haven't got life figured out yet, and that you'll have patience."

"I can try," he said haltingly. He'd gladly do that for anyone, but his brother? Maybe feeling charity towards his brother was meant to be his greatest challenge in life. And still? West was still hurting people. How could Cole give him an inch?

"That's all I ask," she said. "Your bond is as good as your word. You are a good man."

"Thank you," he whispered. He hoped she'd see the man that he was really meant to be, not this shell of one who couldn't hold a conversation with his momma without wanting to burst into tears. "And you're an angel," he managed to get out.

God, please don't take her away to be with the rest of them. I might be in my thirties, but I still need my mother. If she dies now, she'll never know my wife, my children.

She had to live!

Of course, his momma would "pooh pooh" the idea of not being a part of everything going on here, even if she wasn't visible. She would definitely assure him that she'd watch over him from heaven... even if she had to sneak away from the heralds of singing angels to take a peek. His momma always loved to sing, so that would be a sacrifice.

"You sure you don't want me over there?" he asked her.

"No, honey, there's nothing that you could do here but twiddle your thumbs during a boring surgery, but we sure need you at home."

Disappointment flooded him. She was right though, everything he did over there would be futile. "Okay."

The CNA came in, needing to take her vitals and asking her questions, so she was forced to tell him goodbye.

Cole hung up the phone.

Eva's fingers played with the long sleeves of her fuzzy bathrobe. "What is it?" she asked.

"My mother... she's finally getting her heart transplant."

"That's wonderful news."

It didn't feel like it—his momma's last words to Cole felt too final, and his worries about her

surgery overcame him. He hadn't told her everything that he'd wanted to tell her! Years of unresolved quarrels and unfinished conversations flooded through his mind. He hadn't said even a hundredth of how he felt. He hadn't prepared for the moment when he really had to say goodbye.

"Cole?" Eva's face was awash in concern.

He didn't want to talk about how he felt or the possibility of losing his momma would feel too real. "Yeah," he breathed. "It's great news."

"You're worried," she said. "Oh... can I—can I hug you without you thinking that I'm a horrible, scheming flirt?"

"I..."

She had her arms around him before he could make sense of what she was saying. Eva took away his reservations with the warmth he felt behind her embrace—as always she was full of love.

Dang, this girl was all about charity. He should take a few tips from her.

Not only that, but she gave great hugs. It was all about him. Some people made it about themselves, but not Eva. She was a giver. He felt himself sagging with a relief that he couldn't quite describe.

Maybe being alone with Eva wouldn't be all that bad.

And he didn't mean it that way, only that she was great at consoling him.

She pulled back from him, watching him with concern. "You want to know my strategy for dealing with serious situations like these?" she asked. With her usual eagerness, she didn't give him time to respond. "I'm not sure if it works for everyone, but I just want to tell you that you should do everything that you can to keep up your spirits. Have hope, think the best will happen, and don't go into mourning until it is truly time to mourn. Do you get what I'm saying?"

He did. Kinda. He nodded.

"I'm just saying, don't borrow trouble. Do whatever you have to do to get through your worry and feelings of helplessness. Pray!"

He laughed in surprise. "You're telling me to pray?"

"Yeah, really talk to God like you say you do, work it out together and... never accept defeat until you have no other choice."

Spoken like a girl whose family made their fortune off gambling. And still, he could only admire her fighting spirit. No wonder she was full of such contagious cheer, she didn't give up.

Sometimes to her detriment.

But that was a river to cross another time.

Chapter Seventeen

Eva marched through the barn, searching for Cole. She'd made waffles. They were a little burnt, but she was desperate to find someone to eat them.

The morning sun brightened the windows, giving the stalls a celestial glow. This holiday was not going at all as she expected.

Oh, Lily! Her surgery was finally here. Cole was beside himself with worry.

Strangely, he'd let her comfort him with hugs, even after their fight. Eva wasn't used to that. When would West let her in like that? He wasn't answering any of her texts or calls, but then again, she knew that he was stressed out of his mind. He didn't handle pressure well.

She frowned.

Eva wasn't one for prayers, but Cole's talk of miracles kept coming to her mind, and quite unexpectedly, she stopped in her tracks and decided to try it out. *Please watch over West's momma during her surgery, God. She is a sweet soul. I'd sure like a chance to get to know her better.*

That wasn't so bad. Did she really feel like she'd talked to somebody? Actually, yes, strangely enough. Who knew what good her prayer had done, but she felt better already.

She made her way past the next stall and stopped short when she caught sight of Dopey. Her heart brightened like someone had thrown a bucket of sunshine over her. The calf was trying to get to the straw outside of his stall. "Hi, you big goofball." She reached for the mischievous boy. "Looks like you're still trying to get into trouble." She ran her hand down the big baby's long snout. He let out a long bellow of complaint. "Don't you start with me, Dopey. I've got enough trouble dealing with Cole."

West's brother was still talking smack about her man. That was one reason she'd never say anything about West's prolonged silence.

She threw out another plea to God. *Help me out with West, too, while you're at it. Can you get him to call me? I've got to show Cole he's wrong about him. By the way I'm taking tips on how to get West to open up to me on what's really going on his life, have him tell me what he really thinks. I need to know what's going on in that stubborn head of his.*

She paused, wondering if she was asking for too much. But wasn't God supposed to be all powerful? Cole had mentioned something about accepting God's will. Maybe this was where that came into play.

Oh, and if you could help Cole fix whatever beef he has with West, that would also be awesome.

Sure, Cole's intentions to save her from getting hurt were good, but she began to understand that most of his objections stemmed from his broken relationship with his brother.

She'd help heal the rift between them.

If she could keep herself from causing a bigger one. She was feeling too close to Cole lately. She couldn't explain it, but when her eyes closed last night, she wasn't thinking about West. No, an image of Cole in his overalls had flashed through her mind.

Instead of giggling, she'd sighed.

Eva had shot up in bed in dismayed shock. No, no, no! She was missing West, that was all. His

youngest brother was just watching out for her and she was just keeping an eye on Cole while he faced his momma's surgery, but from that moment, she vowed to keep her distance from him. Well, besides hugging Cole when he got stiff with worry. Sisterly hugs didn't count. She was scared for Lily too.

In sudden concern, she went back to her praying. *Hey, real quick, it's Eva again. If I'm being too greedy with all my requests, God, please just watch over West's momma. That's our top priority.*

Feeling like she was wrecking this whole religion thing, she stopped praying before she accidentally turned insulting. Besides, those waffles she'd made were probably frozen solid by now.

Kissing Dopey's fuzzy head, she left in search of Cole again. She stopped short when she spied him milking a cow. She about died with excitement. Clutching the wooden railing, she called over to him. "You milk cows, too?"

Cole glanced up from his work. She hid a grin when she saw what he was wearing—he'd grabbed some basketball shorts from West's belongings that were clearly too short and a yellow soccer shirt that was too small. The cowboy boots were the perfect touch.

She should probably give him back his load of laundry.

The muscles against his strong shoulders moved under that too-tight tee shirt as he squirted the milk into the bucket.

All thoughts of trying to keep her distance fled her mind as she scrambled around the stall to join him. "I want to try it!" It wasn't as if she couldn't handle Cole showing her how to survive out in the country without turning all weak in the knees.

She'd just been out of it last night. That's all. And she really wanted to milk that cow.

Cole turned to her. She noticed that the deep circles under his eyes looked like bruises. He hadn't gotten a lot of sleep. He was out of his mind with stressing over his momma. Lily hadn't gone into surgery until the early morning hours, and they still hadn't gotten any updates. They might not for a few hours.

Eva quickly switched into cheer-up mode. She turned over an empty bucket and sat on it. "I heard that milking a cow is a whole lot harder than it looks."

"It is," he grumbled out. His voice sounded like it was just waking up with the rest of him. He handed her the teat.

Her eyes widened. "Just like that? You want me to try it?"

"You're not going to learn by watching."

Really? She handled the soft skin, feeling like she was doing everything wrong. "I just squeeze?"

He laughed gently, his hair falling forward as he watched her. "The milk comes from the udder, so you're squeezing it down to fill the teat with it and then you pull it to release the..." She tried it and nothing came out. "—the milk," he finished.

His hands went over hers. She tried not to jump at the current of awareness that ran through her. "No, gently," he said, "like a water balloon. You're guiding the milk out."

If anything, after yesterday he wasn't afraid to touch her, and she was more afraid. But this was insane, she touched everyone and there was never a problem. She should be able to be normal with her soon-to-be brother-in-law. They were family, almost. She steadied herself, trying to concentrate on what he was saying while his warm hands enveloped hers.

"Guide the milk out," she repeated. She tried and failed again and again, until finally, he practically did it for her.

She let out a squeal, knowing that she was in no way responsible for doing the milking. "Okay, okay." She nudged his arm away with her shoulder. "Let me try it by myself."

He pulled back while she concentrated with all her might. She got out a squirt, a tiny one, but still, it had worked! She tried again and accidentally pelted Cole with it. He scrambled back. "Save some for Dopey," he called.

"This is for Dopey?" she asked.

"Definitely. It'll do in a pinch. We've got to fill these baby bottles." He held up a container that could hold two quarts. It was definitely bigger than the run-of-the-mill baby bottle. "We have to feed Dopey twice a day."

"Not at night?"

"Nope, he sleeps at night. Calves are a little easier than human babies."

Was that so? Eva had never really dealt with a baby close up, despite how much she'd wanted to get her hands on all that cuteness.

After trying out a few more squirts, she let Cole take over. His practiced movements put hers to shame, and he soon had the bucket full. Trying to be helpful, she brought over the oversized bottle and helped him fill it.

Distantly, she was cognizant of the fact that she kept touching him as they worked together, but she wasn't the type to let him do everything. After getting the bottle finished, she carried it to Dopey. The calf bleated out at her in greeting. She smiled over at Cole. "Okay, how do I do this one?"

"Easy, just like a real baby. Sort of." He held the bottle between the slats of the stall. Dopey went at it, as easily as he'd gone at her clothes. She melted at the sight of Cole taking care of the helpless thing. He'd make a great father, wouldn't he?

She cringed at the direction of her thoughts. She'd never had those thoughts about West before, but then again, she'd never seen him act particularly paternal, even with his own kids.

Give him a break already! West is just learning how to be a father.

And yet, Cole seemed to spend more time with Pip and Charlie.

She sighed as Cole waved her over. "You want to try?"

Of course she did!

The offer threw out her disloyal thoughts. Her fingers twisted through Cole's as the bottle exchanged hands. The calf sucked greedily all the while. She leaned down, rubbing the calf's soft head as Dopey quickly adjusted to the height of the new feeder. The enthusiastic baby knew exactly what to do, although in the very next instant, he sucked so hard that she lost her grip. Crying out, she adjusted both her hands on the bottle in a type of tug of war. She laughed, realizing she didn't have her phone on her to take a picture. Cole's phone was broken. This was a moment solely for the three of them.

"He loves you," Cole said after a minute. "You think you can handle being Dopey's mother until we find the real one?"

Eva nodded eagerly. "I would love that." Seeing that Dopey had finally settled down, she scratched his ear. "What do you think, cutie? You think you can put up with me for a few days?" Dopey's big eyes blinked up at her. "I'll take that as a 'yes,'" she said.

"Good," Cole said. "Maybe you can take care of Momma's flowers in the greenhouse, too. She'd be devastated if anything happened to her babies while she was gone. She loves her roses, especially her Beloved."

"Oh, I heard." Eva had sneaked into the greenhouse that morning to get another peek at the famous Beauty and the Beast flower, though she was a fan of the plucky snapdragons that grew on the wayside. Her eyes lifted to Cole's. "I bet she loves you more."

He squinched up his nose. "I think it's a tie," he joked.

“Hmm, sounds like an important job then. Count me in.” This was fulfilling another lifelong dream. “I always wanted to do this kind of thing, ya know,” she said. “Live on a ranch, drive a pickup, be a cowgirl.”

“What?” Cole’s lips quirked up. “No one actually *dreams* about that.”

“You bet people do! I blame country music—and I grew up on it in Nashville. There’s just something nice about forgetting the cares of the fast city life and just concentrating on the basics and being present.” Not having her phone on her at all times also helped with that. “I wanted to live out in the middle of nowhere. Oh, and finding myself a hot cowboy, of course, was the real draw.”

“You think West is a cowboy?” Cole asked, tweaking her with his smug smile. “If you’re looking for a cowboy, there are actually some real ones around here you can meet.”

Instead of letting Cole get her back up this time, she let him have it. “You offering?”

That shut him up, but not for long. “Someone should take you country dancing. We should go to Mo’s. You’d like the men over there.”

She cringed. He really wasn’t giving up on trying to talk her out of his brother. All those times she’d tried to set him up with Ashley were now coming back to haunt her. She kept her cool. “I have my man... I know you don’t get... us or our relationship, but we have an understanding.”

In other words, West had asked her to marry him and she was going through with it.

Cole didn’t seem convinced that there was anything between her and West at all.

Oh, West! Get back here and prove him wrong... before he turns any more convincing.

Dopey stepped back and lost his hold on the bottle. Eva twisted and squirted the milk at Cole to show him not to mess with her anymore. Cole let out a shout and tripped backwards. She returned the bottle to the calf’s impatient mouth, all the while chuckling.

“Woman!” Cole complained. “You’re just going to do that in front of the kid? Dopey’s going to start playing with his food just like his momma.”

A laugh escaped her lips, quite without her permission.

Man, I like him.

There was a little something about Cole that melted her very bones to butter, especially with that intense blue-eyed gaze that seemed to fix her in place. It must remind her of his brother.

Definitely!

If things were different, her mind would be in the clouds, building them a castle for two by now... if she hadn’t met West, which she *had*.

Eva relaxed and cocked her brow at Cole. “His daddy’s coming home soon. He’ll straighten our boy out.”

Chapter Eighteen

Cole chopped vegetables against the cutting board on the kitchen island while Eva tried to figure out how to make soup from the Eazy Bakez recipe book. “No wonder your momma didn’t want me helping her with Thanksgiving dinner,” she muttered. “I can’t even make a broth.”

He held out his hand. “Let me see.”

Eva slid the book under him, her shoulder heating his, though their arms didn’t meet. “The thing is...” Eva’s lashes rose so that he could see the sincerity in her expression. “I want to be this amazing cook, but, well, you tried my waffles earlier. I’m so sorry about that. Maybe *after* I’m married...”

He hated hearing about her glowing dreams of the future, knowing that she’d never reach them with West. The problem was that it seemed the more Cole tried to talk sense into her, the more she dug in her heels.

He’d done what he could. It was none of Cole’s business anyway.

He’d known that from the beginning.

Maybe that was the reason that he was kicking himself right now. He didn’t care about looking stupid, but he *did* care about ruining their friendship. If she was marrying West, she was at least going to be in their lives for a few years until the inevitable divorce. West didn’t have the best track record. He’d stepped out on Liv before they’d called it quits, and Cole didn’t see any sign of West changing his ways.

Cole studied the cheerful highlights of Eva’s hair as they caught the sun, his throat constricting.

He still hadn’t pulled out the big guns yet.

Should he?

It didn’t seem right to air out West’s dirty laundry. Cole was never one for causing pain to avoid more pain later. It just wasn’t his style. His brother Hudson was the one who was born for resetting dislocated shoulders in his veterinarian work, isolating hurt animals and breaking bones so that they would heal right. But Cole? He never had the heart for it.

He groaned and picked up the recipe book. “How hard can following a recipe be?” he asked. They’d have to do their own Thanksgiving dinner this year. He’d thought about just ordering pizza, if his momma was on the mend... but if she wasn’t, then he wouldn’t even bother doing that.

His heart fluttered at the thought of losing her. The afternoon had worn on with no word about his mother’s surgery one way or the other. So far, he carefully kept his thoughts away from anything that hinged on uncertainty. Concentrating on Eva’s troubles had kept his worries off his momma’s survival, strangely enough.

“Is West making it here for Thanksgiving?” he asked, trying to keep his voice disinterested.

She shrugged. “I haven’t heard back from him yet.”

Of course she hadn’t. Eva must’ve read his annoyed look, because she quickly ran to his brother’s defense. “He’s a horrible texter. You know that.”

“You mind if I text him something real quick?”

She pushed her phone at him. “Go for it. He has to look at his texts sometime.”

Cole took a deep breath, trying to dig inside himself to figure out what he really wanted to know. Finally, he just kept it simple: “Hey, this is Cole. What’s the word on Momma?”

The reply was almost immediate: “The surgeon keeps us updated every few hours. There are some complications, but nothing serious.”

Complications?

Cole was trying to keep Eva’s advice close to his heart, and trying not to worry until... well, until he had no choice except to face something bad, but he didn’t like to hear about complications.

“What are the complications?”

“Bleeding, that kind of thing. They say it’s under control.”

He nodded and gave Eva back her phone. He read over her shoulder what she wrote as she texted West back: “This is Eva again. How are you doing? Do you need anything?”

West didn’t write back. She slipped her phone back into her pocket, looking unconcerned, probably to prove to Cole that she and West had the kind of “understanding that went beyond words.” Personally, if Cole was in her shoes, he’d be annoyed at being taken for granted. And worse, he knew that Eva was a romantic. He hated getting a glimpse at her dreams and seeing West take a torch to them.

Cole reached over her head to pull the broth from the top shelf. “How about you use this?”

Her eyes filled with gratitude, and she began to work on the soup, sliding the vegetables that Cole cut up into the pot.

“Be sure to put lots of Slade beef in that,” Cole said. They had a ton; they might as well use it. “No family recipe of ours would be complete without it.”

Her mouth popped open when he pulled a whole roast from the fridge to use. “Ooh, we’re eating well tonight! Good thing you know what you’re doing or we’d starve!”

“You’re not getting off that easy. Tomorrow you can fix us *your* momma’s favorite recipe.”

“Are you kidding? I haven’t talked to her in years.” Eva took the roast beef. “I can’t even figure out her favorite lipstick color.” She poked the meat like a caveman trying to figure out how the wheel worked.

His ears rang at the odd admission. “Years?”

“Don’t fret... we’re not that bad!” She must’ve heard the shock in his voice because she quickly waved away his concern with a casual hand. “She has a new boyfriend, so that’s why she’s too busy to catch up. Ya know? They’re in India right now, I think, for a wedding. It’s so beautiful! She has a TalkieTalk sooo I can keep up pretty well...”

Cole’s stomach curled in on itself. She excused her momma’s absence in her life like she excused West’s. Now Cole understood where the habit came from.

He changed the subject. “Try our ‘Mountain Man’ spice on that.” He swiped the bottle off the shelf for her, too.

“Mountain man?” She searched the label. “It says ‘Rocky Mountain’ spice.”

“What? Weird. I guess that’s just what we call it,” he said with a laugh. The two worked companionably side by side to make a potluck dinner with absolutely every side available. It was a nice distraction.

Lizardman inched next to Eva’s feet in an army crawl, catching a few scraps here and there, most of them dropped on purpose.

As soon as they had the table set, Eva eyed Cole’s bare legs. She couldn’t believe that West even owned shorts so ridiculously short. Good thing Cole was so adorable—he pulled them off with style. Her nose wrinkled. “I have a present for you... remember, you promised to try on what I bought, so...”

“Forget it,” he said. “I’m not up to a fashion show right now...”

“Well... okay, but some of those clothes came in today and they’re super cute and *you’re* super cute.”

He couldn’t believe that she thought she could flatter him into cooperating. This was blackmail. “Return my jeans,” he said, “and I’ll think about it.”

“Wear what came in today, and *I’ll* think about it.”

He flopped down on the chair, having no intention of doing that. “You know what happens to thieves, right?”

“Nothing good,” she replied, pouring water into her cup. “I’m willing to sacrifice for fashion.”

Cole was kind of at a loss at what to do, since he didn’t have sisters. Normally, he’d wrestle his brothers down by now and force them to do the right thing. He tried to buy time. “What’s in this magical shipment that you’ve got?”

“Oooh, well, Henley tops, shawl neck sweaters, cuffed jeans, rolled up slacks—in charcoal, indigo, chocolate. I even tried mustard.”

Was anything a real color? He was starting to squirm and sweat all at once. “You can’t buy things for your brother-in-law. It’s just not done.”

“West approves.”

Right! Because they had their weird little “understanding.” The traitor.

“Ah, and I got you a puffy coat with sweater sleeves,” she said.

His whole stomach dropped. “You know, I can buy some new jeans at Harold’s to replace the ones you stole,” he said.

“C’mon!” She poked his forearm with her pinky. “You can wear it to the Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice Festival.”

“The last thing I’m thinking about is what I’m wearing to the festival.”

“I know, right? That’s why *I* am.”

He rubbed at his eyes, feeling the fight drain from him. “If I agree to your terms, then you’ll give me my jeans... now?”

“Yes. Well, after dinner.”

He took a steadying breath. His gaze was caught by her laughing eyes. Her blonde hair fell over her face while she dished up her plate. “I have a different idea,” he said.

“And that is?”

“We’ll wrestle for it.”

“What?”

He picked her up over his shoulder and took her to where the Slade brothers always had it out in the living room, despite their momma’s screams to the contrary. “Cole!” she cried out. Eva was a lot lighter than his brothers, and she kicked her bare feet against his side. “You can’t just wrestle your sister-in-law.”

She wasn’t yet. And two could play at this game. “You can always call it quits then, and concede that I’m the victor.”

“Never!”

Not quite what he expected. The puppy barked joyfully around them, wanting to join in the fun. “I can put you in a pretzel,” he teased her.

“I’d like to see you try it.”

Really? He set her on the couch, not quite sure what to do with her now that he’d started, but she lunged at him instead and caught him so unaware, that she managed to pin him down against the cushion. “I might not have brothers,” she huffed out, “but I’ve wrestled a few greased pigs at the fair.”

Great! Trust her to take this to another level. She was clearly enjoying herself. He threw his arms around her, actually not sure how to make this fair when he saw she completely disappeared under him. He rolled her around, careful not to hurt her. “You give?” he asked her.

“Not a chance!” She squirmed out of his grip and fell against the carpet, knocking him back with her shoulder as she wriggled away. “Not until I see you in a turtleneck sweater.”

“You can forget that!” He grabbed her knee and tugged her to him. “I pin you for three seconds and then you have to give.”

“Who says?” she called out. “I didn’t agree to that.”

“Six?”

She laughed up in his face and poked her finger into his stomach, and then followed that with lots of fingers digging into the softest parts of him while she tickled him all over. He crumpled, feeling himself go weak like he always did in a tickle war. He tried to catch her hands, all while howling out uncontrollably in laughter. “You can’t...” he said, “... little cheat.”

“Someone’s got to even the playing field,” she hollered out. “You big-big lumberjack!”

Lumberjack? Ouch!

“Ouch!” he said aloud when she caught him under his armpit. He took her by the wrists, realizing that he had no idea how to end this fight and still come out the victor because the little thief was stealing more than his laundry with her every dimple. He tried to hold her still, and quite suddenly, she stopped struggling, her eyes going to his. Her breathing came out heavily.

His hands tightened over her.

The phone rang, and he turned towards it, a part of him realizing that he needed to stop that sound somehow.

“You going to get that?” Eva asked him.

Yes, yes, of course.

Her hair was everywhere. He tried to push those glorious strands from her eyes.

The phone’s ringing screeched persistently over them.

Her lashes fluttered in confusion. Wait, what was he doing? He straightened and released her. “Your lucky day,” he told her. That was more for bravado than anything. He abandoned her and headed for the phone, every part of him shaking, partly from pushing it too far with Eva and partly because he knew what this phone call could be about.

He answered it.

“Cole?”

His father was on the other end of the line. Cole couldn’t read his tone at all, and so grimacing, he braced himself. “Yeah?”

“The surgery is over, and it went well,” his father said brusquely.

Cole’s legs buckled in relief, and he had to take a seat. Eva was immediately at his side, her hand going to his. He took it without a second thought and quickly put her out of her misery. “She made it through, Eva.”

Her face brightened.

“Your momma needs some time for recovery,” his father said. “You’ve got things handled over there?”

He glanced over at Eva. *Not really.* “I’ve got it.”

“Good. Your mom wanted that festival to be our best one yet. Stubborn woman keeps talking about it, even while they were wheeling her away. It’s all on you, kid, the holidays, everything. I’m definitely staying here with your momma until way after Thanksgiving.”

“Do what you have to do,” Cole said. He was so happy that he’d agree to anything. “Is West coming back?”

He noticed Eva’s breath catch as she waited for the answer too.

“He hasn’t mentioned it.”

“Can I talk to him?” Cole asked.

His father sighed and called out to West. “Hey, come talk to your brother.”

West took the phone. “I’m sorry for ditching you like that, but you can see that I had no choice.”

“Right.” Cole could concede *that*. “When are you getting back here?”

“Soon, soon. I need to go to Nashville first. An emergency just came up.”

“Are you kidding me?” Cole was blown away at what West was foisting on him.

“I’m sorry. Remember how I said that I’d pay you?”

“I did and I don’t want it.”

“Well, you might as well get something out of it.” West sighed. “Look, tell Eva I’ll be back by Thanksgiving.”

That was five days away. “You tell her.”

West had already hung up on him. Cold fury filled Cole as he turned to West’s fiancée. She seemed stunned. How much had she heard from the other side? Her hand slid from his. “He’s not coming?”

He felt miserable as the messenger. She didn’t have to shoot him—he was ready to shoot himself. “West will be here for Thanksgiving...”

Her lips pressed together. “Well,” she managed tightly, “he’s going to miss out.” Her eyes watered.

Was she going to cry? Cole was desperate to make this up to her. “Definitely... he’ll miss the pony races and—and the turkey ones.”

“The turkey ones?” Sudden excitement lit up her face. “We’re doing the races?”

“Yeah, and the piglets and whatever other thing you want to race, and you know what? I’m going to build you a pumpkin catapult.”

“Really?” She stood, her legs trembling with giddiness. “These kids are going to love this festival!”

They’d better. Cole had just signed his life away. “And you’d better pick out my pansiest pretty boy outfit in your possession,” he said, “because I’m wearing it.”

Why not?

The grin that took over her face made all the coming discomfort worth it. She wrapped him in an embrace so tight, it almost rivalled what she’d done to him in that tickle war. “This will be the best Thanksgiving ever!” she cried. “Thank you! Thank you! Cole, you don’t know how much this means to me. You’re really the best!”

Was he? Because he was kind of feeling like a jerk right now, especially when his gaze drew to her lips and he was tempted to finish what they’d started with that wrestling match.

His momma had raised him better than that. And even better? She was alive. Alive!

His hands ran down Eva’s back before he released her. “Let’s eat that dinner we made, huh? It’s getting cold.”

Chapter Nineteen

Eva had never known Sundays to feel this lazy. The sunset had long since been swallowed by the uncaring sky and, as far as she could hear, the crickets had taken over the range. The picture window in the living room revealed each constellation as clearly as watching the Discovery Channel through the glass.

She'd never seen anything so magnificent... and terrifying.

There were more than a thousand acres of Slade land out there, and they were all alone in it.

Eva sprawled over the white carpet, putting together the last of her ideas for the Pumpkin Festival in three days. Lizardman licked her face out of nowhere and she giggled, pushing the ball of fur away from her.

"You'd better be careful," Cole muttered from above her. He'd taken up the whole couch while watching Rumble videos on her phone on how to make a catapult. Since he'd broken his phone, he'd been using hers. West's brother was still in his dress shirt from church, though he'd lost the tie and the pants. He'd put on those basketball shorts. She thought he looked adorable, but that was the last thing that she'd tell him, especially after that wrestling match.

Something felt different between them after that... or maybe it was after Cole had talked to West? Yes, that was definitely when Cole had changed—he'd become more reckless, less careful about appearances. It was like he didn't care if anyone thought they were a couple when they were out supply shopping for the festival or sitting in the pews at church... and in private.

She'd be okay with that, except... well, Cole really meant nothing by it, right? Every time he touched her, her skin felt like it was on fire, and when he looked at her, it was like she'd melt.

But that was all on her. He only saw her as a sister. She was being silly.

He glanced over at Lizardman. "She'll put you in the race next," he warned the puppy.

"I will!" Eva sat up and hugged Lizardman's wriggling body to her. She was ready for bed in a sweatshirt and pajama shorts with absolutely no makeup to speak of. Yeah, she was getting far too comfortable in Cole's company. "Don't think I won't, you little fuzzball. Everyone is so excited for our Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice Festival."

At least that's what everyone had told her at church. Cole had convinced her to come along with him that morning, which was a good thing because otherwise she'd have been lazing around like this *all* day.

Their friends at church had been so concerned with how Lily was doing. Eva's ears still rang with their good wishes and offers of prayers. That was what West had rejected as useless.

Now, it felt like he was rejecting her too.

She gulped. Everyone dealt with stress differently. She studied the puppy's expressive eyes. "You poor little guy. Don't be sad. Aw, Cole, you know what I think? I think Lizardman misses West too!"

Cole's lips tightened, which was about all the reaction she ever got from him when she mentioned his brother lately.

She smiled over at Lizardman, who certainly wasn't letting his missing owner stop him from playing. He wriggled around in her arms like he thought she was his best playmate from the litter. She

glanced up at Cole, remembering what she'd heard from that malfunctioning receiver on their family's landline. West had offered to pay Cole for taking care of her. "I think you miss him too."

"Not really."

"You wish you didn't have to babysit me while he's gone."

Cole's eyes shot to hers, and she felt that same heat that had plagued her these past few days simmer through her neck and into her spine. "Like you said," he whispered, "West is missing out."

Pleasure tingled through her senses, not because he'd flattered her after the insult of his brother's prolonged absence. No, it was something else. She realized that she actually cared what Cole thought of her now. The idea that he had to be manipulated into watching out for her was lowering.

She hugged Lizardman closer. "He is. We're having too much fun here." She'd briefly considered going back home after West had deserted her for Nashville, but she really thought that she could make a difference with the festival, plus, she kinda liked it here.

Not more than she should, of course. That would be crazy.

She poured her creative energies into her blueprints for the festival. They would breathe life into her plans during the next few days. She marked where friends would put food tents, even Kylee from town offered her catering skills, which was huge because Thanksgiving was the next day, but then again, Eva suspected that Kylee had a little crush on the last bachelor from the Slade household.

"You don't like Kylee, do you?" she asked Cole.

He shifted, his cheek pressed against the couch cushion as he met her eyes again. "Are you trying to set me up again?"

She shook her head—too vigorously.

He cracked a grin. "Wait... after all this, you don't want me to go for Kylee? I thought you were desperate for me to find love."

"I'm not desperate."

"You definitely are. I think you'd be happy if I ran off with your friend Ashley tomorrow."

That idea lost its allure. "It's not about *me* being happy," she said.

"Stop right there. I know where this goes. What you really want to do is wrap up my life the way you want it and put a little pink bow on it. You'll find me love, dress me... am I your wittle baby?"

She giggled.

He opened another video, resting his head against his arm. She noticed how broad those arms were. She also knew exactly how they felt around her. She sniffed, distracting her thoughts with a list of races. She was just about to try her luck by pushing the hay slide again when she heard the video stop.

"What's this?" Cole turned the screen to show Eva that her stalker had written to her again. Fortunately, she'd renamed the stalker "stupid ol' Ashley" on the off chance that Cole would be using her phone. "Ashley is texting you again," he said. She put her hand out for her phone. Cole didn't return it. "She just said that she found you."

Sudden worry tangled up her insides before she shrugged off the threat as another empty one. "No!" she scoffed. "She's... lying."

He studied her face. "I'm not sure I want to go out with this girl."

"That's a different Ashley and you know it!"

He briefly smiled at her reaction then licked his lips. "Hey, um, how serious is this?"

"Not at all." *Ashley was bluffing because she—she... wanted Eva to give herself away.* How to make that sound less threatening? *Ashley's too lazy to actually come after me.* No! "Ashley's just a big jokester." She smiled reassuringly and tried to snatch her phone out of Cole's hands.

It wasn't an easy task. He wasn't letting it go easily, but finally he released it. "You can trust me enough to tell me the truth, can't you?" he asked.

Not yet.

She gulped. "You'll tell West."

"Probably not."

She didn't like that disdain in his voice. She gathered her plans and stood. It was really time to get some sleep. "Lizardman," she called out. The puppy leaped forward like her most willing servant. After this latest scare, she'd snuggle him extra tight tonight. The puppy was like having a piece of West with her, which was a good thing because her feelings for Cole were getting far too confusing and out of control.

Her skin still tingled from wrestling her phone from him. What was happening to her? She couldn't seem to catch her breath as he implored her with his eyes to take her into his confidence.

For a moment, she wanted more than anything to give in.

She hadn't even told West about that stalker.

She gave Cole a weak wave. "Time for bed!" Keeping this to herself was for the best. She couldn't in good conscience do anything else that might bring her closer to Cole than she was with West. "Lizardman can protect me."

He sat up. "I can too... if you confide in me."

Her throat felt tight at the offer. His brow was creased with genuine concern. She was both touched and anxious about making this into a bigger deal than it was. She ruffled the top of Lizardman's head. "I'll confide in you when there is something to confide."

His gaze felt like it was penetrating into her soul. He wasn't buying it, but after a moment, he nodded. "If I hear another peep out of Ashley..."

"You won't..." she said quickly. Eva was blocking her stalker again tonight. She sped up the stairs to her room—the one next to Cole's. She felt some comfort from that, though maybe she shouldn't.

What did her stalker mean by saying that he had found her?

Of course, he hadn't.

But as she settled under the soft patchwork quilt on her bed, every muscle felt stiff, every nerve prickled. The wind outside was picking up. She startled.

Lightning lit up her room. She stifled her cry and squeezed Lizardman tighter. He whimpered out in annoyance and jumped off the bed to be alone.

She chuckled.

This was crazy! Her stalker wanted her to live in fear. She'd never let him win.

She picked up her phone, wanting to fight back. "Yeah, right," she texted him. Eva knew she shouldn't feed the fire, but she was so fed up. Thunder cracked outside as her fingers flew over her screen. "You're such a loser."

"I happen to know that you aren't with West."

Her hand went to her mouth. He wouldn't try to hurt West, would he? "How do you know that?"

"I saw him with your daddy yesterday. They looked real chummy."

That meant he was safe. Daddy had bodyguards that made grown men cry with fear. That also meant that her stalker was from Nashville, and possibly someone who went to the same parties that they did. And if West said something to anyone about where she was?

"If you knew where I was," she said, "you'd be here."

"I am."

Liar! She actually snorted at that. "Prove it."

A bell rang outside, loud, crashing, and ugly. She couldn't help it. She screamed.

Chapter Twenty

Cole was halfway up the stairs when he heard Eva scream.

He wasn't aware of much else before he broke into her room. She flung herself into his arms, screaming out. He grimaced at how tightly she held him. The girl had some strength on her.

"What happened?" he asked.

"A bell! A bell outside!"

"A bell? Like a cowbell or?"

"No, no, I..." She shoved her phone at him and he read through her messages as she baited her stalker.

His shoulders tensed. "You think that was this guy?"

"Yes!" she shrieked. Her hands loosened on him. "No! I don't know." She seemed torn.

"I'll go outside and see if he's out there."

"Noooo!" Her fingers bunched into his shirt. He'd never had anyone forbid him to face danger before. His momma thought her boys could slay lions. "Don't leave, Cole! Just stay right here."

"I'll be fine," he tried to reassure her.

"I won't be!" she shrieked.

This wasn't about keeping him in one piece. He grinned, not bothering to hide it. At least she thought him capable enough to fight bad guys—earlier he was having his doubts.

"Nothing about this is funny!" She pushed her head into his chest. "Please, please, just protect me this once, and I promise that I won't ever ask you to do it again."

"There's not a limit on how many times I'll protect you," he said.

"Of course not, it's just that I plan on being strong next time. I'm just not feeling it right now."

Eva was killing him. If she let him go outside, he could prove to her that there was nothing out there to fear... well, maybe a really vicious windstorm that knocked everything around. Anything could've sounded like a bell out there. "If anyone was outside," he said, "we'd see headlights at least a mile away when they were coming in."

"Yeah?"

He nodded.

"What if he came by foot?" she declared.

"Foot? It would take him days."

"Or he turned his headlights off?"

"He'd hit a cow."

"What if he's a crazy man, huh? And he didn't hit a cow... because sadists have a lot of luck, you know! Or he could've come while we were at church and just stood outside the window all day spying on us? I saw a True Crime once where this guy stalked this girl after they broke up. He found her every time she moved. And you know what she found out? He was like on the Most Wanted list, a mass murderer, and they used to go out country dancing all the time! They were always alone before—before..."

"Shh." Eva was creeping him out. He brought her closer to his chest. Her heart was beating like a wild thing against his. "It's okay. I've got you."

“Yeah, there’s no way I’m sleeping alone tonight. It’s not like you see me as anything more than a sister anyway,” she seemed to be talking to herself now. “I’m not exactly tempting anybody in these PJs.”

Was she kidding? This Nashville beauty had been driving him crazy all night with those cute silky shorts, and if she meant for him to stay in her room all night? Well, she had a much better opinion of his self-control than he had. “Come with me,” he said. “Bring your pillow and your blanket.”

She dragged his momma’s quilt off her bed, stuffing a pillow under her arm to follow him out to his room. He gave a hard laugh. Yeah, being alone in his room wasn’t any better than hers, but he had to grab his blanket... and after her True Crime story, his gun.

Her eyes widened at the shiny barrel. “Oh good. Yes. A gun. Good.”

“Yeah, unless I turn out to be the murderer, then it won’t be good.”

She let out a giggle, fed mostly on hysteria. “Shut up.”

Eva leaned against his side, and he immediately herded her out of his room where she had no business being. He could barely repress his wandering eyes. “Believe it or not, Eva,” he said, “you’re...” How did he admit to her that he was hopelessly drawn to her in every way without scaring her off forever? “You’re uh... we need some space.” He led her back into the living room. “Take the couch. I’ve got the floor here.” He found the remote. Maybe they could watch something that might calm her down. “How about a nice Disney movie about a mouse?”

She scrambled off the couch to sit by him. Lizardman took her other side. He groaned and collected the remnants of his scattered brain while she burrowed into his side. “I just want to hear you tell me a story,” she said. “Something from your childhood, about you and West.”

“Not happening.” He flipped on the TV, trying to find something boring, but not so boring that it couldn’t distract him from all that soft hair currently tickling the side of his neck.

Praying for strength, he flipped through the trailers. This was absolutely useless. Nothing was sinking into his brain, except thoughts of her. He found a documentary on dogs. At least that would keep Lizardman entertained. She let out a small shivering breath that only made him want to tug her closer. She was still so scared. He turned to her. “Eva... I don’t know how to say this politely.”

Her eyes got wide. “Yeah?”

“You’re...” He cleared his throat. He lost his nerve. “You’re crushing my knee,” he said. He pointed to his leg.

She let out an amused breath and inched away. “Sorry, sorry. This is no way to treat my hero.”

He noticed she trembled, and immediately Cole forgot his own selfish desires in his desperation to comfort her. Groaning, he dragged her against his side. “Are you okay?”

“No.” She buried her face in her hands. “I should’ve said something earlier. It’s just that I thought I had it handled. If I told West about that stalker then he’d tattle on me to my daddy. Then I’d be under lock and key.”

Even Devlin Trout’s own daughter feared him. Cole still couldn’t believe that his brother had turned into his flunky. He bristled. “I’ve heard about your old man.”

Her eyes widened. “No, no! No matter what you’ve heard, it’s not true. He’s a hard businessman, sure, and he gets into a few... disagreements, I suppose...” she trailed off. She bit her lip as if caught between her loyalty and sudden distress. “...but—but he’s honest.”

“He is, huh?”

“Yeah, he says it as it is. You’d love him.”

If her daddy wasn’t so bad, like her momma wasn’t and West wasn’t, well... Cole wasn’t sure if

he believed her.

“I can’t blame Daddy for being worried,” she said, “but if he thought I was in danger, he’d never let me out of the house again. And why is that fair? I get attacked and I’m the one who has to hide out from the world?”

She was right. Even if it was realistic to call in her bodyguards, it wasn’t fair. “I’d never let that happen,” he said.

Her head tilted. “How?”

“I don’t know... maybe we’ll get you a gun or something.” He quirked a smile at her. “I know you’re a far better aim than you let on.”

“Nonsense.”

But he had her smiling now.

His mind ran over who this stalker could be. Knowing her social media history, it could’ve been anyone in the world—though if those texts could be believed, this guy knew her. Cole’s thoughts went straight to Lacy Lynch. Eva and West had ruined his life and his career—both would be enough motivation for a crazy man to take his revenge. “You sure you don’t know who this stalker is?” he asked.

“No idea.”

He didn’t want to worry her yet, but if they could discover his identity then they could take action. “What if we find this guy?”

“You mean like set a trap?”

“Something like that.” She’d already gotten into a text fight with him.

“You...” She let out a breathless laugh. “You’re really so different from anyone I know.”

“We’re not doing anything dangerous.” He had to make that clear before she got it into her head to turn reckless.

“No, no,” she agreed. “We’re going to do this smart.” She clambered onto the couch, throwing her blanket up to her neck. He could see now that they had a plan, she felt braver, which was good for the both of them.

I want to convince her to leave West, not cheat on him.

It was getting harder to convince himself of that by the day, especially with his brother’s prolonged silence.

Cole stretched out on the carpet, cradling his head to watch the documentary. Lizardman sniffed at his head.

“Dogs?” Eva laughed. “That’s what you thought would calm me down?” She reached down and inched the remote from his hands before he realized what she was doing. She flipped the TV to an unsolved murder mystery case.

“That’s going to calm you down?” he asked.

“Yes!” She yawned like it was a drug. “Yes...” Her voice began to fade.

He’d steal the remote from her the second he heard her snores. Lying there, he listened to her breathing smooth out and turn deeper. Meanwhile, the crime on the TV turned more violent and disturbing. He poised to take that remote, but he didn’t have to. It fell from her fingers and hit him on the shoulder.

That was one way of doing it. He grappled with the remote, but before he could turn it off, the landline rang from the kitchen, startling him upright.

Who made those ringers so loud? Eva groaned in her sleep. Cole scrambled across the carpet to snatch the phone from its cradle before it woke her up. “Hey,” he answered with a hoarse undertone.

“Why are you whispering?” West asked mockingly. “It’s only ten o’clock at night.”

He rolled his eyes. Cole had almost killed himself getting to the phone for West? “Eva’s asleep,” he said.

“Oh.” West didn’t sound too torn up about it. “How’s Lizardman? Can he talk?”

“You’re unbelievable.” He glanced over at Eva’s sleeping form. She’d be dying to hear from him, especially after her scare. “I can wake her.”

“No, no, Momma wants to talk to you. She’s been begging for the sound of your voice since she woke up.”

She could talk to him already? Cole was beside himself, but he was still confused. “I thought you were in Nashville.”

“I was... and now I’m here, stupid. That’s the awesome thing about transportation.”

And then he’d be back for Thanksgiving. West needed to come back before Cole did something they both regretted. “Give me to Momma.” He didn’t want to hear West’s annoying voice anymore.

“Cole!” his momma cried into the receiver. West hadn’t bothered saying goodbye before he’d relinquished the phone to her. “My baby.”

Cole laughed. Normally, he’d be irritated to be called the baby, but his momma could get away with anything right now.

“How are you?” she asked. “You taking good care of West’s fiancée?”

“Uh...” Too well, except there were complications with that stalker. He moved into the other room. “I’m keeping her alive.”

“Good.”

He tried to find something that would make his momma happy. “She’s got some great ideas for your pumpkin festival.”

His mother made pleased sounds. “She’s a keeper. You hear that, West? Eva is turning things around for our pumpkin festival.”

“Great,” West muttered in a bored voice.

Cole ground his teeth.

“You better be careful, West,” his momma chided him. “You’re gonna leave her so long in Cole’s care, he’s going to take her off your hands.”

Uh oh! His momma wasn’t supposed to be so sharp after her surgery. Cole shifted.

“Momma,” West complained. “I’m not leaving your side until I see you eating a full meal again.”

Their momma let out a scandalized breath. “West! I’ve got your father to take care of me. You need to show that girl you value her or you’re going to lose her. A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

“I will... when you’re better.”

“Here’s some free advice, boys,” his momma sounded stern. “This is for the both of you. You’ve got to fight for what you want... if it’s really worth it. If it’s not, then you’ve got to move on. You’ve got me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” And West didn’t sound like he was taking that to heart at all.

“Cole?” she asked. “You going to do that?”

“Uh.” He hesitated. Was he willing to fight for what he wanted? The question was... what was that? His mind went back to Eva sleeping peacefully on the couch. Cole quickly changed the subject before he became a bigger liar than West. “How are you feeling, Momma?”

“Alive,” she said. “My heart is beating and—and I feel really good right now, actually, a little lightheaded after my rehab. They’re watching me closely, even walked me through the hall, but...”

she lowered her voice, "I need to tell you something, Cole. I can't explain it. I feel like I'm living on borrowed time, but..."

"Momma," West said. "You're just tired. You've been through so much. You need your rest. Lay down and I'll take care of things."

"You are too good to me, but let me say my piece, love. Cole, listen to me. It's just that I've come to a realization that we can't leave for tomorrow what we need to do today. Do you hear what I'm saying, Cole? West? Cherish the ones you love!"

"What do you think I'm doing?" West asked with a laugh.

"Honey... sometimes I wonder if you're doing this on purpose. I'm talking about Eva."

"No worries, Momma. We have an understanding."

Cole didn't answer. Both of their words burned through him. Eva needed his help, and he'd been doing a lousy job of rescuing her from his brutish brother. Things were going to change.

He listened to West coddle their momma, followed by the commotion of his oldest brother, Hudson, entering the room with his wife Mimi. "Uh uh," West called out to them as they greeted him brightly. "Don't think about it. She was just getting ready to go down."

"West! I'm fine," she argued cheerfully. "I want to see my boys. Cole, I love you," she sang into the phone. "I'll see you soon."

Cole hung up, his heart skipping dully. He walked back into the kitchen and set the phone back into its cradle. He looked out through the window into the black November night and noticed that the motion detector lights had been set off.

He didn't see an animal in sight.

Eva's True Crime show was screaming bloody murder in the other room.

Cole rushed to turn off the noise and gathered up his blanket to set up camp next to the couch where she slept.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Eva! Eva!”

She twisted around, seeing West’s kids run for her. “Charlie! Pip!” she cried out.

They shouted out in excitement. The Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice Festival was every bit as magical as she’d imagined. The kids hopped over orange pumpkins glistening over the dark soil.

A cold mist had settled over the ranch further out in the marshes, but miraculously a stream of sunshine had caught the oversized barn in its gentle rays. The day only grew brighter as the afternoon wore on, which was a good thing because she hadn’t been able to resist wearing her flirty, flowing floral dress the color of chocolate and buttermilk.

Cole had called the dress white, but no... it was after Labor Day, so it definitely was not white! And it went perfectly with her gold cowgirl boots.

Eva held out her arms as Charlie and Pip reached her. “You made it!” She’d begun to wonder if they would as the afternoon wore on, but now she caught them as they landed against her with a hardy hug. She let out a giddy “ooph.”

At least *they* were happy to see her.

Her attention drifted to their mother in concern. Liv stood with River, her shoulder pressing into her husband’s. She cradled her new baby next to her chest as she smiled over at her boys. West’s ex kindly included Eva in her sweet looks. Was there some pity in that gaze? Eva was both touched and annoyed. Liv probably knew too well the way West worked.

The guy was pulling a disappearing act that Eva had dumped past boyfriends for, and yet... what they had was special, wasn’t it? He’d changed his ways after what he’d done to Liv. He was just being a dutiful son.

Cole was *also* one, and yet, he never made her feel second best. Earlier, after Eva had stuffed her phone into his glove compartment to banish her stalker yet again, Cole had handed her down from his truck to escort her to the pumpkin patch just like the gentleman she knew was still hiding inside West, and yet, she never had to trick Cole into being one.

In a way, West’s brother was making her realize how she liked to be treated. Cole was protective, fun, smart—just the kind of guy that she’d love to set up with her friends, and yet, for some reason, the thought of matching him up with *anyone* made her teeth clench.

She was turning greedy probably, just like she had when she met any of West’s brothers and enjoyed their company. Who was she to stand in the way of Cole’s happiness?

Eva straightened. Her gaze went from Pip to Charlie. “How are you liking your Thanksgiving vacation?”

The boys both started talking at once. “Mompa got her heart surgery!”

“Mompa talked to me on the phone!” Pip announced proudly. His missing teeth from the summer had grown in, making him far more articulate than a boy with such innocent blue eyes should be. “She said I was her good boy!”

“Well, you are,” Eva agreed cheerfully. There was something about these kids that made her heart sing with joy. West and Liv had done a good job raising them.

Charlie was already tugging on her arm. “Where’s Cole?”

Surrounded by all the beautiful, single women from this town. They'd clutched to Cole all afternoon like Charlie and Pip were presently doing to Eva. How was she to know that her makeover would be too powerful? As soon as Cole helped her out of his truck that morning, the women had him trapped as they hounded him with questions about his mother.

Kylee was the worst of them. Eva still didn't know why the talented caterer rubbed her the wrong way—maybe they were too much alike in another life? Eva had no idea, but she'd bristled when Kylee attached herself to Cole's arm and tried to tempt him away with treats.

Of course, the flirt could cook! Apparently she could do everything that Eva couldn't!

Kylee had given Eva a sideways glance before she'd asked him, *"So this is going to be your sister-in-law?"*

Eva could still hear her giggles from where she stood, and Cole's rumbling replies.

She peeked over at him and felt herself flush when she caught his eyes sliding to her...and his nephews. Of course, he was just making sure they were okay.

"Please! Take us to the milk jug target shooting."

She ripped her gaze away as Charlie and Pip begged her to take them into the part of the pumpkin patch that she and Cole had sectioned off into carnival games. They'd have to hurry to try out everything before the festival was over. Already their friends were taking down their booths. It turned out kids weren't allowed to party late into the night. Go figure.

After a nod of approval from their momma to go with Eva, the boys dragged her over to the mini shooting range.

Cole still teased her about being a better shot than she'd been with West.

He was such a dork!

Too bad he couldn't see her target practice with West's boys himself, but Kylee had him cornered. Again! Eva carefully picked up the pellet gun, listening to the animated chatter around her. The addicting aroma of pumpkin pie and pumpkin scones sweetened the cool air. The tastes and smells were to die for. The kids who had come were even cuter. They squealed out in excitement as they warmed their hands against the fire barrels with their families and tried out the games.

Charlie and Pip hadn't even seen the races yet. They were all in for a treat.

She giggled and nestled the pellet gun against her shoulder. She'd only worked on this festival to make West proud of her, but now? Well, even if he hadn't been able to make it, she'd cherish this Thanksgiving memory in Harvest Ranch forever.

She stared down the barrel at the first of the six milk jugs.

"You can do it," Charlie whispered behind her.

She squeezed the trigger and hit all six of the jugs in succession. Of course, she could. Her father had her shooting guns since she was four years old.

The boys cheered behind her.

The worker jumped up while Charlie and Pip pointed out the stuffed animals that they wanted. One was an oversized pink and blue bear that no one had managed to win that whole day.

"No, no, pick those smaller stuffed animals," she said. "I'd have to hit about twelve more targets to get that big one!"

"You can do it!" Pip said eagerly.

"She sure can."

Eva turned and groaned when she saw Cole had finally joined them. He leaned against the partition dividing their game from the rest of the carnival. His eyes smoldered on her.

Wow, she had definitely overdone it with her makeover. She'd never do that again!

Eva was good. Too good.

He looked way too attractive and he knew it. Cole belonged on a runway with his camel-colored cable knit sweater. She'd paired that with a long tweed houndstooth coat and charcoal slacks with the hem cuffed up so that it showed off his brown leather boots... ones definitely *not* made for the farm.

To his credit, he'd kept his complaints to a minimum, laughing every so often, especially when he saw the care she'd taken in choosing his socks. But she had the last laugh when she caught him checking himself out in the mirror and, of course, she had to tease him about it the whole drive over to the barn in his truck.

He'd seemed deep in thought this morning.

He pushed his elbow against the partition wall, watching her. His fingers twitched as he gave her a shrewd look. "Win us that pink teddy bear," he said.

The know-it-all!

She laughed and lowered the pellet gun. No way would she have him crooning about how right he was about her trying to dumb down her skills for West's benefit. "Nice try," she said. "The boys just won their stuffed animals."

They groaned.

"It would never fit in your momma's car," she said. "She'd kill me."

"Lame." Cole brushed near her side, hardly giving her room between him and the boys to escape. Before coming to Harvest Ranch, she'd think nothing of his proximity, but... her senses felt heightened for some reason, like she was aware of his every move.

This thing between them was getting worse!

His hands went to hers... no, he was taking the pellet gun from her, in the most compelling, sensual way. His fingers slid down hers until she released the barrel to him, and not as quickly as she should. He lifted the gun and blessedly narrowing his eyes on the milk jug and not on her anymore, he took every target down and continued doing it until he got them that teddy bear.

The boys danced.

"Their momma is gonna have your head," Eva said.

He smiled at her. "We'll put our prize in *my* pickup. What do you say, boys? Should we let Eva sleep with the teddy bear tonight? She'll need it after all those True Crime shows she's been watching."

She gasped out in laughter. What crazy thing was he saying?

The boys clapped and robustly agreed that Eva should take her turn with the stuffed animal.

He passed the shotgun off to the teenage worker so that the kid could close up his booth. Cole put his arm around her shoulders. "Have you made your bets yet?" he whispered into her ear.

She startled, more at his flirtatiousness than at the fact that he was willing to consider making a friendly wager on racing the baby animals. "But you said bets were tacky?"

"For the kids, *not* for us. We only have a few races left."

She bumped him away from her with her hip. "I'm the one from the long legacy of bookies, not you. You don't want to mess with me."

"Oh, but I do." He winked.

He was on one today. Honestly, what was her problem anyway? He was just having fun. She should relax and stop being an idiot. "You're on," she said.

Somewhere to the side of them, a pumpkin catapulted through the air and smashed into the field to the delight of a bunch of teenagers who'd come to crash the party.

The festival was a hit!

Cole brought Eva and his nephews to the baby animals that were separated in stalls near the corral where the races were going. Cole had asked a neighbor, Ray Funches, to oversee the races, and the outlandish rancher was really getting into it. “Snortie has a lead on Babe, but oh, now Pinkie has a leg up on the both of them. It’s anybody’s game now, folks!”

The piglets were racing right now. They’d decided to race the cutest animals in her opinion—the chicks, the baby goats, the puppies. The way her heart leapt around at seeing their bobbing heads, she felt like someone had punched stars in her eyes like that emoji that she used on *everything*.

She leaned down and picked up the feistiest of the chicks. “ChugChug is winning this thing.”

“This isn’t a cockfight,” Cole said. “Nothing against ChugChug, but he’ll just beat up on the nearest chick and let Butter win.”

She scoffed. “Butter’s slow.”

“But consistent. He won’t go in circles. Butter’s my man.”

Her eyes narrowed on Cole. He seemed too cocky. “So help me, Cole, if you’ve been racing them on the sly...?”

“Just a feeling,” he said. “Can’t go against the gut instinct.”

Now who was the hustler? “Sure,” she said. “Hmm.” She was starting to get second thoughts on her choice, but Cole could be doing that on purpose. “Yeah, my money’s still on ChugChug,” she said. “I’m not letting you bluff me out of this one.”

“Money?” he asked. “Who said anything about money?” He glanced over at Charlie and Pip. “Pick your winner of the first race, then we’ll figure out what our winner gets.”

Charlie and Pip weren’t about to be left out. They chose Loopy and Clucky as their champions.

Eva hadn’t felt part of something in forever, and here she was actually fitting into a family, a very close-knit, broken-but-healed family. She always knew there was something special about West, but... why wasn’t he here sharing in these memories?

She was sure that Lily would encourage him to do it.

“If I win,” Cole said, “you have to make the turkey for Thanksgiving tomorrow.”

“Noooo!” she complained.

“What?” Cole said. “You think you’re going to lose?”

Ha, he was doing his best to take her off her game. “I’ll win, you cocky cowboy.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

She hedged. “You really want me to be in charge of the main dish? It could be terrible.”

“Bok, bok, bok,” Cole teased her.

Charlie let out an appreciative laugh.

“Oooh, that’s it!” she said. “You’ve got a deal. But if I win...”

His brow went up. “Yeah?”

“If she wins, you kiss Eva,” Charlie cried out.

Cole’s expressive brow went up, and he shook his head at his nephew. “That would be if *I* won. Duh.”

Eva laughed. He’d saved that one. “Smooth,” she said.

“We already worked out what I win,” Cole said. “Think of something else.”

Before Eva could suggest anything, Charlie was shouting out, “Bok bok bok!” Pip joined in. The boys were getting into this, and even funnier, they were actually making their uncle lose his cool. His jaw tightened as he stared down at them.

Now it was Eva’s turn to get him back for his trash-talking earlier. “You think you’re going to lose to me, is that it?”

He stilled at her challenging tone. His eyes went to Butter then to ChugChug before they narrowed on her. "You're on, hon."

Her face went warm as she just realized where her teasing had gotten her, and yet? A kiss on the cheek wasn't shocking in the least, certainly nothing to what she'd livestreamed with him in the barn. And now her whole face was on fire at the memory.

That kiss had been, in a word, amazing, but now that she knew him so well, it felt like something more.

They should never repeat that!

Cole swiveled on his nephews. "If you boys win, then you get the teddy bear forever. We won't even take turns with it."

That seemed only fair. Eva stifled her smiles as they nodded in determination. Each of them picked up their champions, coddling them with seeds and trying to train them before the big match.

Funches called them out on it. "I see you, Slades! No coaching your animals over there. I don't care how much you've got riding on this race, put those chicks in the arena and let's see what they've got."

Charlie and Pip exchanged glances and set Loopy and Clucky down at the starting line. Eva edged Cole aside and carefully set ChugChug on his feet. Her contender was fast, but undisciplined. Already he pecked at the other two birds. Cole was right; Butter could claim victory just by its slow and steady advancement. The race hadn't even started yet, and Cole had to keep picking up his bird and putting him back at the start.

She giggled. Her chick had no chance of winning... though it was definitely for the best not to collect on that kiss.

"Last race of the night, friends!" Funches cried out. The small children shrieked out in complaint. Eva grinned over at Cole. This really was a success. No one wanted to go home, including herself. She still needed to pick out the perfect pumpkins for their Thanksgiving table.

"We're getting you kids home for an early night," Funches announced in his no-nonsense way. "Your parents are going to need their sleep so they can make you a delicious Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow."

Martha Slade, Cole's elderly great-aunt, stood at the other end of the corral. She dropped the birdseed. That was the signal for the beginning of the race. The birds whipped around at the sound. Cole had trained them well, but that also meant that he knew which one would be the fastest.

Eva wouldn't let that intimidate her. Having every intention of pretending she cared about winning this race, she clutched the railing, cheering on her bird. "Go, ChugChug! Go!"

ChugChug started out in the lead, but just as Cole had predicted, the bird noticed Clucky edging in on him and turned and got into a fight. "No!" Eva shouted.

That kiss certainly wasn't going to happen. It was a relief, of course, though she was torn between her competitive spirit and the price of winning. She pointed at the birdseed. "That's what you want! Leave Clucky and go!"

"Butter!" Cole shouted beside her. "Win me that turkey dinner!"

Butter passed ChugChug and Clucky as they bopped heads. Loopy, true to his name, ran in circles around Butter. She could win that way, but it just depended on what part of her rotation Loopy ended on when those two crossed the finish line.

Butter was so slow... if ChugChug would just stop being so aggressive. Eva pointed at Butter gaining on the bird seed. "Butter's going to get it first! ChugChug, stop him! Stop him! He'll eat it all and there'll be nothing left for you!"

ChugChug miraculously turned, strangely, like he had somehow understood what Eva was saying. He let out a squawk and chased after Butter this time. “Go, go, go!” Eva egged on her bird.

Cole froze as ChugChug gained on Butter. The question was whether the bird would go for the seed first or tackle the competition... and that could be Loopy or Butter!

Eva scrambled onto the railing, trying to guide ChugChug with her hands. “For once in your short life,” she cried, “stop fighting yourself and go for what you want!”

Cole pushed up beside her on the railing to watch the action for himself, and then something absolutely crazy happened. Loopy, in her mad circling, brushed Butter too close with a wing and the two collided. They rolled through the hay in a cute, yellow blur.

ChugChug slowed, and then realizing that the competition was no longer worthy of his attention, charged for the birdseed. He crossed the finish line first.

Eva was beside herself with joy. “Yaya!” She pushed Cole’s arm with her own. “Take that! My bird is the champion of all champions!”

She honestly couldn’t believe it herself. It really went against all the odds. She hopped down from the railing, noticing all the phones recording the match. She hadn’t realized what a ruckus they’d caused, not that she wasn’t used to being a show woman in these situations. She turned and curtsied to their audience before accepting the boys’ hugs as they congratulated her.

Their momma was at their side, smoothing Pip’s hair, declaring how amazing the whole race was. River held their baby, whose head bobbed from side to side as the little guy watched on with vague sleepiness.

“ChugChug was our dark horse!” Charlie said with admiring eyes; they took on a wicked gleam. “Cole!” He turned on his stiff uncle. “You have to kiss Eva!”

Liv actually gasped in horror. “Charlie! They can’t!”

Eva’s stomach tightened. Now the phones took on a new sinister meaning as they recorded her every moment. Even her plan to have Cole kiss her cheek seemed too shocking, probably because of the quickening of her heart at the thought of feeling his lips against her skin... which no one would see. For goodness’ sake! No one could possibly guess how close they’d grown these past few days.

She could play this casual.

Cole’s fingers wrapped around her wrist. Her eyes locked with his. “Run,” he said.

“Run?” She grinned in sudden relief. He was going to renege on their deal! Eva was so pumped from winning that she couldn’t imagine a more hilarious ending to their championship. She loved the thought of scrambling from the races like Maverick escaping a gaming hole so she wouldn’t have to pay up.

“Liv!” Cole enlisted the help of his ex-sister-in-law. “Don’t let those little devils escape you!” Cole scooped up the oversized teddy bear with one hand and the two of them tore away from the pumpkin patch.

She thought he’d take them to his pickup truck, but he had different ideas. They raced for the barn.

Immediately she knew where they could hide. He must’ve had the same idea because as soon as they dashed into the barn, he tugged her the direction of the trapdoor. Eva was already shedding her sweater to stick on the lock. No way were they getting stuck down there like the legendary night when Hudson and Mimi had.

Cole helped her peel her sweater off. He dragged open the trapdoor, his eyes veering to the opening at the barn door. So far, the kids hadn’t followed them in. He stuffed the pink teddy bear through. It barely fit down the stairs. She kicked at its soft body to squish it through while he laid her

sweater between the lock and the trapdoor. He closed the screeching board over them, not a moment too soon.

The boys ran into the barn. She listened to their feet creak over the warped boards. “Cole!” Charlie shouted. “Eva!”

“You gotta kiss her!” Pip was getting into it.

“Boys!” That was Liv. “I’m sure they aren’t in here, and—and well, Eva is going to marry your daddy. She can’t kiss your uncle.”

That shut them up for a second, until Pip said, “No, not Daddy. Eva is marrying Cole! She loves him.”

Eva’s stomach took a nosedive. The children had seen something that she hadn’t meant for them to see. She groaned inwardly. She’d done this all wrong. Her natural warmth often got her into trouble, but this was different... and she didn’t want to face it.

She couldn’t face *any* of it.

Eva didn’t know what to do. Were these feelings even real? She was so confused.

“Come on.” Liv’s voice took on a stern note. “River’s waiting to take us home. You can tease your Aunt Eva and Uncle Cole later.”

“Cole!” Charlie shouted out. “You can’t run!”

Eva hid a laugh with her hand. “They’re like raptors,” she whispered, breathlessly. She turned to Cole, her cheek running against his rough one. She stiffened, as her heart tangled into a breathless heap at how near he was. She might’ve gotten herself into a worse jam. Why had she thought that getting into close quarters with Cole was preferable to a chaste kiss on the cheek?

The second that Charlie and Pip’s voices drifted away, she pushed up on the trapdoor.

It was stuck.

She whipped around, her hand going to Cole’s arm. She tried to keep the panic from her voice. “Get this open.”

He tried. She listened to the wood knock uselessly up and down. He actually swore.

She grimaced, feeling nervous laughter cramp her insides. Her sweater hadn’t been thick enough to keep the door from locking, had it? Well, that made sense. She’d been freezing. Now she was *really* going to turn into an icicle.

“It’s okay. It’s okay!” she said. There were other ways out... not the hay slide, of course, but... well? That would be their last resort anyway.

Cole’s hand went to hers in the darkness. “Call uh... West, then have him get ahold of Funches or Morningstar or Aunt Martha or something.”

“I didn’t bring my phone.”

“You didn’t...?”

“I wasn’t about to let that stalker get in the way of my fun,” she hissed. “What happened to yours?”

“Broken.”

“Still? You haven’t fixed it by now?”

“I don’t live on my phone.”

She still didn’t get that. “Who does that?”

Instead of answering, he rushed down the stairs. She listened to his feet take him across the pavement to the other side of the barn where that door was barred. He yanked at it, which of course, didn’t do anything. He kicked at it, then pounded. “Hey!” he shouted. They were on the other side of the pumpkin patch where the festival was happening. “Can anyone hear us down here?”

A loud crash sounded in the distance. The pumpkin catapult was still in fine form, apparently. The cheers drowned out any noise that she and Cole could make to call for help.

She followed more slowly. Her hand went to the oversized teddy bear, and she dragged it behind her. The light from outside still illuminated the goat cellar, but it was quickly fading. Harvest Ranch got dark early in November. Most of the booths had already been taken down.

No one would be checking for them.

This wasn't looking good.

She joined Cole at the door and sat on the teddy bear, sinking down into its soft padding. She watched the lights from the window cast his strong features in glowing relief as he lowered onto the dusty ground next to her. "Sorry." He sighed out. "All those new clothes you got for me are going to get real dirty down here."

"Maybe it's for the best," she said. "I couldn't pry Kylee away from you."

"Yeah?" He chuckled. "Jealous?"

"Whatever..." Her distress was quickly taking over her reason, and she tried to make sense of it. "If you want to go for someone like Kylee, don't expect me to help you. I'm never giving another Slade a makeover as long as I live."

"I looked too good, huh?"

"Yeah."

That shut him up, but she could still see his eyes in the dying light, and they were as bold on her as they were earlier. He was acting different. She licked her lips. That shouldn't be too much of a surprise—she felt different, too. She shivered in the cold.

Her attention wandered to his houndstooth jacket that she'd insisted he wear. "Well, at least *you* 'll be warm."

He grumbled out a grim laugh. "Get over here."

Chapter Twenty-Two

To Cole's surprise, Eva came to him.

She smelled great with that rose perfume; she also felt great in that soft dress of hers. The skirt had flirted with her legs all day, teasing him in every way. He'd been waiting for an excuse to touch her, and now that she was pressed into his side, it was all he could do not to bring her even closer.

Destiny was a strange thing, a strong thing. He wasn't big into coincidences or fate. All he knew was that she belonged with him and he'd do anything to keep her at his side for a very long time.

Eva moved around like a wriggling puppy, completely oblivious to his thoughts as she set up house around them. She smashed the teddy bear behind their backs and fluffed it with her elbow.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I don't know how long we'll be stuck down here." Her bare knees pressed against his legs while she worked. "I just wish that I'd had some of those pumpkin scones. I can still smell them."

He was sick of them. He'd had about twenty. Kylee got a kick out of watching him down them. And for some reason, her flirting got a reaction out of Eva that he'd never gotten before. Cole tested out his theory. "I'm sorry you didn't get to try them. Kylee's cooking is to die for."

She stiffened, but refused to take the bait... which meant that she had... because she always took the bait. Her curiosity was legendary.

He turned to her, barely making out her dainty chin in the shadows. "Why don't you like her? She doesn't ruin your plans for Ashley and me, does she?"

"No."

She was pouting. That was actually a good sign. Eva had been pushing him to go out and meet girls from the first time they'd met. Now that he thought about it, that might've been her way of distancing herself from him.

And now?

"Tell me about this Ashley," he said. "Why is she so perfect for me?"

She let out a breath. "I... she... forget it. I take that back. She's not."

"Then who is?" he asked. "I'd love to hear your theory."

"I'm not feeling up to it right now," Eva admitted. "It was a stupid idea anyway. You can find your own—your own..." She shivered and he took pity on her. He shuffled out of his coat and tucked the wool around her.

"No, no," she demurred. "You need to stay warm, too." She threw the ends of the jacket around him too, so that they were sharing both the expensive threads *and* their body warmth.

He didn't fight her this time. He wasn't going to fight himself anymore either. That morning he'd decided to take his momma's advice to heart. He was fighting for what he... uh... well... *what he loved*.

He winced in the darkness.

Loved?

He adored her. He didn't throw the word "love" around lightly, but neither did he hold it so close to his heart that he second-guessed himself at every turn. He just knew how he felt.

How do I convince her that we're right for each other?

She'd never let West go. His brother was a bad habit with her. West kept himself so closed off to love that he'd become a challenge, so much so that she'd never had the time to question whether he was right for her or not, because she'd never truly *had* him. Not that she didn't try. Oh, Eva tried to win West over every day, even by pretending to be something that she wasn't.

It was like trying to throw a blanket over a gloriously bright light.

"I knew you could shoot," he said.

She made a sound of amusement. "I ain't talking, copper. You'll never get me to admit a thing."

"Good thing I can read you then... better than you do yourself."

"Oh yeah?" Her voice echoed in the darkness. "Let's hear it."

Okay, but she was asking for it. "You're a softie," he said.

"Whatever!" she scoffed. He knew she'd hate that one—she tried so hard to put on a cool girl vibe with her little girl act. "Try telling that to anyone in Nashville," she said. "I'm a tough cookie."

"... who crumbles for small children and baby animals, and anyone smaller or vulnerable or hurting... that's why you went for West, huh? He's your project."

She didn't laugh at that one. "That's not fair. What do you have against him anyway?"

"You know, actually?" He decided to get real with her. "Nothing that was ever important—until you came along, to be honest."

"Me?"

He had to tread lightly here... but should he? He was tired of beating around the bush. "It's like watching a python swallow a rare and glorious bird."

"Wow! Wow... so you really think I'm that helpless?" She guffawed mockingly. "I told you that I can take care of myself. Ha! And what makes you think that I'm not making *you* into a project, huh?"

"Because you don't feel sorry for me. I'm not broken. I'm not your boy toy and you can't play games with me. I'm not West... at all." He actually appreciated her, and maybe he should tell her that? "I love everything about you."

Her whole body tensed up beside him. He cursed his timing. Why had he even started this conversation down here? He didn't want to blurt his feelings to her in the darkness, and in the middle of an argument, when he couldn't even see her expression.

"You're all talk," she whispered hoarsely. She shifted and her hair whipped up against his neck. "ChugChug won that race by the way," she said. "And you haven't paid up yet."

What was she talking about? "You want me to kiss you?"

She sounded far too angry for that.

"It's so easy for you to act so above everything, isn't it? But when it comes down to it, you don't have the guts to make this about us. There's no one else here, just you and me. West isn't stopping you from doing anything."

"You're right," he said.

That was the most frustrating thing about this. He hated that his brother even came up in this at all. After being cowed into proposing, West was so blinded by her riches that he'd never see the true gem in front of him. He'd never willingly let her go.

And to tell Eva all of that when she couldn't figure it out herself? It would be like calling her an idiot, and she wasn't—she was just tenderhearted and manipulated by his jerk of a brother.

"This *really* isn't about West," he said. Let her decide for herself who she loved, even if she rejected him. Horribly. This was the most vulnerable thing he'd ever done, but now his mouth had a will of its own and opened to share how deeply he cared about her. "It's about us."

"You could've fooled me."

“I’m trying to tell you that I’m in love with you,” he said.

She shifted beside him. “I don’t belie—” her voice cracked, “I don’t believe you.”

Oh, this kiss is happening now.

He found her waist and dragged her onto his lap. That was the easy part in this darkness. She let out a breath, taking his shoulders to steady herself. Her knees ran into his arms. His fingers went to her chin next. He found her neck instead.

Interesting.

He’d think he was blundering this, except she was melting into him like they were one person. Despite the fact that the night had wrapped them in this frustrating blackness, nothing would stop him from showing her how much she meant to him. He carefully traced her soft skin with his fingertips, past that familiar jawline until he touched her lips.

There they were, smooth, full, perfect.

He bent forward to claim that kiss.

Her mouth opened with a quick intake of breath, even as his lips connected with hers. The sparks rushing through them were just as mind-blowing as the first time—more so, because now he’d gotten to know the sweetness of her soul.

Relief filled him as her hands tightened over him. She’d been holding back as much as he’d been, and now he couldn’t get enough of this smart and delectable woman.

They belonged together.

Eva’s responsive lips surprised him. He felt her hope and longing, even as his own resolve to be the man she needed hardened through his veins. All thoughts of his scheming brother were thrown from his mind as he got lost in every wonderful thing that made up *her*.

He definitely had a sense of where she was in this cellar now, not that it stopped him from touching her. She was soft, feminine. His lips moved over hers.

“West...!” She planted her hands against Cole’s chest and drifted back from him. “He won’t... I’m not sure how... don’t tell him yet...”

He froze. Cole wasn’t the kind of guy who sneaked around, especially with his own brother. Never mind that it was West they were dealing with. “Break it off with him,” he told Eva.

“I need to talk to him...”

He slid his hands over her arms to find her wrists and then her fingers. He caught them in his. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t know. I mean, it’s West, but—but I don’t want to hurt him like this.”

Hurt him? Maybe his pride, but did he even care about Eva?

She was a saint to even consider his feelings. Her kindness was one of the many things that Cole liked about her, but was it causing her to second-guess this? He wrapped his arms around her, feeling the quickening of her heart, like a bird ready to take flight, and still she didn’t go anywhere.

“Oh, Cole!” She sniffed. He jerked upright. Was she crying? “I wanted your family to love me. I didn’t want to tear you apart.”

He was quick to reassure her that would never happen. “No, no.” He ran his thumb over hers. “No one will blame you for anything. We’ll be fine.” Eva was, at best, a trophy to his brother, and at the worst? An albatross around his neck. In the end, he’d swallow his pride and move on. “West will be mad for maybe one hot minute.”

And if things got bad? Cole would take full responsibility for everything that had happened here—he’d face his brother’s wrath; Eva’s daddy; his momma’s disappointment. All for her. He found Eva’s lips with his finger, feeling their tenderness before he followed that with another kiss.

He tasted the salt of her tears and groaned. “Don’t cry, Eva. I’ll take care of everything.”

“It’s just that you’re so amazing,” she said in a watery voice, “and I should—should never have come here.”

Oh, she definitely should’ve come. How to convince her of that? “For one second, block out West,” he said, “and tell me what *we* have.”

“Everything,” she breathed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Eva didn't know what she was saying, only how she felt. She was supposed to like West, wasn't she? Right?

Since the moment the two of them had met, everything had been about that man.

Her heart wasn't telling her that right now. It beat up against Cole's as she buried her face into his chest in this cold goat cellar. Her shoulders were frozen, her knees too, but mostly she was warm with happiness.

The confusion rocked her, making her feel unsteady. Or maybe that was Cole's earth-shattering kisses. Eva had wanted nothing more than for her little chick champion to cross that finish line. She could admit that now. Wasn't that why she'd kept throwing that wager in his face? She'd just been so afraid that she was imagining what they had, and she was some flighty romantic who couldn't make up her mind.

Her dashing cowboy was all that consumed her now. He held Eva so tightly that she'd never fall. She hadn't felt so secure and insecure at once.

"Eva, you have to know that I'm crazy about you!" Cole's obliging mouth returned to hers, taking away all the rest of her inhibitions with his kisses, so that she couldn't remember why she'd fought this so hard.

She'd been too used to feeling numb, unlikeable, not enough—and yet, didn't West still need her? She'd excused everything that he'd done with some lie that she eagerly swallowed like poisonous candy:

He's got too much on his mind.

He's been dealt hard cards in life.

He'll change once we get married.

And likewise, she'd excused everything between her and Cole as some trick of the mind:

He has to watch over me because he's West's brother.

He's just nice to everyone.

He looks way too good for any female not to notice... must be those new jeans.

Not to say that Cole didn't look amazing. She was very proud of how she'd brought out the blueness of his eyes and the broadness of his shoulders with those clever purchases, but he was more than what he wore, and she knew that very well.

Her fingers found his face in this darkness, feeling the roughness of his neck and cheek. "I'm sorry," she said. "I really have been a horrible handful these past few days."

"I wouldn't say horrible." His hands found her knee, tickling her.

Eva jumped. "Oh!"

"Sorry!" he returned.

She laughed. These misadventures had become the norm this past week. What would a future with him be like? Eva had meant what she had said earlier—Cole and West already were feuding. She never wanted to add fuel to that fire.

Yet, here she was responding and returning every one of his blazing hot kisses each time he planted one on her. "I can't wait to spend even more time with you," he said, "... as soon as we get

out of here.”

“I’m okay getting stuck in here with you,” she said.

He chuckled, tucking her skirt around her knees while they talked. Now that he’d discovered her legs, he wouldn’t leave them alone. “I know, but you’re cold,” he said. His voice held a touch of guilt, like he actually blamed himself.

Wow, that wasn’t something she was used to... and yet, strangely, she liked how protective he was. She didn’t want to compare him to West. They were brothers, and as different from night and day, and yet, a part of her couldn’t help marvel at how well he treated her in comparison.

Eva just didn’t know how it could be.

“We need to figure out how to get out of here,” he said. “No one knows we’re here and no one will see that we’re missing.”

She sighed, knowing who would. “What about West? He said he was coming tomorrow.”

Cole turned silent.

“Did you hear differently?” she asked.

“No,” he said finally. “He might come.”

But he might not. He was like the benevolent spirit of the holidays that might bless them with his presence if they were especially good, like Santa Claus; just as unreliable and just as fake. How had she allowed this strange relationship they had to stretch out for so long? She’d invested so much time and energy into West that it was hard to see that he hadn’t given anything back... until this moment. Because now that she felt what Cole felt for her, she knew *that* was how love was supposed to go.

She was sure of it; even as the affection she had for Cole warmed her insides like hot cocoa, what they had also gave her a confidence that she’d never known in a relationship. She had craved this all along.

So why? Why had West asked her to marry him if he didn’t truly love her? Did a part of him think that he did?

He must! He wasn’t a complete monster, just thoughtless maybe.

Her pity for him broke through her in a flood of emotion. West had to see that they weren’t right for each other, even though a part of her mourned for what could’ve been. This was all so new, and still, West and Eva were like puzzle pieces that jammed in every which way. She’d talk to West, get him to see it too. He might even be relieved. He must’ve sensed it. It was probably why he distanced himself from her at every turn.

A sudden urge to break free from this cage she’d made for herself urged her to action. She could make all of this right. “We can try the hay slide to get out of here,” she told Cole.

Cole moaned, his hands tightening over her again. “Let’s wait out the night and check it out as soon as it’s light, okay?”

“Okay.” She rested her head against his shoulder. Defeat never came easy for her, but spending the night in this murky goat cellar wasn’t really a loss if she was cradled in Cole’s arms, was it?

“I’ll keep you warm,” he assured her.

She giggled and nudged her cute man in the darkness. She had no doubt about it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cole woke up to the sound of the trapdoor squealing open. Eva startled awake beside him. The light from the morning illuminated her face through the slats of the tiny windows above them. It glowed over her blonde hair like a halo, albeit an uneven one.

The sound of boots thudded down the stairs. Cole didn't have a chance to call out before a light was shining in his face.

West was holding his cellphone above them. "Great," his older brother muttered. "This is the last thing that I need right now."

With that disturbing statement, his light shifted to Eva, who began to unwind from Cole's arms. "West?" She shielded her eyes. "You found us."

"Lucky for you I'm good at following breadcrumbs... maybe *unlucky* for you."

Cole was the next to be blinded by the cellphone light. He raised his arm against it, feeling like he was in an interrogation room. "Get that off of my face."

West ignored the request. "You didn't even have the twins locking you in; it's almost like you did it on purpose." Cole couldn't see his brother with the light on him, but he caught sight of his stiff shoulders. The hand on the phone shook. "To think I offered to pay you, Cole."

Eva squeezed Cole's arms. His eyes went to her tumultuous ones before she scrambled from the hay. She tripped over the pink teddy bear. "I have to talk to you, West." Her southern accent came out in her distress.

"I'm not in the mood." West switched off his light. Rage hardened his every feature. "I told the hands to take care of the animals before they take off, and then we can make the most of this Thanksgiving, and hey, good news! I brought a pumpkin pie. We're gonna have a blast."

It was no secret that West hated the holidays. Cole was sure that catching his brother canoodling with his fiancée would be the whipped cream on top of that pie. Cole got to his feet, watching his older brother carefully.

"We'd better hurry eating it though," West said. "We only have a few hours before Eva and I need to go."

What was he talking about? Before Cole could object, West turned from them. Cole's stomach tightened in confusion when he noticed his brother's bruised jaw. West had been in a fight.

"What happened to you?" Cole asked.

West smirked mockingly, refusing to answer.

Eva let out a shocked breath, but she didn't press for an explanation. It was very unlike her. "West," she said with some urgency. "I need to talk to you."

"Not right now," West snarled. All that fury stiffening his body had finally found an outlet in his voice. West took a deep breath and caught Cole with a warning look. "I'd like to talk to my brother alone."

That meant a fight and he didn't want witnesses. The Slades liked to duke things out in private. Cole had the same sentiment. He glanced over at Eva, hoping that she'd listen for once. "It's okay. I've got this."

Eva shook her head. "No! We can be civilized about this. I just want to explain to you, West,

make you understand that we're just not right for each other."

"Eva!" West roared. "Get in my car." His lips twisted sarcastically. "I promise I won't hurt my *baby* brother."

"I'm not getting into your car!" she cried out. "Look, this was just as much my fault... maybe more..."

West glared at her for that, and Cole realized that his brother actually agreed that she was to blame.

Cole steadied himself. "West..."

"You've got to listen to me," Eva cut in. "I'm worried about you, West. Do you know that? You're all beat up. All the time, you come home with some new scrape or bruise and I can't—can't stand to see it! And still you won't tell me anything. You refused to let me in. It hurts how little you trusted me, you know!"

"Trust?" West spat. "In *you*?" Eva flinched as he directed all his wrath on her. "Why should I trust you? You've shown me just how little I should."

Eva stepped back. Hurt paled her face. "So that's it then? You're going to blame everything bad happening on me?"

"I'm not in the mood to hear you go off on me on how *I* should behave."

"Fine," she said. "But this? Whatever we are? It isn't happening anymore." A tear slid down her cheek.

Cole put his arms around her. "Eva, it'll be okay."

"No, no, it's not." Her hair flew around her shoulders as she shook her head. "I can't bear to see this..." She ripped from his embrace and ran up the stairs with a cry.

"Eva?" Cole stepped after her.

West dove forward, getting between them. He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I *said* we need to talk."

Cole could scarcely keep himself from throwing his brother to the side to go after her. "Don't pretend that you've ever cared about her," Cole said. "You treat her like trash. That's ending now."

"You think so, huh?" West's glower seemed especially threatening in the shadows. "You're the one I don't get. Such a disappointment. I thought you had far better sense than to go for her."

A sick feeling permeated Cole's stomach. "Better sense?" It was almost as if West thought Eva wasn't good enough.

"You pretended to have all these morals..." West said.

Eva was a sparkling ray of sunshine in the gloom that their lives had become in the shadow of their *momma's* illness. West was an absolute blind man if he couldn't see that. "Do you even hear yourself? She's... fantastic, kind, warm. Of course I fell for her. What did you expect?"

"From you? Everything! You're my brother!"

"You don't love her," Cole said, "or even care about her. Admit it! You just saw a pretty face and—and her connections. You've never seen who she really is."

"And you do? After a week and a half and a few stolen kisses?" West gave a mocking laugh. "Spare me the lectures. You're just a lusty monk with your holier than thou attitude. You're as shallow as the next guy. Yeah." West nodded like he had Cole all figured out. "If you have to cast me as the villain to live with yourself, go for it. It's none of my business how you ease your conscience, but if you think that you and Eva are going to be a thing, you'll have to get through me first."

He had to be kidding. "You don't own her, West."

"You never will either."

Cole's fists tightened. "That's not how relationships work. You make it sound like a chain that holds you back. No wonder you're always fighting commitment."

West let out a bitter laugh. "But you're ready to jump off that plank? Ha! You really are a simpleton. What else has Eva talked you into while my back was turned? Good thing I got here when I did—she'd have you saying your vows on the top of this barn."

They hadn't talked marriage, but it wasn't off the table. Cole couldn't imagine a life without her. "I'm sorry if we hurt you, but..."

"Hurt me?" West scoffed. "What kind of world do you live in? Her daddy wants to see her in Nashville tonight. He's not taking any excuses. You know her daddy, right? Mr. Devlin Trout."

Since when did Eva not have control over her own life? Cole grew uneasy. He knew nothing about the shadier part of West's business or Eva's home life. The bruises on West's face were a dead giveaway that something wasn't right. No way was Cole letting West drag Eva into that world again. "She's not going with you," Cole said.

"You want to bet?" West seemed very sure of himself, which made Cole even more nervous. "You really don't know how her world works at all. We're going to one of her father's parties tonight—one of those who's who parties where you have to bar paparazzi it's so exclusive, and Eva loves that glittering world, like she loves her attention from her fans on social media—like she wants from me. I hurt her pride, so she got me where she thought it would hurt me most—my own brother. And guess what? She won. I'll mind my P's and Q's after this. Eva and I understand each other."

"West?" Did he really believe that? "You're wrong about her."

"Now who's hurt?" West asked flippantly. "I really thought you were too smart for her, the way you kept running. Watch how this all rolls out for yourself if you still don't believe me. She'll come with me tonight and get lost in her world of parties and fame and forget *all* about you. That's who she is. Now that she's gotten what she wants from us, you'll never see her again."

Cole couldn't believe that he was hearing this, and yet a part of him knew that Eva *could* be manipulated into living in that world. She'd been lost in that emptiness before. She'd desperately sought fame and attention, not knowing where to go to find love. Cole realized that Eva needed him more than ever. The thought of West taking her back there was terrifying.

"You'll destroy her this way," Cole said.

"Please! She loves this, as much as she loves the glittering life of Nashville, and True Crime, and the drama she always tries to make of my life, so yeah, I'm sorry to ruin your plans to exchange vows on the top of this old barn, but I'm sure you'll thank me some day."

He doubted that, though he saw that West was desperate to keep himself "chained" to this monster he'd made of Eva. A rich diva was his ticket to that underworld. "You have to let her go, let her run her own life. She can't be your puppet anymore, West."

"Is that what she said?" West's voice cracked on his incredulity. "What sweet and pathetic stories did she whisper into your ear about her life? That she was the damsel in distress? And still, you'd *never* fall for her sob stories if she wasn't such a tantalizing distraction from the dullness of your life."

Cole didn't have to listen to this. He was a full head taller than his older brother. "Get out of my way," he said, "before I move you myself."

"Temptation is sweet, isn't it? She'll have you go against everything you believe in. What would Momma think? But Eva's so gorgeous, fashionable, rich, soft..." West's strength wasn't in his fists, but in his hypnotic words that rooted through Cole's soul before he even realized his brother had planted a seed in there. "There are strings attached to that girl that you won't want to go up against."

West shook his head. “You call her the puppet? Just wait... and when you see it, you’ll run, because not even *you* will be stupid enough to stick around.”

His brother could try to twist this to make Cole look like an idiot, weak; he always did this to get into his head, but what Eva and Cole had was simpler than this intrigue that West tried to make out of everything. “I love her,” Cole said. “That’s enough. You can’t say anything to get in the way of that.” He tried to get past West again.

His brother stubbornly took three steps back to block Cole from getting to the stairs. “You don’t know anything, do you? You’re gonna face her daddy, is that it? You’re coming in with your javelin and armor to take down all the dragons of that rich world that she lives in, despite her screams to the contrary? That’s real cute, hero. Too bad Eva’s only using you, because you were made for each other, both bright-eyed infantile dreamers, absolute children.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Cole exploded. “You really think you’re better than all of us, don’t you? You had no trouble using me before I got too difficult. That’s your real problem, huh? People are just objects to you.”

Cole, Nash, Eva! West had even thrown their momma through the ringer. An image of Momma praying and crying for her sweet boy was seared into Cole’s darkest memories. It didn’t matter how much she cared, West had torn Momma’s world down over her ears.

“I’m not going to stand here and watch you do the same thing to Eva as you did to Momma.”

“What?” West’s voice took a dangerous turn.

Now that the accusation was out, Cole wasn’t keeping anything back to save his brother’s feelings. They’d done that for too long and West’s destructive pride was the consequence. “Everything you did put her one step closer to the grave.”

West was silent, staring him down. He took a deep breath. “I know!” he said. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Cole was taken aback. That had been far too easy... and didn’t feel right at all. Winning this fight by tearing West into pieces wasn’t going to save Eva. A pit of unease dug into his stomach as he watched this dark and bitter pain consume his brother.

“Why do you think I stay by her bedside and work out these—these deals to get these surgeons to even consider her case?” West asked. “I’m playing catch-up, every day coming up short... everything just falls through my fingers, and I don’t expect you to understand anything that I do, only that it’s necessary, and I can’t quit... or she dies.”

“She dies?” Cole asked.

Wait, was West really putting the fate of his mother’s life on his shoulders like this? It was like he’d completely taken God out of the equation, and now he thought he was the one in control... over life and death, even?

West’s fists clenched, every part of him rigid from the pressure of keeping the heavy weight of guilt he carried from crushing him.

Cole happened to be the idiot that helped place that burden squarely on West, when disease and failing health and... even wayward children—for heaven’s sake—was the nature of being alive in a world that was fallen, an existence that was meant to turn in cycles in every season of life.

His heart sank at how he’d blamed his brother for every bad thing that had ever happened over the years.

“I was wrong to say that,” Cole said.

Or to think it.

How could West not catch on to their negative vibes? The men in the Slade family had blamed

him for as long as Cole could remember.

Ugh. Cole had fallen for the same trap that the prodigal's brother had. He somehow believed that justice and mercy belonged in his hands. To nudge God aside and say that he could do a better job at His judgement? Now who didn't believe in His power?

"You're not to blame for Momma," Cole said. The words were years too late.

West snorted. His eyes glittered under the broken shafts of light in the cellar. His brother would only accept the worst version of himself, just like he did with everyone around him. And yet, didn't taking the sole blame also make West believe he had some control when he didn't?

Cole needed to pry West's clenched hands from a steering wheel that had long since been detached from the car. The guy needed to forgive himself; that partly came from Cole's forgiveness too. "You have to stop this," Cole said. "It's over. Let it go." West's need for control had made him a wrecking ball that took everyone down in his path. "Let Eva go."

West laughed again. Ominously. "You'll never understand how it really is." He took a deep breath, lowering his voice. "I did it for our family."

"Excuse me?" Cole asked.

West shrugged, hiding behind that familiar shield of sarcasm again. Cole supposed it was easier than appearing to be weak. West had been hiding his hardships for so long, but then again, he'd always put so much weight on being powerful.

"You know how Nash and Porter were in trouble," West said. "Eva was the only one who could help us. She had that earring that we planted in Lacy Lynch's car. *That's* how we ruined the guy... before he could ruin us."

Cole groaned at the dangerous plan, and then again, at how West had manipulated Eva. "You didn't think that she'd help you without you playing with her emotions? She's a real person. She has a heart of gold; not that I agree with what any of you did—it was stupid, but... she'd have done *anything* to help you... whether you pretended to like her or not."

"Whoa, who said anything about pretending?" West asked. He'd put on a new mask of mockery that further shielded his vulnerability from earlier. "Eva's smoking hot. Having her hanging all over me has its benefits. I really enjoy feeling those eager lips under mine... don't you? Oh, I'm sure you do. She doesn't hold back."

Red hot anger blinded his vision, but somehow Cole saw well enough to punch his brother squarely between the eyes.

"No! No!" Eva screamed above the stairs. He heard her boots scuttle over the dusty steps as she ran back down to them in that pretty little dress.

Cole wasn't sure who she was coming to rescue.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Stop!” Eva cried out. “Stop fighting!”

Like an idiotic drama queen, she'd run to Cole's pickup to have a good cry, and then when the men took too long to come back, she'd begun to worry. Eva had returned only to overhear that West had gone for her because he didn't think that she'd help him otherwise.

Had he never really loved her then?

Her cheeks burned. He'd used her. At the very least, he should at least *like* her as a friend after she'd helped him out, but nobody talked about their friends the way West just did about her.

She felt sick. Barely able to see in the darkness below, she saw that Cole *could* see and very well. He was letting his brother have it, but West was like a cornered animal, snapping and flailing, and he didn't give Cole the upper hand for long. West had been in his share of fights these last few months, and they must've been vicious by how practiced and desperate he'd become.

Eva wasn't sure what West was fighting for, except his wounded pride. He definitely didn't care about her.

West grabbed his brother around the neck and ran his fist into his jaw. Cole's fingers grappled at West's shoulder to break his hold on him.

“You won't have her,” West hissed.

“Don't push me, West,” Cole grunted out.

Cole was definitely holding back because if he wanted to, that strong cowboy could flatten his older brother into the ground in a second.

“We're over, West,” Eva shouted. “Just stop it!”

West threw a knee into Cole, who crashed back against the goat stall. It splintered into a million pieces. “Cole!” Eva ran to him.

West grabbed her arm. “Not so fast, hon.”

Cole growled out, kicking the shards of railing out of his way while he tried to get to his feet.

“Hear me out.” West's eyes burned into hers. “I'm not letting you drag anyone else down. You made that video your daddy saw. Now we face the consequences. You and I... we follow through.”

“I dragged you down?” In an instant, she realized the truth. West despised her. He wasn't fighting Cole to keep her in his life; he was fighting to keep her *out* of Cole's. “I might not be perfect,” she choked out, “but at least I never pretended how I felt for you. *I* meant everything I did and said.”

“Then why did you mess around with my brother?”

“I...” *love him*. That didn't sound like someone who was very dedicated. She gulped. Was West right? Would she drag Cole down?

“We understand each other,” he said. “We're practically the same person.”

No, no. She shook her head. “We're not. You're broken and I never could...” She choked on a sob. “I wanted to help you.”

He smirked. “Really?” he asked. She didn't like that dark amusement on his face. “This is how you do it?”

Cole's arms went around her. “C'mon.”

West's stormy blue eyes shot over Eva's shoulder to his brother's. “You're making a big

mistake.”

She was positive that his warning was meant for his brother, not for her. She trembled in astonishment. Cole was the best man that she knew, and it killed her that West might possibly be right—Eva wasn't good enough for him, but now she craved Cole's comfort and protection after what had happened.

Did that make her just as much of a user as West?

Maybe if West had talked to her, she'd know exactly why he hated her so much!

“Let's go,” Cole said.

She felt like crying, and not sure if she was doing the right thing, she nodded and went with Cole, feeling West's glare on them as they retreated up the rickety steps out the trapdoor.

West followed them out. “We are flying out tonight,” he shouted at her back. “Your daddy's been asking after you.”

She turned slightly. Had her daddy heard about that stalker? Or was this something else altogether? “I told him that I'd be here for Thanksgiving,” she said.

“Turns out he's too worried for that,” West said. “He wants to see his little baby.”

“I'm watching out for her,” Cole said. “We'll let him know she's staying here.” His grim face dared his older brother to object. None of them were playing anymore.

West snickered. “Yeah, that'll go over well.”

Eva's shoulders ached from all this fighting. She wanted nothing more than to get as far away from West as she could—a strange development from the beginning of this holiday when she would've done *anything* to get his attention.

Outside of the barn, Cole handed her wordlessly into his pickup.

The morning was beautiful, even if it was awful. She couldn't tell if the cold front had finally hit them or not because she was so angry, but it definitely felt warmer than the goat stalls.

The door slammed shut behind her as Cole made his way around the front. It was sweltering in here! She fanned her face then pulled at the front of her dress, trying to breathe. That fight was starting to get to her. She avoided looking at West at all costs, who advanced on them like a threatening shadow.

Cole dragged himself onto the bench seat. He dug his keys from the glove compartment. Eva spied her phone in there. The screen flashed with about a million notifications on it. She groaned. Were her daddy's orders to get home one of them?

Cole stuck the keys in the ignition. “Where to?”

She shivered, even though she was burning up. “Not to the house.” West would just follow them there. At this point, she almost wondered if he'd try to drag her home to her daddy, kicking and screaming.

Resentment filled her at his ill treatment. How did he live with himself making her into the villain? After everything that he'd done to her?

The wheels of the pickup squealed as Cole took them the opposite direction of the house. Eva ran her fingers along Cole's rough cheek—possibly rougher after their long night together. He was scraped up, and she saw some bruises appearing. Her heart hurt seeing it. “Are you okay?” she asked.

He nodded. “Are you?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Come here.” He held out an arm, and she slid over the bench seat to get under the warmth of his protection. Despite everything that had happened, she felt herself relax, feeling absolutely safe with him. Her eyes drew to her phone with all those messages. Earlier, she hadn't wanted anything to do

with more complications, but now that she was with Cole, she could face it.

She scraped her phone out of the glove compartment. Ever since she'd gained so many followers on TalkieTalk, she'd had more notifications than she could handle. Her throat tightened when she saw that TalkieTalk was still the culprit. She'd been tagged in a video. Scrolling through the once beloved app, she saw that someone had livestreamed that cute little chick race.

KyleeSmiley was the handle on the user.

Oh Kylee! That girl had it out for Eva, though Kylee couldn't possibly have known that this wasn't what Eva wanted, only that Eva Trout was a sure way to get a viral video. And that's exactly what had happened.

Uh oh.

Eva read through the comments, some of them threatening. This would be why her daddy wanted her home.

If her stalker wasn't lying before about knowing that she was in Harvest Ranch, he definitely would've figured it out this time.

And running through her phone messages, she found one unknown number in particular that had written her about half a dozen texts:

"Harvest Ranch, huh?"

"That's interesting. You're not with any of your bodyguards in that video."

"That's not West you're with, is it?"

"Is that his brother?"

"Uh oh. You seem pretty close to him. West is gonna be TICKED."

"You like the pretty boys, huh? Let's invite him to our little party."

She gasped. What a creeper!

Cole glanced over at her. "What is it?"

"It's that stalker—he wrote me again. Kylee livestreamed our chick race. Now he really knows I'm in Harvest Ranch."

His jaw tightened. "Maybe we should get you home to Nashville."

And leave Cole vulnerable? No way. Not after those threats. That was it! She was not running anymore. "Stop right here!" she cried. "Stop the pickup, Cole. I mean it. Please!"

It seemed like her pleas had moved him because Cole pulled over to the side of the road so fast that the brakes screeched. Directly in front of them were more cattle crossing signs. They were on the other side of the Burro Mine. The swamp covered in reeds in the distance gave it away.

Eva pushed out the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

Not answering, she clutched tightly to her phone and marched to the back of the pickup truck where she pushed down the tailgate and tugged out the shotgun that she knew Cole kept there. She wouldn't be intimidated anymore, and she wouldn't let this stranger hurt anyone she loved.

She gave Cole her phone. "Point the screen at me."

"What?"

"Just do it."

His forehead wrinkled, but the dear man did it. Wrapping her fingers over his, she found TalkieTalk and clicked on the record button. She smiled brightly at the screen. "I love target practice," she said. "Go ahead, Cole, tell me what to aim at, I'll hit it."

"Uh..." He tilted his head at her, watching her like he was afraid she was having a nervous breakdown. After her pleading look, he finally gave in and pointed. "The cattle crossing sign. Why

not? Nobody seems to respect them around here anyway.”

She slammed the shotgun against her shoulder and shot the sign into smithereens.

He let out a whoop. His brow was arched in confusion, but also he seemed impressed. She never would've seen that expression on West's face. He never let go enough to show how he really felt.

“You've been hiding your talents, Eva.”

She had, hadn't she? The grin Cole gave her was contagious, and she realized how much she'd been missing out on these past few months while she tried to bend and twist into the thing that she thought West wanted her to be.

Never again!

She felt so free.

Eva shrugged flirtatiously over at Cole. “I'm getting out a little aggression,” she said. Of course, that announcement was for the benefit of her stalker.

Cole's mouth curved up. “I like it,” he said. “And I'm just a teensy bit afraid.”

She laughed, feeling it from her belly to the tips of her fingers. Cole brought out her fun side. Why had she cut out that part of herself? “A teensy bit?” she asked. “Give me another target.”

“The wooden fence over there,” he said. “That lock.”

“But... but Cole, that takes a lot of work to fix.” She should know—she'd worked on that fence on that first day on the ranch with him.

“You're worth it,” he said. “Do it.”

Worth it?

When was the last time that she'd felt the truth of those words? There was something about him that was so welcoming. Cole treated her like she meant something, like he believed in her potential. Maybe it was because he was fulfilled, and that's why he wasn't threatened by her.

He was settled in who he was.

West wasn't. He was too empty to give her anything.

And she had been desperate to fix that, fix him! But now she knew that changing West was something that she had no control over.

If West wanted to change, he had to do it himself. Unfortunately, he'd never have the strength of character to do it.

But that was out of her hands.

“Go for it, Eva.” Cole coached her. Her hand tightened on the shotgun. “Get that lock and prove what a sharpshooter you are,” he said.

“Remember!” She nodded at the camera. “This is live.” Smiling, she took aim and shot the lock into kingdom come.

“Yeeeeeee-haw!” Cole shouted out in true cowboy fashion. “Bull's-eye.”

“You want to play, Cole?” She moved to give him the shotgun. “He's a pretty good shot. He's quite the hunter, too—crossbows, archery, knives, darts.” She was running out of dangerous weapons that he knew how to use. “And that's just him—his fierce dogs would tear anything to pieces.”

He let out a laugh at that, no doubt thinking of the gentle Lizardman and Ballerina. “What are you doing?”

She should've explained that she was intimidating her stalker before she pushed record. She was a little impulsive sometimes, but she knew that Cole could keep up.

“Oh, sorry. I haven't properly introduced my friend.” She took her phone from him and showed her audience Cole... who, she wasn't going to lie, looked really good after a night of sitting in the

straw with her in that dusty old barn. He'd covered his messy hair with a cowboy hat that he'd found in his truck. His blue eyes sparkled at her in the morning light.

“You remember that hot kiss in the barn I livestreamed in August? Well, even though I was waiting for West, that was me accidentally kissing Cole, not his brother. It was dark, but... wow, I made a mistake. A big mistake, but at the same time, a good one.” Her cheeks heated at what she was doing. Was this making things right or worse? Was she going too far? “Even so, he didn't deserve me doing that to him.”

His expression tightened.

She supposed she should've warned him that she'd blast their sins all over social media, but she wanted to clear some things up before she closed her TalkieTalk account forever. Would Cole understand her need to tell the truth to the world or would he judge her for it and think that West was right about her?

But there was one difference—Cole loved her. West didn't, so even if he didn't approve, they could work this out. “Will you forgive me?” she asked him.

Cole took a deep breath, his tongue running over his teeth as he brightened his dubious look with a grin. “Well, that's one way of confessing the truth.” He let out a nervous laugh. “Eva? Listen... I'll only forgive you if... you do it again.”

She returned the sentiment with a relieved giggle. “You bet I will!”

Oh, Cole was definitely letting her off the hook way too easily. He had it bad for her... she did for him too! Eva had almost settled for the counterfeit of love. How could she sell herself so short? Was she so desperate, so impatient, so lonely?

She'd imagined West to be everything that she wanted him to be. Now that the mirage was dashed, she was left gasping at the close call. She'd almost thrown everything that she'd ever cared about away when something so much better had been waiting for her.

“I will kiss my big strong man,” she promised, “... again and again, but this time... it will be our moment, for us alone. We don't need to share it with anyone else to make it real.”

Her free hand reached out for Cole where the camera couldn't see, and he took it, studying her face like they were already alone. Cole probably would never understand why she'd used social media to get attention. It was like this outside world didn't exist for him—he didn't let it in, and it had no effect on who he was.

That's what she loved about Cole. He stood for what he believed in without caring what anyone thought, but then again, he understood his worth. Hadn't he said that they were all children of God? He'd said it as casually as if stating the sky was blue. Eva wanted to feel that too. She was ready to put her worth to the test.

She handed him her phone and pointed it back at her. “Will you do me the honor, Cole?”

He took the phone while she aimed for another sign. “That's your brain,” she said, quoting an old school '80s ad she once saw against drugs. She shot the sign and it exploded. “That's your brain on social media. At least that's how mine has been!” she allowed with a laugh. “Any questions?” She whipped around to Cole. “Give me one more target,” she said.

“How about your phone?”

She let out a squeal of laughter, and then realizing that was a good enough message to her stalker, she nodded. “Set it on that post.”

“Wait, really?” he asked.

She nodded. “I'm closing my TalkieTalk account forever, friends, because... though I appreciate the individuals that you are, I need to start concentrating on the individuals who are in my life right

now. I don't need this app to feel loved. I have that love right here in my heart... and now I'm going to cherish these amazing moments that are waiting for me, without an audience. You'll have those moments, too, and I bet they'll be just as special to you and your loved ones because, well, life is so good, friends, and I'm reclaiming mine. Love you all!"

She shot the phone into the next field over.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Cole had no idea what was happening right now, but Eva was laughing and crying. He ran to her and swung her around in what he hoped was the biggest embrace of her life. She clung to him. “Oh, Cole! Cole, thank you for putting up with that... you won’t ever have to do it again!”

He was completely mystified by what she’d done. He set her down on the tailgate of his pickup, not letting her go as he ran his hands down her back. “What was that about?” he asked.

She wiped at her eyes. “I don’t need fame to be happy, ya know?”

True, but... “Why are you doing this now?”

She let out a sound of distress. “I was trying to warn that stalker off me. I looked pretty tough, though, right?”

She’d looked hot. His heart warmed in absolute pride and amusement. “Totally.”

Eva pushed her errant hair from her face. “I hope my daddy doesn’t see that, though. He’ll think I’ve lost my mind.”

“Well, at least he’ll know why you aren’t answering his texts.”

She sucked in her breath. “He did... text. Oh!! He’ll call West next.” She hid her face against Cole’s chest, her back heaving while she groaned. “I’m in so much trouble.”

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” he said, laughing a little, though a part of him was also concerned after hearing West’s warnings. Devlin Trout sounded more protective than the usual daddy he ran up against, and way too controlling. Would he really try to stop his daughter from getting together with Cole, like West suggested?

It didn’t matter.

Cole would fight her daddy for Eva’s hand. It couldn’t have been a harder fight than the one Cole had put up against himself.

“We’ll take care of it,” Cole said. “It’s going to be fine.”

“West had better not try to say anything bad about you,” she said. “Sometimes I think he’s closer to my daddy than I am...”

Irritation filled him that West had used Eva to further encroach himself into her daddy’s good graces. “No offense,” Cole said, “but why did you ever go for my brother?” Her expression darkened, and he groaned inwardly. Did he really want to hear? He quickly amended his words. “Sorry, maybe it’s better if you don’t say.”

She shrugged and began picking at the hay still stuck to the skirt of her dress. “He was interesting... and I just didn’t feel very interesting by myself.”

He was blown away by what she’d just admitted.

Abandoned by her momma and treated like an object to be controlled by her daddy had done a number on her self-esteem. West hadn’t helped things by taking over both these roles himself.

Cole choked back his anger at his brother and moved closer to her, so that she could see the sincerity in his eyes as he tried to undo all the damage West had done. “Eva... I can call you a lot of things, but boring? That isn’t one of them, like at all.”

She laughed lightly, but he could tell that she wasn’t convinced, and why should she be when her fiancé had done everything to escape her company these past few months?

His hands joined hers; they found her pretty little kneecaps as well, and he slid her closer, feeling an overwhelming urge to do everything in his power to keep her safe from any more of life's crushing blows. "I mean it," he said. "You are practically perfect," he said.

"Practically perfect?" she asked. Mischief seemed to sparkle through her at the revelation. "A perfect angel or a perfect devil?"

He smiled at the cute retort. That was it! He liked her far too much to allow West to try to win her back. Her playful spirit had been dealt a blow by his brother, but she hadn't been broken. "Maybe both an angel and a devil," he admitted, "and I like who you are. I'm sorry not everyone can see it."

She gnawed on her lower lip. "I know your family has endured a lot of hardship these past few years, and so, you know, it's just... your brother might not have treated me like he should, but he's not bad, either. He was... *is* really stressed," she amended. "He can be sweet."

"Sweet, huh?" No one had ever accused West of that before. Eva's good opinion of his brother was likely the one reason West *did* like keeping her around. Some people—no matter their circumstances and upbringing—exuded charity and goodness, and she was one of them.

"I just want you to take it easy on him," she said.

His teeth clenched. He might've felt that same impression twisting his insides while he argued with West in the goat cellar, but he'd never allow him to hurt Eva again. "I'll leave that *sweet* man alone as long as he leaves you alone. How's that?"

She studied their clasped hands. "You're more protective than my daddy. You know that?"

She had no idea! Just like she didn't know how amazing she was. He'd change that starting now. It was time to share all the light and love that he'd been gifted and reclaim her soul for God. Wasn't she His child first? She deserved to know how beloved she was.

"Your daddy's got nothing on me," he said. "I've got plans for us, starting with a Thanksgiving dinner for two tonight and ending with another one about sixty years down the road with about a hundred annoying relatives."

Eva burst into laughter. "You sure know how to sweet-talk a girl."

Before he could try again, her hands spread through his like she was comparing hand sizes—hers were tiny in comparison... of course. Cole had always been broader and stronger than any of his brothers. She wrapped her fingers around his thumb and found the collar of his sweater with her free hand before pressing her lips against his.

She was setting his blood on fire again.

Kissing her in the light of day was possibly better than all those shadowy alcoves they always found themselves in. The morning clouds were beautiful in that jeweled November sky, but they were nothing to her eyes.

Shafts of light sizzled against their skin. The day was practically perfect with its unusual warmth for this time of year. It felt like nature all around them celebrated their love. Even birds sang in the distance, echoing Cole's own wonder at feeling this stunning girl's heartfelt touch.

He couldn't help it. He scooped her off the top of the truck bed and held her while they kissed, not even sure what he was going to do with her now that he was carrying her, only that he was claiming her as his own. No seething brother, no high society daddy, no glittering party, no screaming fans could ever get between them.

Her fingers traveled up his jaw, almost melting him into jelly as she took him captive by playing with his hair.

She stole his cowboy hat.

Of course she had. Eva was as spirited as they came. She clutched to the hat helplessly, unable

to put it on because he wasn't through kissing her yet.

If ever!

They had their freedom to celebrate and a lifetime of living to do it. He felt in his bones that their relationship could withstand the darts and challenges of time, but he just couldn't seem to pace himself.

She was as addictive as laughing in a storm.

A loud squawking noise sounded above them. Both of them tilted their necks to gaze upward where they discovered a turkey. Cole let out a disbelieving chortle. "That one got away."

"Fly! Fly!" Eva shouted. She caught Cole's eye with a mischievous look as he set her back down on the truck bed. "Now what are we going to do for Thanksgiving dinner?"

He snatched his hat from her, considering its leather brim before he placed it over those blonde curls of hers that were only made curlier after a night out on the hay. Eva was absolutely adorable in his hat. Maybe he'd give her his sweater next. He'd follow that with his boots. Cole laughed at how those would drown her.

"I look that good, huh?" she asked.

"You're the cutest cowgirl I've ever seen."

"Good," she said, "because I intend to be one now."

"You do, huh?" He sat beside her, his hands capturing hers over the flatbed.

"That doesn't scare you, does it?" she asked.

He felt his lips dance up like they often did when they talked this way. "It depends on how many wild projects you've got flying around in that head of yours."

She didn't miss a beat. "A pumpkin catapult to keep back the bears and wolves."

"You're on." He lay back onto the truck bed and tugged her with him. She leaned against his arm, making a little home for her head there while they stared up at the clouds drifting through the sky. They turned mysterious on the horizon where a coming tempest swallowed them up in its darkness.

A storm was coming, but it would be a few hours yet.

That had better not be symbolic of what waited for them at the farmhouse.

They could wait it out. Cole had no intention of going anywhere until the sky poured over them in a punishing torrent. Until then, they'd enjoy this beautiful morning together where every once in a while, Cole stole away Eva's attention from those fascinating skies with a kiss.

Eva was proving to be just as sly a thief. She sneaked a kiss against his jaw, making him grumble out a laugh.

They could stay this way forever. Cole didn't mind wiling away the morning like this at all, even though his stomach started to whine. After about the fifth time his insides rumbled, Eva's head twisted around. She patted his poor growling stomach. "Is someone hungry?"

Cole tried to deny it. "No, no." He slid her closer, marveling that he could have her at any moment by just reaching out and bringing all that softness into his grasp. After stopping himself for so long, he felt almost greedy for her. "I can't be hungry when I have you."

She giggled. "How is that even a thing? You planning on eating me?"

"If I have to." He growled and rolled over, pretending to nibble on her ear.

She shrieked out with laughter while she wriggled to free herself, though not very convincingly. "Not me! Not me! I'll cook a turkey. You can eat that instead! C'mon." She caressed his cheek. "Let's go back and make that Thanksgiving dinner that we planned for. It'll be so nice."

His romantic soul complained more than his stomach. He was not eager to return to whatever intervention West was planning for them at home. They could still make the most of these last

moments they had to be alone.

“Not yet.” His gaze traveled to that old abandoned Burro Mine to the side of them. The granite walls of the mountain towered over them to the side. The area had always fired up his imagination when he was young, thinking of the miners risking life and limb to get through those sheer cliffs to get into the caves above them. “I want to show you something first. You recognize those granite rocks over there?”

That deep dimple of hers made another appearance. “You bet I do—that’s the make-out spot.”

He laughed. Cole didn’t need an excuse to kiss her now, but pretending like he did was still funny. “Why do you think I want to take you?”

She jokingly slapped his arm.

“Don’t you want to see where that abandoned miner cart is stuck? Some say it’s haunted by the ghost of the old man’s horse.”

Her eyes widened. “His horse? What?” Cole watched on with amusement as right in front of him, her expression turned from horror to intrigue. She squeezed him. “You know me way too well, Cole,” she said. “I’m in.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As they walked through the field to reach the marshes, Cole's hand in hers felt so nice. She was still getting used to the joy of being able to grab his hand whenever she felt like it. She just loved being near him.

She felt the protection in his touch; she sensed his passion, his soul.

The way Eva felt with him was so different from anything that she'd ever had with any of her other boyfriends. She'd often got a sense that those men had all been threatened by her in some way, whether at the fear of losing her or of getting too much of her, but Cole?

He was his own man. Not only could he match her strange wit and humor, but he also seemed to enjoy everything about her, like the whole package! She'd always gotten guys that enjoyed her looks, her flirtatiousness, and then gawked when she got out of hand.

One even said that she looked one way and then acted the other. He hadn't meant it as a compliment.

And here she was with Cole accepting and loving her the way she was! She laughed and talked too much; her hair was messy; her makeup was smudged—she'd noticed *that* on her TalkieTalk—and yet, he was still crazy about her.

Eva was crazy about him too, and strangely... that didn't drive her into a panic at ultimately being rejected by him.

She just felt so secure and comfortable, and... absolutely dying to kiss him again.

This would take some getting used to, even if she loved what they had.

Eva caught sight of a glimmer in the distance and stumbled over her feet when she realized that she'd found what was left of her phone.

Eva set the shotgun in the dead grass while Cole got the fencing open. She squeezed through and ran on ahead. Eva couldn't help it—she had to see the damage. Rushing to her phone, she bent down and retrieved the heavy rectangular piece of metal. The screen was shattered... no, the protective covering was... wow! That was a good buy there.

Her actual phone was still alive, though the TalkieTalk had been turned off after the usual five-minute cutoff. Thank goodness! Leaving her TalkieTalk fans staring up at the sky was not the way she wanted to say goodbye.

She turned the phone over in her hand, glancing up at Cole. "It's still working."

"No way!" He chuckled when he studied it. "You really have over sixteen hundred unread messages? You'd better get on that."

That same heavy reluctance weighed her down, making her feel overwhelmed, and she stuck the phone in her pocket. "Not yet," she said. "I want to enjoy my Thanksgiving with you." The tall grass fluttered around their knees, though she could feel the solid earth turning softer as they neared the marshlands. "What are your holiday traditions? My dream was always to sit around the family table and share what I'm grateful for."

"We do that," he said.

"And?" She smiled up at him. "Out with it."

"Isn't it obvious?" He brushed his knuckles across her cheek. "I'm grateful for you."

Yeah, he was on the top of her list, too. “Lame,” she teased. “You keep making my knees melt like that, and I’m going to start wondering what you want with that kind of talk.”

“Same thing I’m grateful for,” he said. “You.”

She was absolutely going to float away on a cloud of pure bliss if she wasn’t careful. Not making anything any easier on herself, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “That’s what I’m grateful for!” She then planted another one on his mouth. “And that... but I’m *ungrateful* for your height because you’re too hard to reach.”

He picked up her hand and kissed the back of it while they walked. “It’s okay, babe. I’ll get you stilts.”

She leaned her head against his arm as they reached the lagoon. The water wrapped around the strength of a granite hill. The banks were covered in reeds, and past that was the swampy mud hole, she was sure of it.

No way was she losing her boots again! This time, she was careful to walk on her tiptoes as Cole took her around the side.

Cole didn’t seem to be having any troubles, and she followed where he put his feet, noticing that he stepped on rocks and patches of plants where the ground was more stable. He took her through a thicket of trees.

To the side of them, she noticed a small waterfall trickling through the rocks. He pointed near the edge of the water where a humongous willow tree spread its branches over the still surface. “It’s past that, see?” He tugged her closer, and she noticed a wheel stuck in a mountain of fallen rocks.

“Oh wow!” she said. “Did the driver get buried alive under that rock fall?”

“Luckily he’d gotten out for some water.”

She guessed the livestock hadn’t been so fortunate. Cole had mentioned a ghost horse. She gulped, coming closer to the immense rock pile. The forces of nature were too powerful to contend against. One wrong step and they’d be swallowed by it, too. Cole’s discussion on miracles ran through her mind and she marveled on the wonder of living side by side with the dangers of this treacherous, glorious world.

And yet, Cole had called this land their stewardship—just another blessing to add to her Thanksgiving gratitude list.

Wandering closer, she noticed the mud sucking at her boots. She stopped where she was. Cole let her go to take off his own boots. He shrugged off the shawl collar sweater she’d given, showing a white tee shirt beneath. He stashed everything safely in the reeds.

Matching Cole’s grins with her own, she decided to tease him, “So how come this is the make-out spot?”

“How come it wouldn’t be?” He picked her up and her boots slipped right off, so that she was laughing and kicking her bare feet. Her skirt whipped around the both of them.

No way would she let the mud claim another pair of her Sandbarrel boots! She’d definitely come back for those.

Eva’s arms tightened around his neck. “Are we going to get stuck in the mud again?”

“Not if I can help it.” His breathing grew heavier as he took her closer to the cart. He was fighting the mud, and he stopped briefly to set her down while he rolled up his pants. They were so close to their destination.

“I can probably walk to....”

He didn’t let her finish her sentence as he dragged her up again and took her the rest of the way to the bank where the cart was buried. He let her find her feet again, but she stayed close to him,

trying to find the smoothest, flattest granite to walk across.

The old miner's cart was cracked and weathered by the sun. Its bleached, skeletal remains rose up like mammoth bones. As soon as they reached the historical artifact, Cole pressed his hand against the cart wheel. "Put your hand on the wheel, too."

Her hand joined his, though she watched him quizzically. "Why?"

"You feel that?" His dancing eyes invited her to join in the fun. "That's adventure; that's hardship; that's struggle and survival and triumph—how we were *meant* to experience life. We're just getting it to rub off on us."

"What?" she cried, giggling. "Did you make that up?"

"Porter probably did," Cole admitted, "but totally not the point. Who isn't looking to live life to the fullest?"

"Just as long as that adventure doesn't end the same way as it did with this cart," she whispered, though she knew exactly what he was saying, and was feeling herself getting swept up in his intense expression as he watched her.

"I want to live that life with you," he said.

"You... do?"

"Don't you?" he asked.

She did, but still she hesitated. He wasn't afraid that they were moving too fast? Normally, it was the other person's job to object, not hers. But wasn't that what sensible people like West did? "You're not scared that I-I'm not everything you want me to be?"

"I'm not afraid when everything feels so right," he said. "Are you?"

Not at all. Recklessly tossing aside any other considerations, she slid her arms under his and kissed him. He might've helped her reach him this time by scooping her up.

A part of her was very well aware of what kind of explosion happened when two wild, passionate souls like them found refuge in each other's hearts. He was the intense one; she was the impulsive one, and she didn't care what storm rained down on them! She welcomed it, welcomed the adventure, the hardship... and everything else that Cole was talking about when he'd had her touch that wagon wheel.

Her daddy was going to freak out! But this? His lips traveled over hers. *This* was so worth it. She stepped down to the ground and slipped in the mud. Cole let out a surprised grunt, toppling backwards into the reeds. She eagerly followed him, crawling beside him and laughing down at his mud splattered face. The back of him was covered in it.

"What are you doing over there?" he asked. What did he mean? She held her hands up while he took her wrist. "Get over here." He dragged her through the mud. Eva realized that they were both covered in the sludge again. Her dress wasn't exactly the color of buttermilk anymore.

"Cole!" she cried. She took a handful of mud and ran it down his hair and neck, so that a brown puddle dribbled down his widow's peak. He wasn't about to be outdone. Grabbing her around the waist, he rolled her through another puddle. She screamed, finding whatever part of his body that happened to be clean of mud and fixing that for him.

She was aware that he was doing the same thing to her.

"You little dork!" she called out. "We look... uh..." like they'd been having a lot of fun. The evidence of it was all over them, and for a moment, she spared a pitying thought for West for what he'd think when he saw them... if he *really* was waiting for them at the homestead.

West wouldn't really try to take her to her daddy, would he?

Almost as if thinking of someone else brought intruders, a voice broke through their solitude.

“Eva!”

“West?” she whispered. Her back stiffened, and she raised her head, not that she could see through the reeds. They were too high. She sucked in her breath to shout back and got a hand over her mouth.

Cole sat up, his face alert. “That’s not West,” he hissed.

Her whole body tightened.

“Eva?” the man shouted out again. “I know you’re out here.” Cole’s pickup was just across the meadow. Anyone would know that if they weren’t in sight, they’d only be somewhere hidden in the swamp area. “Come out,” he said. “I’ve got something for you.”

She gulped.

A shot sounded through the air.

She’d left that shotgun by the fence! Had whoever followed them stolen that to use against them? Cole’s arms went around her. He brought her close. “Shhh.” His breath lifted her hair.

She listened to the heavy thudding of his heart. Her own was trying to lodge into her throat to choke her. Her stalker had found her, hadn’t he?

If he’d found her through Kylee’s TalkieTalk, the guy must’ve traveled all night to reach her. Eva dug into her pocket. She tugged out her phone to see if her stalker had written anything to her after her TalkieTalk.

He had. Plenty. She read the messages in succession:

“I’m almost there.”

“Nobody’s home?”

“Even more intriguing.”

“Where are you off to now, little girl?”

“Oooh, you’re not running from me, are you?”

“Hmm, good shooting. Can you shoot more than signs? I’m calling your bluff, bright eyes. You can’t shoot me.”

“I know where you are now.”

“Girl, do you not check your phone? Too bad. I want to talk to you.”

“Soon. Soon.”

Eva glanced up at Cole, seeing his mud-soaked jaw had gone rock solid. He’d read the messages over her shoulder. Reaching behind his back, he scraped out a hunting knife. She jerked in surprise, though in a way, she’d guessed he’d be the type to keep a weapon in a back holster. This was a cowboy who fought off all sorts of predators from the cattle.

But his shotgun was what they really needed to stand a chance. She groaned at her carelessness at leaving it behind.

“What are we going to do?” she whispered.

“Pray,” he said under his breath.

She did, almost immediately. *God, all the things I’ve asked for before probably don’t matter as much as this matters now, so if you could listen to this prayer and ignore every trivial thing I’ve asked for up to this point, I’d be okay with that. Please help us out here... most especially Cole.* He always pushed her to be better. Always. He was everything that she wanted to be, and so she tried to take on his faith too, pleading to God as if he crouched down in the mud with them. *I’d rather die than have anything happen to Cole. I mean... I don’t want anything to happen to me either, but if you want to choose here, than keep him safe, okay?*

Cole’s eyes squinted open beside her, and she was sure that his prayers probably contradicted

hers to keep her safe, instead. It was okay. She was pretty sure that God was smart enough to figure out what needed to be done.

“We’ll stay hidden as long as we can,” Cole said. “He has a gun, so we’ll make him find us before we take him on.”

Eva nodded, staring at her phone. She should call 911, but some small towns didn’t have that service, just a local number, and who knew what they were doing during the holiday. She started to punch in the number anyway.

Cole shook his head at her, which meant something was wrong with that strategy. “Text my brother,” he whispered. “Tell him what’s happening.”

West never looks at my texts!

Maybe he would this time, considering the fight they’d gotten into.

A flock of birds flew up into the sky. She winced, knowing that meant the man was coming closer and that he wasn’t being shy about it.

If they were lucky, her stalker would get stuck in the mud.

She texted West: “We’re near Burro Mine. Someone is shooting at us. Get the sheriff.”

Another shot rang through the sky. She cringed, her fingers freezing over the screen. Was her stalker shooting up or at the reeds? Ducking down, she pressed send on her text.

The funny thing was that West had plenty of practice getting into fights nowadays. He might be their best bet—assuming that he got her text and decided to help.

The gun went off again. Was that his gun? The gun she’d left behind? She didn’t know, but her stalker must have an endless supply of bullets with the way he kept using them up. She clung to Cole. Her whole body felt stiff with terror. Cole covered her with his body. That wasn’t how this was supposed to be. He’d get shot first!

“Oh c’mon, you’re such a party pooper!” the man called out. “You’re not hiding from me, are you, little Eva? You’re not scared?”

She gritted her teeth. “Do you recognize his voice?” Cole breathed into her ear.

“I...” She tried to run the voice through the channels of her memory. Nothing was coming up. Her terror crushed down on her so hard that she wasn’t sure if she’d even recognize her daddy’s voice right now. “I don’t know,” she admitted.

The sounds of reeds crunching down marked the man’s progress. “You sure they’re here?”

She bit back a gasp of surprise. Her stalker wasn’t alone.

“Of course, she’s here, hiding like a scared rabbit,” the first man answered. “Eva! You showed the world where you were.” He was back to talking to her. “That wasn’t too smart, was it, baby Trout?”

Her back prickled in panic as the men came closer. *God, please don’t let them see us.* Fighting evil had a tendency to turn her closer to God, almost as powerfully as seeing the wondrous beauty that God had made of this world and of everyone around her. *Give us more time, God; we’ve so much more to do here. Call it ultimate FOMO, but I’m not ready to leave any of this yet.*

She wanted babies with her man, a family to call her own.

Eva listened to the men talking amongst themselves, catching a few things here and there that made her flinch: “I’ll guarantee she’s with West’s brother. She likes those Slade men.”

“She’s never been smart.”

“Good thing I’m not after her because of her brains. Eva?” The man raised his voice. “You can hear me, right? Don’t you think I’m right? Come out and play.”

Cole leaned over her ear. “Lacy Lynch?” he whispered.

No, no. Lynch just wasn't the type to chase her through a swamp—the corrupt investor was a white collar criminal, one who sat comfortably behind a desk and made others do his dirty work. Besides that, he was a coward.

“He wouldn't come near me. My daddy would have his head...”

“What does he have to lose?” Cole asked. “You ruined him.”

She swallowed. Was there a lecture behind Cole's voice? Maybe she'd taken things a step further than she should've? “It's not possible,” she said. “Lynch's... got his own problems to deal with.”

And yet terrorizing her would be the perfect revenge, even if he never caught her.

Her daddy would never let her out of the house if he ever heard about this, or he'd send a bodyguard to watch her every move.

If she got out of this in one piece, would she ever have a normal life? Studying Cole's set face, she prayed that she could.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Cole clenched his teeth. Eva's hand squeezed his, harder and harder as she waited out these jerks. Mud rimmed her blue eyes glistening with unshed tears. Her face was smudged in that black sludge too. Their mud wrestling had coated her knees and legs with it, even her dress was the exact shade of this swamp.

Getting so dirty had made for a good time before, but now it was essential for camouflaging themselves from these stalkers. They hunted them with no mercy.

"Happy Thanksgiving," the man called out. "Sorry, we're out of turkey. We'll have to put you on the menu. Is your friend with you? We'll invite him to the feast too."

A shiver ran through her.

Anger burned through him as he tried to sooth her shaking body. He'd had a strong impression to keep down, but it was going against everything in him. He was made for fighting. Maybe that would still happen.

How could he leave his guns behind? He cursed his carelessness. He should have been on high alert after hearing about that stalker, not so intent on kissing her that he forgot everything else.

He'd taken nothing that his brother had told him seriously until it stared him in the face. And still her soft gaze on him drew him to her as she turned to him. Cole kissed her muddy cheek. He wasn't sure how to get around these guys without killing them. He'd faced down bears and moose, even an occasional cougar, but his *fists* were generally reserved for humans, not a knife. A savage way to go, and against guns?

And yet, for Eva? He'd do what it took to keep her alive.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered. He'd protect her no matter the cost.

She nodded, not looking so sure that everything was going to be okay. He wished he knew how to make her feel better. He felt helpless in the face of her fear

"Eva! Not so brave now, are you?" the man shouted.

Cole's hands clenched. He wanted to tear her stalker apart for terrorizing her for so long. She might be spunky, but she was more sensitive than she let on.

"You don't have some smart aleck comment for me, huh?" the guy asked. "C'mon, let's hear it!"

The more this man talked, the more Cole was convinced this was Lacy Lynch, no matter what she said. He had too much anger against her to be some run-of-the-mill stalker. This was personal.

The reeds ahead of them crunched down as the man charged through. Cole dragged Eva back with him to get away, inching closer to the edge of the lagoon. He was about to push her in to give her a head start while he fought the guy back when he was flooded with the craziest idea of his life.

Her phone!

Prying her fingers loose from her lifeline, he opened the screen with her facial recognition. She met his eyes, not daring to say anything.

West hadn't texted back. Cole had no choice but to go through with this. He scrolled through Eva's phone and texted her stalker back: "Where are you, handsome?"

Pretending she wasn't here in the swamp was worth a try.

The man's progress stopped short ahead of them. He let out a soft chortle. He'd read it! That had

to mean he had his phone on him. The next moment, a text appeared on Eva's screen: "I'm right in front of you. You're not scared, are you?"

Did he know where they were? No, he was bluffing. Cole channeled his inner Eva and wrote: "Uh, say what? Why would I be scared of you?"

Eva's brow arched up at him, as they both waited for the guy's reply. It didn't take long: "Nice try," the guy wrote. "I see where you parked. You're here. Why don't you come out and say hi?"

Cole knew exactly how to get at him: "Wow, you're dumb," he texted as Eva. "I'm making Cole meet my daddy in Nashville. You're too late. Ha. Ha. Ha."

The man groaned to the side of them. They were horribly close now. "You expect me to believe that?" The text appeared on Eva's screen.

"I don't care what you think," Cole wrote back. "Have an awesome time in small town Harvest Ranch... if that's where you really are, loser. You're never getting a piece of this."

By now, Eva's eyes were huge as she watched him. It was like speaking another language, but he knew hers well.

"Just try and get me," Cole added to the text. "Spoiler alert—you won't."

"Eva's not here!" the man shouted out at the other one.

Wait. Had it really worked? Eva's fingers clenched to his.

"Why do you say that?" the other guy asked.

"She's... she's on her way to Nashville." The stalker began cursing that spoiled little piece of trash. His hatred came out in the obscenities flying from his mouth.

Cole took a deep breath to steady his own anger. He felt Eva's body shake under his fingers.

"She's taking her little boy toy with her." Cole was the next to feel of his wrath with a string of cuss words that normally would fill him with amusement if Eva wasn't in danger.

"What's with the pickup?" The other guy wasn't so quick to drop the hunt.

"Some fisherman out here or—or... Let me see that TalkieTalk. Did we see their pickup in that?"

Eva's hands were faster than Cole's. She scrolled through her phone, skipping through the apps until she found TalkieTalk. She deleted the video.

"It's gone," the other guy reported after a second.

Her shoulders sagged in relief.

"C'mon," her stalker said. He sounded impatient. "I know how to cut them off. We gotta move fast. We can't let her get to her daddy. This makes things a little harder, but I'm not letting her slip through my fingers this time."

"You'd better be right."

"Get going. I don't pay you to question me."

What? Who were these guys? Again, suspicion rammed a fist into Cole's stomach as it recoiled in disgust. This *had* to be Lacy Lynch, and it sounded like he'd never give up.

The next instant, Eva got another message: "Oh honey, you're going to wish that you hadn't run. I'll make you pay for that."

Eva took over this time. "Get a life. You're pathetic."

Another gunshot ricocheted through their ears as the man on the other side of that text message let out his steam. It felt too close. Cole scrambled to get Eva under his arms. He covered her, even while he listened to the men argue. They began to move... farther away. He let out a relieved breath.

Thank God! For now, she's safe!

Slowly, painfully so, the men traveled back to wherever they came from. There had better be no proof that Eva had been in his truck.

Her boots were in the mud somewhere. Her sweater? Had she taken the time to take it from that trapdoor?

“Eva?” He licked his lips. “Where’s your sweater?”

“On the floor of your pickup.”

So was a blanket. Maybe it was covering it. West still wasn’t answering them back. He tried to call him this time.

No answer!

Had he turned off his phone?

Cole gulped, rising to his knees. He gathered Eva in his arms, helping her keep her balance in the slick mud. He had that handgun in the back of his seat, if her stalker had stolen his shotgun. He really had no idea if he had any guns left.

Either way, he had to get to a firearm before the men caught sight of her sweater and came back for them. At least then they’d have a chance.

“Stay here,” he whispered.

“No,” she said. “I’m going with you. You said it yourself. We make a great team.” She pled with him, using her eyes.

He tried to resist them. “I don’t want you hurt.”

“I could either way,” she argued. “They could circle back or—or I don’t know. I just want to stay with you.”

She had a point. “Okay.” He crawled through the mud and the water, taking the longest way back through the reeds with her. The vegetation covered them for now, but soon they’d have to make a break for it in the clearing by the meadow. That’s where they’d left his shotgun.

If her stalker hadn’t already stolen it, that’s where he’d find it.

Bending low, he listened for any sign that the men had stayed behind to wait them out. Pushing up on his knuckles, he peered through the tall grass. There was nothing, not even the sign of a car. “Let me go first,” he told Eva.

Her expression turned rebellious and he thought she’d disagree, but he reached out for her and touched her fingers. She meant everything to him, and he’d never be able to concentrate to do what must be done if he knew that she was in danger.

Her face changed as she studied his eyes and she nodded.

Cole army-crawled through the grass, lowering to the ground at any sound. He finally caught sight of where they’d laid his shotgun near the fence post. He breathed out a sigh of relief. If her stalker had found them, he might’ve guessed that they were tricking him. He grappled with the shotgun, getting it firmly against his shoulder.

He’d never leave his firearm behind again.

Slowly pushing to his feet, he peered around the meadow. It was empty of any sign of life. After about a minute of waiting, he gestured for Eva to come. She ran to him while he covered her. As soon as she reached him, they headed for his truck at a quick pace. He noticed the tracks behind his wheels where the other car had parked.

Peering through his windows, he noticed Eva’s sweater, though some of it was hidden in the folds of the blanket that was still crumpled on the floor on the passenger’s side. Yeah, *that* had been a close call.

“Quick! Get in,” he said.

He didn’t leave her side until she was inside of his truck, and he had the door shut behind her. He hurried to the driver’s side and jumped onto the bench seat. Peeling out of the mud and dirt, they

raced for home. He wasn't sure if it was their wisest target, but as far as he knew, the men were on their way to Nashville to cut Eva off.

Cole wouldn't rest easy until they reached the homestead. Turning to Eva, he studied her with new eyes. Her hand landed against his. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You don't have to apologize," he said. "I just wish I'd taken any threat against you more seriously. If anything had happened to you...?" He couldn't finish. His devastation would defy all imagination.

They'd made it safely through the horrible experience, and she was alive and in one piece. He had to make sure she stayed that way. She meant everything to him.

After about twenty minutes of driving, they entered the circular driveway that took them past the barn near his family's home. Momma's flowers and shrubbery were dying, their leaves turning brilliant colors against the familiar three-story red brick building. The peaceful sight was a beacon under the afternoon sky that darkened under the coming storm.

There were no cars... besides West's.

Cole groaned. That wouldn't be fun, but at least it wasn't a life or death situation. He wasn't sure how he'd explain to West what had happened... if ever.

And yet, his brother could help.

Grunting out in reluctance, Cole parked in front of the barn and pushed out of his truck. When he opened Eva's door, he laughed grimly at how dirty she was after their misadventures. This was nothing like last time. They both dripped in a thick layer of sludge. Her blonde hair hung in black strands and her white dress was a dingy brown, plastered against her body. It was almost impossible to see where the fabric ended and her skin began.

What was West going to think when he saw them?

Did it matter? They were alive, and she was stunning. He took her by the waist. Her stomach heaved with her frightened breaths. He set her on her feet and held her close, running his fingers down her muddy hair.

"Should we hose off before we go into your momma's home?" she asked.

What a thing to think about right now! And yet, they were filthy. He grabbed the shotgun from the back of his truck, and taking her hand, he led her into the barn where they kept a shower in the back.

It was a wide cement pad behind the stalls. The Slade men didn't care about privacy, and it showed with the open space. They'd even thrown a few muddy dogs and other livestock under the spray when they got too dirty. The cement pad would be perfect for getting the worst of this mud off.

Setting the shotgun against the wall in easy reach, he turned on the spray and winced at the cold. Fiddling with the knobs, he finally got the temperature nice and hot. His numb skin complained under the spray, which made him realize how cold it actually was outside.

Turning to Eva, he saw her try to hide her shivers from him. He groaned. She wasn't just scared, she was freezing. Her arms were wrapped around her torso. Wasting no more time, he drew her with him under the spray of warm water, fully clothed.

Why not?

Their clothes could use a good rinse too. He'd done as much after a day out on the ranch.

At first they just stood there under the spray, trying to get back their body heat as the air steamed around them. Eva wouldn't stop shaking. He wrapped his arms around her, realizing instantly that he needed the heat from her as much as she needed his.

"Cole!" she cried out with a laugh. "How did we get so cold?"

They'd been focused solely on survival, that's how.

Parts of his body stung under the warmth, but the shower was necessary for getting their core temperatures back to normal. He ran his hand down her grimy hair. "I'm not sure your hair is ever going back to its natural color," he joked.

Eva reached for her hair, trying to squeeze out the mud. Her fingers trembled. That could be from the cold... or her fear. His protective instinct surged through him, and his hands joined hers to clean her off, catching what she couldn't see on her face and wringing out the mud from her dress.

She tried to return the favor, by getting whatever she could out of his white shirt. Unnecessary, but sweet—the shirt was done for. So was that dress—it was a permanent dingy brown.

His gaze drew to the water catching on her long lashes. It dripped like dew against those misty blue eyes.

He couldn't help it—he kissed her under the spray, gently. He was still so grateful to God that she was okay. Her fingers trailed across his neck as he caught her soft lips under his. They'd been through so much, and he didn't want to take advantage of the turmoil of her emotions, though he supposed his were all over the place too.

Cole held her close just to reassure himself that she was still there.

He should get her back to the house, but he just didn't want to let her go. As soon as he felt her shivers smooth out into her even breathing, he rested his chin on the top of her head. He listened to her heart slow from its earlier racing.

They could get out now. The swamp was as rinsed from their bodies as it would ever be. Steadying himself, he turned the knobs off from the shower and led Eva over the thick cement pad to where they stashed their towels on a side shelf. Someone had forgotten to replenish the supply, so he grabbed some clean horse blankets instead.

Those would have to do.

He draped one over them both, and they headed out, grabbing the shotgun again as they passed the stalls of horses. They left wet footprints to mark their way. Sleipnir whinnied softly.

A movement in the back of the barn made Cole stumble to a stop. They weren't alone.

"Eva!" A man came crashing from the shadows. He carried a big balloon that might as well have belonged in the hands of a deranged clown for how creepy this looked. Written on the side was, "Will You Marry Me?"

Behind him, his flunky followed him with an oversized teddy bear and chocolates.

In one fluid movement, Cole brought the shotgun under his arm, shouting for Eva to get behind him.

The men's hands went up. "Whoa!"

Cole noticed that the man with the balloon still had his phone on him, but where were the guns? Was his friend hiding his weapon behind that bear? "I want to see those hands," Cole said.

The teddy bear flopped to the ground with a shout of surprise, and still no weapons. Where were they hiding them—or had they truly found his shotgun in the grass and had just left it where they found it? That would be insane!

These men *looked* insane.

"Why are you following Eva?" he shouted at them.

"Dude," one of the men said, "I love her!"

Cole's fingers tightened on his shotgun.

The man saw the move and shouted out. "What? No! Not like that. She's my favorite celebrity on TalkieTalk. I had to see her." He waved over at her as Eva poked her head around Cole's shoulder. "Hey there... you're a lot shorter in real life."

Her fingers squeezed Cole's arm as he faced down this weirdo. "Oh no," Cole said. "You don't get to pretend that you're some nonthreatening lunatic."

"Cole! What are you doing? Put the gun down."

Cole glanced to the side of him, seeing West, who inched forward like *Cole* was the one who was off his rocker. "It's okay," his brother said. "Those are just some of Eva's stupid fans. They're not going to hurt her. Drop the gun, Cole."

Cole didn't.

"Cole?" West sounded frustrated. "Do it now! The guy's livestreaming this whole thing."

"I don't care if he brought a whole camera crew."

"Cole!"

Growling out in irritation, Cole lowered his weapon.

West swiped the shotgun out of his hands. "What are you thinking? You could've killed the guy; I can just see the headline now: Thanksgiving Prank Turns Into a Massacre."

His brother didn't understand. "He had a gun," Cole said.

The men denied it in ugly unison. Of course they were playing innocent, now that they were caught.

"Earlier they did," Cole said, irritated that West was making this difficult. Hadn't he seen Eva's texts? "I don't know where they stashed them."

"They did!" Eva pushed forward, her hair stringing over the blanket. She looked a sight. Cole guessed that they both did. "We called you! We texted!"

"Sorry, I was a little busy with your daddy! I've been stuck on the line with him for the last hour trying to assure him that his little girl is just fine!" West glared at his brother. "What'd you do, Cole? You can't handle being alone with her for that long without making a liar out of me?"

Cole glanced over at the men, who still recorded them.

Something wasn't fitting together. These men hid their guilt too well, but they'd tried to hunt them down earlier. "Look," Cole said. "Let's just call the sheriff and get these guys out of here."

"You want me to drag him from his Thanksgiving dinner? That's going to go over real well." But West was already dialing for the police. After a heated conversation, he hung up. "Deputy Morningstar is on his way."

Cole let out a breath. The last thing he wanted to do was face Morningstar after the guy had been ripped from his family festivities, but these guys here were dangerous, no matter what West believed.

Outside, the storm picked up. The wind beat against the windows and splattered them with a few rogue raindrops. The peace of the morning was officially banished. The world was about to explode as the consequences of everything they'd done in the past week came for them.

Life was about to get real.

"Let's get Eva inside," West said.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

West refused to even look at her.

Well, Eva had a beef against him too! She rearranged the blanket over her shoulders, trying to pretend that there wasn't a storm of accusations simmering between them as they ran up the steps to the porch. Her anger simmered just below the surface in the face of the horror hunting them down earlier. "Those guys were chasing us in the meadow," she said. "They really did have guns. It was terrifying..."

West almost ran into that oversized pumpkin that she and Cole had carved up two days ago. They'd abandoned Eva's cute ideas for a harvest theme, when they'd drilled a hole into it that was so hideous that it resembled a gaping zombie maw. Chuckling out evilly, they'd immediately thrown all their energies into warping the pumpkin into a Halloween freak show. It was grotesque.

West edged around it and stalked into the kitchen. He was wearing that blue plaid button-up that she'd given him. The manipulative move wasn't lost on her. She'd always said that the vibrant colors made his eyes pop. He worked out too much for it to fit properly, anyway, and the fabric stretched up against his shoulders. His eyes went to the window where Cole was holding up those men in the barn. "Your daddy wants to talk to you..." he said.

"Yes, yes, I know," she said. "He blew up my phone, and I was going to return his calls..." except that her life had been in danger.

"Sure, you were," he said. West looked worn down.

Suddenly, she was afraid to know what her daddy wanted to talk to her about. "Did he see my TalkieTalk? I-I confessed that I'd kissed Cole, not you... so you're off the hook."

"I know," West cut her off, even more impatiently. "Your daddy wants to meet my..." He shook his head before he finished his sentence.

"What?" Daddy wanted to meet Cole? Was he going to accept him into the family? Her heart lifted.

"Listen to me..." West rounded the island in the kitchen to take her hand. "I'm sorry," he said, "for everything that I did. I never should've ignored you. Just tell me what I have to do to make up for it, and then we can just forget any of this ever happened. We don't have to come back to the family ranch again. We can get on my jet and get married. Just name the island."

She gasped at the intensity of his blue-eyed gaze—it was different than Cole's, so much torment and passion boiled in that raging sea of secrets—she still wanted to know what was going on there.

It's none of my business.

And now, Eva was so shocked at his proposal that she couldn't answer.

She watched West's jaw working. He had a habit of clenching his teeth, like he was trying to keep back the words that were trying to claw their way out. He'd kept that mouth shut more often than he talked to her nowadays.

The mystery of West had been what drew her to him and had eventually torn them apart.

"You *want* to get married, don't you?" he growled out. "Let's get out of here and have the most romantic time of our lives. I'm dying to escape this place with you." His eyes shifted back to the barn.

The police had come. Cole was talking to a stern-faced deputy.

West's fingers tightened on her hand. "It would've killed me if anything had happened to you." She turned back to him. His eyes told her that he wanted her; his expression, the way that he leaned.

But he didn't. He never had.

Why hadn't she seen it from the beginning? He must've feared her daddy's temper so much after that scandalous kiss and *that's* why he'd asked her to marry him, but it was going to be okay now. She'd clear up everything.

"West, no," she said. "I don't want you to offer yourself up as some sort of sacrifice just to—to keep me happy. I promise, I'll tell my daddy that this whole misunderstanding was my fault."

He shook his head. "What misunderstanding? Honey, it should've been me you found in the barn that day. It might as well have been. Who else can kiss you until you're breathless? I'll make it up to you. Right now if you want."

Her heart shot up to her throat and she stepped back, landing up against the fridge. She let out a surprised chirp. West had her cornered. Her hand pressed into his chest to put some distance between them. He was blazing hot like he always was. He had her arm somehow and eased her closer.

The blanket that Cole had wrapped around her shoulders slipped to the ground.

"Let me show you how good it can be."

Cole already had.

She shook her head, not knowing what to say. West wasn't in love with her, so what else was going on? He'd always been charming, but now he dripped with it like cheese.

"I can take care of you," he said. "Cole can't. Can you imagine him with your daddy? Your family would swallow him like an insect."

"Hey!" Cole charged inside. "What's going on?"

Eva sagged in relief, though West's words about what would happen to Cole had her ears ringing. "I'm sorry, West," she whispered for his ears alone. "What we have isn't real. You've never loved me."

"And you and my brother have nothing in common," West snapped. "Don't hang on him just because you didn't get what you wanted from me."

"Knock it off." Cole was between them.

"No!" Eva cried out. They were going to fight again, but she could see that West had lost all taste for it. If anything, his glares were all for her.

She recoiled from him.

He really hates me!

Cole picked up the blanket again and tucked it around her. His gentle touch was the complete opposite of his brother's uninvited advances. "Can't you see she's shaking? Leave her alone. She's had enough for today."

West sank into the couch in the living room. "She brings it on herself."

Cole swung around, his hands made into fists.

Eva laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Please, don't..."

West watched his brother, frustration making his lip curl in sarcasm. "Her loyal dog."

"Just stay away from her," Cole hissed.

Eva tried to piece together what she was missing. West was trying to get her away from his brother by "sacrificing himself." She was almost sure of it. Did this have to do with those bruises and scrapes all over his face? "What is it about my family?" she called out to West. "Why are you worried about Cole?"

He sneered at her. "We're not talking about this right now."

“When?” she asked. Eva’d had enough of this runaround. “*When will we?*”

Lizardman sniffed around West’s legs and he pushed the puppy away, just like he pushed everyone away. The cute labradoodle was probably hungry. Eva took out the dog chow and filled up Lizardman’s food bowl, glaring at West the whole time. She couldn’t stay here another minute. She’d ask Cole to take her home as soon as she changed her clothes and packed.

A knock sounded on the door. Cole answered it to a stern-faced Morningstar. “The men still claim they have nothing to do with what happened to you out by Burro Mine,” the deputy said, “but I’ll get them to talk.”

She was positive that the man would. Besides fuming with annoyance that he’d been ripped unceremoniously from his Thanksgiving meal, the deputy looked more muscle than man, every bit of him chiseled all the way to his shaved head. West avoided his eyes like the plague.

“My sister made me bring this to you, Cole.” Morningstar held out a pie.

Eva was drawn to it like a starving woman, which she pretty much was. The smell of strawberry filling seemed like everything she was missing in her life up to now. “Who’s your sister?” she asked, pushing around Cole’s elbow to get at the pie.

“Kylee.”

Of course she was! Eva stepped back at that. Her scones had almost stolen Cole away from her forever. It appeared Morningstar’s sister still wasn’t giving up on her relentless hunt of the last remaining Slade bachelor.

And still, she was an amazing cook. Eva’s stomach growled, despite her sudden onset of jealousy.

“Tell her thank you,” Cole said. “I hope you get to join your family soon.”

“We’ll see,” was Morningstar’s blunt reply. His eyes went to the men in the back of his patrol car. “They’re claiming it was just a prank.”

“Grab their phones,” Eva said. “Their phone number should be this one.” She pushed her screen into Morningstar’s face and he quickly read through the messages.

“Screenshot those to me, plus the phone number, would you?” he asked her.

“Yes.” She did that while Cole took the pie. He leaned into her, supplying Morningstar’s number for her.

Morningstar’s attention focused on them, darting from her to Cole in sudden confusion. “Aren’t you still dating West?”

Was that an official police question? “Um, no, not anymore,” she answered.

Morningstar’s forehead wrinkled then cleared when he caught sight of West fuming on the couch. She gave the deputy a weak smile. Morningstar quickly dropped the subject and retreated to his vehicle.

Small towns. Nothing was a secret apparently.

The screen door swung shut behind him. Cole brought in the pie. A part of her felt sad that their sweet Thanksgiving dinner had been denied them in all the excitement. This would make up for it, not to mention she was starving. Eva slid out the plates.

West dragged a stool over to sit at the island with a stubborn glint in his eye. What was he doing? He’d claimed pies were one of the worst things about Thanksgiving. Nevertheless, he roughly dished himself up a piece.

West didn’t even wait for her to cut it!

“That Kylee’s a nice girl,” West said, stabbing his fork into the pie with brutal ferocity. “She’s had her eye on Cole for a while.”

“Yeah... ever since Nash and Porter got married,” Cole muttered, “so like, two months. She’s not too particular.”

“Still, she comes from a good family, and...” West swallowed the pie with difficulty. “Not a trace of scandal there at all. You’d have a happy life with a woman who wants to live out her days in Harvest Ranch. A good farm girl, who knows how to run the land.” Eva realized with a jolt that West’s words were meant solely for her. Her ex-fiancé could care less what Cole thought of Kylee. “Can you imagine breakfast in bed with her?”

Eva straightened in outrage.

“Sounds like she’s perfect for you,” Cole said. He hadn’t touched his pie.

West didn’t answer, just gave him a sidelong glance while he finished up his piece. “I need to head out soon, so Eva, why don’t you...?”

The phone rang, interrupting Eva’s intention to ferociously reject his offer of a ride back home in his private jet. She’d take an Uber all the way to Nashville to avoid another uncomfortable encounter with West if she had to.

A call on the landline usually meant news on their momma. Cole picked up the phone. “Hey, Dad,” he said. His hand tightened on the receiver. His shoulders hunched. The last day and a half had been hard, but now she literally saw him going into shock before her eyes.

West stood up. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Momma,” Cole rasped. “Her new heart’s failing. The drugs she was taking to suppress her immune system caused some sort of complication, and they can’t reverse it. She’s opting out of an emergency transplant. She doesn’t think she’ll survive it.”

West’s face had turned a chalky white. “Is she awake?”

Cole nodded into the phone. He was still trying to take in what his father was saying.

“Can we talk to her?” West wrestled the phone from Cole, directing all his fear and frustration at their father. “What do you mean she’s waiting for us? Is she in pain?” West grunted out in frustration. “We’ll be there. We’ll be there!” He hung up the phone, turning to Cole. “She wants to see us while she’s still...”

Cole was already gathering up his jacket. West snatched up the keys to his car.

“I’m so sorry,” Eva whispered.

West didn’t answer. His momma’s losing battle with her heart was too much for this day. He shot for the door, glancing back once at his childhood home. His eyes skipped over Eva to the dog. “Lizardman, come!”

The eager puppy seemed to sense that his master needed him and charged forward.

Cole was still in his wet clothes. She was too. His hand clenched against the doorframe when he followed his brother out onto the porch. “Wait for me to change,” Cole called out.

“Forget it,” West shouted back. “I have clothes in my jet!”

Cole had tried to wear his older brother’s clothes this past week when Eva had messed with his laundry. It hadn’t gone over well, but there wasn’t a doubt that West would leave them all if they didn’t go now. Eva didn’t even try to ask what she was supposed to do. West would desert her the second he could.

Wrapping the blanket around her shoulders, she rushed after Cole as he took the steps two at a time. He ushered her into the back of West’s Lexus and slid into the seat next to her, his eyes glistening with untold pain. The Slade men were completely gutted, their earlier fight forgotten with the possibility of losing their momma.

Looking to the side, she saw her familiar pink-and-yellow luggage on the edge of the seat. “You

already packed for me, West?” Anger flared through her, but she couldn’t give it an outlet right now. West wasn’t in the right frame of mind to fight with her. He merely shrugged.

He’d been desperate to peel her grasping fingers from his brother. She let out a breath of disbelief. At least she had some clothes to wear, though she knew that barging into their momma’s hospital room wasn’t her place. She burrowed deeper into Cole’s arms. He glanced down at her. “They want to put her into a medically induced coma because of the pain,” Cole said, “but... she refuses to let them touch her until she sees her boys.”

West pushed on the gas.

Cole kneaded his forehead with his fingers. “Dad said that he’s been trying to get ahold of us for at least an hour. Hudson’s already on his way over. I guess Nash and Porter cut their vacation short. They said they felt something was off.”

“They felt this?” West sneered. “Maybe they should’ve told the doctors, huh? Huh! They couldn’t have known this. No one did!”

Eva watched in shock as West grew increasingly unhinged. Tears pricked at her eyes as this unspeakable pain became hers. West would never invite her to feel this with him, but it drowned her in its misery all the same.

Cole’s lips tightened. “This all seems so unbelievable. The last time I talked to her, she sounded so healthy.”

West’s jaw clenched. Obviously he didn’t want to talk about it, even as they rushed to see their momma for what could be the last time. Sorrow and anger streaked across West’s face, each passion fighting for control and neither coming out the victor. He’d done *everything* to fight his momma’s outcome, and still, it hadn’t been enough.

Eva rubbed Cole’s arm. He leaned into her, casting her a grateful look as he let her console him—just another difference between the two brothers—as he allowed her to share his pain with her. Cole pressed his head against the back of the seat, squeezing his eyes shut. She noticed the tears. He wasn’t afraid of them.

West, on the other hand, stared wordlessly through the windshield. The shock on his face rimmed his eyes and lips in red. This was how he mourned: privately, pressing down every tortured emotion that tried to claw its way out, as if they made him weak.

Lizardman licked West’s cheek. He blinked, the only outward sign that he was alive. His fingers twitched then ran over the puppy’s soft fur.

She felt horrible for him. Seeing how West pulled inward every time he encountered hurt, she knew more than ever that she’d never been a part of his life.

Cole squeezed her hand in return. She pressed a silent kiss against his cheek and his arms went around her. Though he was hurting, he surrounded her in the cocoon of his love. Yes, she was with the right brother.

Chapter Thirty

Their boots echoed through the sterile halls of the hospital. Last time Cole had been here, he'd counted the ceiling tiles in the waiting room. Thirty-two, in case anyone asked.

Seven of those were off-white.

Cole had never wanted to darken these halls again. After thinking things had gone so well with his mother's heart transplant, he'd hoped to never return. So much for expectations. And on the holidays? This place felt like a ghost town. The halls were hauntingly empty as they made their way to the cardio wing of the hospital.

That was all he could think about at the moment. Those little details, not... were they really losing their momma? She was such a bright light of goodness. Could such amazing vibrancy truly be snuffed out? And to lose her on Thanksgiving? This was the day where she worked for hours to set a table with creamy pies and a golden turkey roasted to perfection.

The smell of the sweet and savory seemed enhanced in that warm kitchen because of her smiles and laughter. Even though Cole loved the food she made, he loved his momma more. Nothing would taste the same without her love.

He couldn't imagine a Thanksgiving without her. He remembered each one, from the time he was crawling and watching her legs march busily back and forth while he played cars under the table until last year's when Charlie and Pip had come over, and she let them snitch the cheese she taught them to grate.

He'd never forget this Thanksgiving either. The memories would be bittersweet. He'd lose his momma and find Eva all at once.

Cole kissed Eva's fingers, not sure how he could've made it this far without her. On the jet, he'd only parted from her once, so that they could change out of their wet clothes. She'd found a soft sweater and plaid pencil skirt. All that glorious wet hair was caught up in a messy bun. His breath had caught when he saw her.

She was simplicity and elegance in one.

He'd been a different story. Cole had changed into one of West's gray fitted suits—the biggest one that he could find, and yet the expensive threads still pulled at his shoulders. He'd finally had to unbutton the first two buttons of the dress shirt to even get his neck to fit in there.

Eva had assured him that he looked absolutely dashing. His momma would be so proud of her boys.

Presently, Eva leaned into him as the CNAs and nurses pointed out his momma's room. "I'll wait for you out here," she said, pointing to a chair in the hall.

"No." He couldn't do this without her.

"This should be your time alone with her," she said.

Obviously, West wasn't about to argue with her. He'd wanted to leave her behind in the jet with Lizardman. "Let's go." He rammed Cole towards the room with his shoulder. Eva was right, as usual. Cole looked back at her as they headed for the door. Her comforting smile made him straighten.

His momma had supported him from cradle to only a few days ago; now he'd be the strength that she needed.

Pushing through the door to Momma's hospital room, Cole wasn't sure what he'd find. Lily Slade sat on her bed, her light blonde hair pulled into a low ponytail at the back of her neck. She was hooked up to an IV and monitor. Her breathing was heavier, but then it had been that way since the heart problems began. He couldn't believe that she was in such terrible health, not with that relieved sparkle in her blue eyes when she turned to them.

"My boys!" Her voice was exuberant, though weak. Cole saw it now. His stomach clenched. She was fading. "West! Cole! You came."

One look around the room told Cole that Hudson and the twins hadn't made it there yet. West's private jet had beaten them all, even though they'd left later. Their dad sat vigil by Momma's bed like Papa Bear guarding her from Goldilocks.

Ignoring their old man's ominous looks, West rushed forward. "Of course we're here." He leaned over her and kissed her pale cheek. "They can turn this around. We'll get you another transplant. You're not too weak. Look at you!"

Instead of arguing, Momma's eyes widened when she saw the bruises on his face. Her gaze immediately flew to Cole. "No, no, you two weren't fighting, were you?"

Their father let out a protective growl to the side of them. Even if their disputes had resulted in West's bruised face, they'd never admit it now, not with Momma's eyes tearing up like that.

West exchanged glances with Cole. "No, of course not."

Momma clung to West's hand. "I told you to watch out for him when you went down there."

"Yes." West hastened to reassure her. "And I will. I'll always have his back. I promise."

Cole stiffened. Was this where West's strange new protective instinct stemmed from? Some useless vow that their momma would never enforce if she knew the details?

Cole pushed the disturbing development away from his mind. His one job here was to give his momma as much peace as she needed to face the end, and still hope warred against his fears. He wondered if perhaps the doctors were wrong, and they could keep her with them a little longer. "Momma, you look so good. Why can't you do another surgery?" he asked.

Her other hand found his. Her skin was as soft as it normally was, though colder, and it trembled. "Honey, we can't."

"She barely survived the first transplant," their dad cut in in a voice rough with emotion. "Now it's her kidneys that are failing. She's got a small window. Things are going to start shutting down fast, and your momma... well, your momma just decided that her body's had enough. The next heart can go to someone who can survive the surgery. She wants to let it go."

"Let it go?" West choked beside him. "You're dying." Trust him to be blunt, but maybe he had to say it to believe it. "We can't let this happen. Let's get you on life support while they find you a new heart. We can't let you die like this."

Momma's eyes filled with tears. "Please, don't worry yourself. I've never felt closer to God than I do now."

West's mouth twisted in that stubborn way of his. "He can't take you away. I won't let Him. We'll fight it. Who do I need to talk to? We'll get you a new heart. Now!"

She laughed admiringly then coughed. Their dad's stern look behind her shoulder told West to back off, though their old man usually avoided arguments when Momma's tender ears might overhear.

"My dear, listen." Momma gave West such a loving look that his brother had to swallow a few times. She tried to catch her breath to speak. "You're a fighter—and that's good. God knows your gifts. He'll use you for good."

West stared at her like she'd lost her mind. Maybe she had, but Cole understood exactly what she

was saying. They'd all seen the fire in West that could burn down any obstacle when he had a mind to it, and now his momma matched that strong will of his with her own.

"Turn to God, my love," she whispered. "He loves you like I do."

West's expression darkened, not at her, *never* at her, but Cole sensed the anger all the same. Who was it directed at? It was that same rage and hopeless guilt that Cole had seen earlier when they'd argued in the barn. Cole caught his breath when he realized that West was aiming all that darkness at himself.

"Don't lose h-hope," Momma said, even as she lost the strength to say it.

West clenched his fist, unable to retort, unable to agree.

"West?" Momma caught him with a piercing look that seemed almost steel hard in a body that was deteriorating. It was as if she was forming angel wings that lent her firmer resolve when it came to saving her children. She'd prayed for West long enough—they all knew it—and now heaven was joining forces with their momma to pull her boy from the ashes of what he'd made of his life. "Tell me you'll look to God," she pleaded.

"I can't make promises like that, Momma," West finally got out. "I-I'm not really the kind of guy that His angels are going to welcome with open arms."

"If you only knew..." Her eyes glistened.

"I'll tell you what..." West started doing what he did best, soothing her with his practiced words. "I might not do things your way, but I'm going to become exactly the kind of man that you want me to be."

"Not for *me*, never for me, my dear, for you. God grant you joy."

"Joy?" He repeated the word like it was an offense.

"When you find it, you'll know it. Don't put it off." She caressed his face, not allowing him to comfort her with meaningless promises like he usually did. "I worry for you."

"Please..." West struggled to keep his composure.

Cole's own eyes overflowed with tears as he mourned this loss. It felt so much better to express his feelings before they throttled him on their way out.

His brother would never feel that relief. He gave nothing its due. "Don't worry about me," West pled with her. "I hate that you spare any thought for me when you're—you're in so much pain."

"What a sweet man you've grown to be," Momma said gently. "You're in God's hands now. All my boys are. I love you, West. I'm so proud of you. Watch over my grandsons."

West nodded. "I will. I will. They love you so much."

"Make sure they're happy," Momma said. "Raise them up good and strong... just like you."

That was too much for West. He stepped back, his mouth firmly clenched. He'd lost all ability to speak. He only nodded.

Momma turned to Cole with a pained smile. "My dear—so wise from so young an age. Such a good, kind soul."

West's pointed glares at Cole didn't make him feel that way, but neither of them were about to inform their momma that she was wrong about them and they couldn't survive without her.

"Take your strength, your will to do good and make the world a better place." She tapped his fingers. "And for mercy's sake, find a girl who makes you laugh. You are far too serious!"

Cole could own that. He also had the perfect girl in mind. West glowered. Cole rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, not sure how to tell his momma the truth with West standing here.

Hudson hurried into the room. His older brothers' sudden appearance spared Cole from further guilt. West's scowls shifted to the loud newcomers. His brothers' wives had come too. "I brought the

twins,” Hudson said.

“And everyone else too,” West muttered. He lowered into a chair, his casual words contradicted by his tight grip on the armrests.

Momma’s tall cowboys towered over her hospital bed, especially the twins, who had about two heads over the rest of their brothers. Nash and Porter were even tanner after their vacation. Their normally mischievous looks had turned sober in the face of their mother’s illness.

They immediately took either side of her. Their hands went to her arms. Their wives followed them, unable to keep back their tearful expressions. There was no doubt in Cole’s mind how much his sisters-in-law loved Momma. Emily and Cadence were both orphans. She was everything to them.

What would she have meant to Eva, who had a living and breathing mother, but who ignored her after the divorce in favor of traveling and boyfriends?

“Oh, my beautiful family,” Momma said. She watched them all with such love and pride that it felt almost tangible.

Hudson ripped off his cowboy hat before he reached her. His wife, Mimi, rubbed his back. Her usual sass and grit made her a valuable ally in these times of hardship.

“You’re all here!” That same relief and happiness etched Momma’s face when Cole and West had first come. Her eyes found their father’s.

Jase’s eyes and lips were swollen with grief, like West’s, though strangely, he was far more contained than how he’d been when they’d first found out about their momma’s heart condition. It was like the fight had been wrestled from him.

Cole felt that way, too. Now that the worst was happening, his body felt like it was shutting down. He was going numb, even while his helplessness ate at him. Why did this have to happen now? He found himself praying. *God, just give us another ten years with her... if not, then a year. Why not a month? This world is short of angels. She can do so much more good here. We need her. I’ll do anything.*

Cole hesitated. What was he doing? He didn’t actually think that he could bargain for his momma’s life like everything rested on his shoulders, did he? That made him just as bad as West at accepting their fate.

Maybe even worse.

Cole believed in miracles and felt it was okay to ask for them—even encouraged—but, he had a strange feeling that losing his momma was non-negotiable. His stomach clenched.

That was his answer, wasn’t it?

His momma was going and there was nothing that he could do about it. He struggled against being told so. *I’m scared, God. I don’t think I can handle not having her in my life.*

Did he not think that his Father in Heaven knew what He was doing? When it came down to it, how hard would it be for Cole to really put his trust in God?

Hard. Really, really hard, especially with this.

“Hudson!” Momma cried out as she kissed her oldest son’s cheek. “If I had your heart, I’d never go. You’ve the strongest, fiercest heart.” She had to gulp a few times to catch her breath after such an outburst. Her fingers tightened over him as she lowered her voice. “Lead your brothers where your heart goes. Don’t be afraid. Lead with your quiet strength.” Her eyes sought his wife, and found her. “I’m so glad you found your Mimi.”

Mimi made a sound of grief. “Oh, Lily!”

Momma’s shaking hand found her red hair next as Mimi bent down to say goodbye. Mimi’s mother, Kris, had been their momma’s best friend since high school. “Mimi’s my fire,” Momma said.

“You complete my boy. Your warmth... you’ve made his heart into gold.”

Beautiful sentiment, but Momma’s lips trembled, like she was frustrated with her inability to say more.

Cole groaned as reality began to press down on him. Was she truly going somewhere better than this earthly home? He believed in heaven, didn’t he?

Of course, he did!

He’d felt God’s presence often enough, influencing his thoughts, communicating with him on his rides through the range, directing him through danger. God had even brought him Eva. But how well did he know God? Could he really trust Him with the ones he held closest to his heart?

My Momma means everything to us, God. There is no one more beautiful. I have no choice but to give her back to you. I get that, but... please, I have to know she will be okay. She is... she’s absolutely wonderful.

A rush of gratitude filled Cole. Was this what he’d been missing? Was this why he couldn’t bear the thought of letting her go? He hadn’t understood that she’d literally been a gift from heaven... and that she was never going to fade away.

Thank You, God! Thank You for giving us Lily Thorne Slade.

The twins each bent down to kiss either side of her face. “Nash. Porter.” She closed her eyes before opening them to take them in. “Such spirit. What would I do without you?”

“What will *we* do without you?” Nash asked in return. He wasn’t laughing.

Momma did it for him, with a wheezing chuckle. “Life was never dull with you in it, Nash. You bring that life everywhere you go. Porter? Oh honey.” Momma noticed his tears and tried to reach them with her shaking palm. “You’ve shown us who you are always—so brave, so noble, a good strong man.”

Her gaze rose to find their wives, Emily and Cadence. Once again, Cole wished that he could’ve talked Eva into coming in, but her presence in this room was too complicated. Momma kissed the rest of her daughters-in-law, starting with Emily. “My sweetheart. I’m humbled you called me ‘Momma,’ if even... so short a time. I’ll meet your parents in heaven. They’re proud of you and your brother, River... I know.”

Emily bowed her head, her dark hair sliding over her shoulders. A tear slid down her cheek as she leaned into Nash.

My momma really loves You, God. It’s evident in everything that she does. I mean, she loves us too, but well, she’ll still miss us if she’s going to be with You, so if You really insist on taking her home, well... Please take very good care of her.

That was without question, because in that moment, Cole felt a comfort and a strength rush through him that was beyond anything that he was capable of feeling, considering these tragic circumstances. God would watch over her. He was sure of it. He felt the reassurance so clearly, so profoundly, that he knew with absolute surety that they weren’t alone in this hospital room.

You are love!

The realization, though he thought he knew this fact before, filled him with amazement.

Our momma taught us to know You because that’s all we’ve felt when we’ve been with her. If this love I feel from You is what You have for her, then yes, I trust You to take her.

The peace of knowing that God was a part of this process eased the sorrow consuming him. All would die because of the nature of imperfect bodies in this fallen world. Death was only a matter of “when,” and yet, despite the temporary existence of bodies, each soul mattered, because... well, why would God take the time to comfort Cole, who was about to lose his mother?

She was just one grain of sand in an endless sea, but... she was one in a million.

Momma's eyes found Cadence next. "My daughter."

Cadence fell to her knees in front of her, crying. "No, no, not yet. I don't want to lose you now that I've found you." Her words were smothered in Momma's blanket, but Cole heard them well enough.

"My dear." For the first time, Momma choked up, and unsurprisingly, it wasn't for herself. Her hand slid over Cadence's soft black curls. "Darling, you're like seven sons, do you know that?"

Cadence brought her head up at the Biblical reference to Ruth and Naomi's unbreakable friendship. Her eyes glistened with happiness even as she sobbed. The two of them had formed a special bond when Cadence had helped their momma with her gardens over the summer.

Porter's wife had made a plaque for her mother-in-law outside of the greenhouse that said: "Remember the Lilies of the Field."

And it meant everything—God was over all. Cole had to trust in that now.

"Don't let my flowers die," Momma whispered to Cadence. "You'll bring beauty to Harvest Ranch no matter what you do... with my beautiful grandchildren."

Cadence was six months pregnant with twins—they were Lacy Lynch's babies, though Porter would be their father now. Those children would be Slades, and the Slades protected their own.

Cole actually understood why West had gotten involved with so much on the line. He was the only one who had the connections to destroy Lynch and stop that vindictive man from ever going after them again; but why had West thought that he needed to manipulate Eva to do it?

So foolish.

The consequences of their feud had rained chaos and pain over their heads.

And yet, here was Cadence, finally safe in the arms of a family who loved her. Her shoulders trembled. Porter knelt next to her, squeezing her tightly.

"I wish I could see *all* my grandchildren as they come into this world," Momma said. Her voice turned wistful. "But I'll live on... in my loved ones, their children, the grandchildren, and on and on. That's one way of being immortal, isn't it?" She sighed.

Cole would miss that sigh; he'd miss the animation in her face when she scolded or laughed, and despite that, or even because of that, a glow of warmth encircled him like an embrace—the kind of embrace his momma always gave her boys—she would always be with them.

The assurance of the eternal nature of her soul pierced his core and filled him with peace. This wasn't the end. He'd see her again.

But how to remember this feeling when the eventual loss came? And how could he share this comfort with his brothers?

West sat in the corner, biting at his fingernails, acting above it all when he wasn't.

I hope you realize that if you take her, God, that Lily Slade won't stop bugging you about her boys, especially about West. She won't rest until you've rescued that little lost sheep of hers.

As if to prove the truth of her words, Momma's eyes traveled lovingly over each of her children. "I'll sneak away from those heralds of singing angels to peek over you all. I don't want to miss a thing."

It was what she'd said from the beginning of all this.

West made a strangled sound and ran his arm roughly across his face.

Cole felt his own eyes watering. Some of it, he realized in shock, was for his brother. West had worked so hard to keep their momma alive. He'd set up strange deals with powerful and corrupt politicians to get her on that transplant list, defying the board who said that she wasn't strong enough

to make it through. He wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

Even now, West still would've found ways to keep her breathing if she'd allowed him. Cole groaned. *There* was a guy afraid of death. His brother would only stop short of animating her body like Frankenstein's monster... and he couldn't blame him, not if West couldn't see God's plan in all this.

But their relationship with their momma wasn't ending here. As hard as it was to have her ripped from them in this life, they would meet again in heaven... that same heaven that West had all but admitted he wasn't worthy of.

"I don't want some stupid funeral," Momma said.

That made Nash burst into watery laughter next to her. "You don't, huh?"

"Nope." She gritted her teeth stubbornly. "I want a ceremony of life," she whispered. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes ma'am," Nash answered quickly.

"Good," she said. "Hold it in my gardens on the brightest, most glorious day in December, and I'll see if... I can't call in some favors for a-a... snowfall." She gasped in a breath at the energy it took for that kind of request, but she wasn't through with her family yet. "Even *if* my garden is dead... it only rests until spring..." Her voice trailed off, like she could see her famous gardens with her own eyes.

Cadence had made the rose garden glorious for her these last few months. The men had been too busy on the ranch to take over the flowers after their momma's illness, but knowing that Cadence was taking good care of her garden had been a blessing for them all.

"It will be in full bloom soon..." Momma breathed out. "*I* will too."

West shot to his feet. "I can't..." His stormy eyes met their momma's. He found her side. Though he had difficulty saying anything dear to his heart, his expression said everything that he couldn't. "I love you," he said. "You know that, right?"

She rubbed his arm to comfort him. "Yes."

He licked his lips. "Then let's fight this."

"We did," she said. "Thank you for standing with me. It was glorious."

He blanched. The failure had finally consumed him; Cole could see it in the bleakness taking over his brother's face. West's shoulders slumped with exhaustion. "I need some air. I'll be back... I'll be back." Turning, his gaze went from brother to brother until it finally rested on Cole. "Don't... let anything happen without me. You got that?"

Cole was taken aback. For some reason, West trusted him to be the one who wouldn't forget him if Momma took a turn for the worse. Recognizing the honor of such a request, Cole nodded.

The spasm in West's cheek as he wrestled with his emotions stopped him from saying more as he stalked from the room.

Cole wasn't sure that he trusted West to be alone right now.

"Honey." Their father nudged past his remaining children to take his wife's hand. "We'll have that ceremony of life. Make no mistake. And—and... all your family will be there and *will* be welcome."

He was talking about West. They all knew it.

Momma seemed to melt into her bed with relief at his words. They meant a lot, of course, since she always worried that "her boys" would drift apart with her gone. They'd called her the glue. And strangely, Cole wondered if that bond would be stronger now that she was destined to be their angel.

If this was her final wish, they'd honor it.

“I love you, Jase,” she whispered.

He kissed her hand. His wrinkled lids drooped over his eyes as he watched the love of his life with the desperation of a man who meant to make every moment count while he could.

Cole finally understood the depth of emotion that he felt. Even after so short a time of knowing Eva, he suspected losing her would be devastating. And still, his father’s love for their momma would force their old man to stay strong and protect everything that she cared about, *especially* if she wasn’t there to do it herself.

Cole wanted to be that kind of man for Eva.

“Thank you for bringing all my babies to me,” she whispered to her husband. “Now, I have a gift for you... it’s in my greenhouse—flowers and letters. Don’t read them until you’ve brought our family together there for our celebration of life. Gather our dear ones, Jase... like—like the buds of spring.”

“I will,” their father said hoarsely.

Chapter Thirty-One

Eva's fingers clenched over her purse as Lily's hospital door swung inward. West stormed out from his momma's hospital room.

Did that mean that Lily... was she? Had she passed away?

It wasn't Eva's place to ask, or to interfere in his sorrow. West certainly wouldn't welcome it. He didn't before and, for sure, he wouldn't now.

His eyes locked with hers. She noticed his cheeks were wet. He quickly wiped any evidence of his grief away and turned his back on her, walking down the hallway while he grappled with his phone.

She took a deep breath, not sure if she wanted to overhear what he had to say, but she wasn't deaf, no matter how he willed her to be.

West's chin jutted out as soon as someone answered on the other end. "Liv," he barked out. His voice had a harder edge than usual as he addressed his ex-wife. He moved further away from Eva. She could still hear his words clearly down the hall. "Can you bring the boys down? I'm not sure how long we have."

He fell into silence as he listened to Liv's reply. West's head lowered. No doubt Liv was giving her condolences.

Liv should save her breath. West wouldn't want to hear it.

He wiped at his eyes again, extinguishing any evidence of his emotion that he could, like tears were shameful reminders of being human that he'd rather not have. "Yeah." His voice broke and he manfully worked on steadying it. "Well, people die, Liv." Instead of sounding strong, it came out a sob.

Eva jumped.

Impossibly, West was breaking. And no way would Eva try to help him just to have him lash out at her. To make sure that she wouldn't, Eva wrapped her ankles around the feet of her chair to stop herself from going to him with her hugs. She'd save that for Cole. He needed her, too. They'd cry together. She'd do everything to ease his pain because he let her in.

Liv must be trying to comfort West because he pressed his fist into the wall. His shoulders stiffened. "Just bring them, Liv," he cut in harshly. West took a deep breath. He was trying to calm himself down. "Get Funches to take over the ranch for us until we get back, and uh... thank you." He lowered his phone and stared bleakly at the wall.

There was nothing that Eva could do to make this better. Her words were meaningless to him. She believed in another life, even more so now that she'd had some experience with prayer, but West? Well... he didn't.

Her "thoughts and prayers" meant nothing to him.

West put the phone back up to his ear and moved further down the hall to make another call. He shouldn't have bothered to put space between them. The echoing corridors revealed every detail of his conversation. "Hi, yeah." He cleared his throat and put his voice back to order again. "Sorry, I called you as soon as I could. We had a little family emergency over here."

A little family emergency? His momma was dying. What kind of loser was he talking to anyway?

West leaned against the wall, crossing one arm across his chest while he talked. “Yeah, she’s safe. Eva’s with me. I’m bringing her home.”

Eva tilted her head to look over at West. He was talking to her daddy; she was sure of it. And if so, why couldn’t West say what was really happening, instead of pretending that everything was okay?

“Uh huh.” West was silent for a minute. “You heard about that? Just a minor scuffle. Nothing to worry about. Ha, if you think my face is bad, you should see the other guy.” He let out a light laugh. “You don’t have to worry. The information is safe. I made sure of that. No one will find out about... that.”

Uneasiness prickled from the back of her spine down her shoulders. Why did West sound like he was talking to a mob boss? She knew her daddy was a hardnosed businessman, who took the unconventional route sometimes—he admitted as much in those debates when he decided to run for office—but what information could West possibly be hiding about her daddy that had gotten him roughed up like that?

Her daddy hid nothing... right? He wasn’t corrupt like those *other* guys.

Unless he was.

The shock made her clasp her purse even tighter.

West ended the call and came back up the hallway. The source of those bruises was far more sinister than what she’d imagined. Was this why West had refused to let her in? He had too much to hide from her about her own father?

She glared up at him. “What happened to your face! You’d better tell me this time. Quit hiding it from me. You’re trying to cover up something for my daddy, aren’t you?”

He tried to move past her. “Just another job,” he said briskly. “You ready to go?”

Oh no, she wasn’t playing West’s game anymore. As soon as he left here, he’d leave his heart behind with his momma’s failing one, so that no one could ever get through to him again. “What are you doing for my daddy? Huh?” she pressed him. “You think your family wants you doing this? Your momma would never want this for you.”

“What does it matter what she thinks?” he exploded. “She’s dying. I’d sell my soul again to give her a fighting chance... and she doesn’t even want it. It was all worthless. There’s nothing that I can do anymore.”

Her gaze sharpened on him. “How’d you sell your soul, West?”

He made a sound of annoyance. “It’s not a big deal, Eva. Some political opposition tried to get into your daddy’s office to steal information, and I had to fight them off. That’s it.”

Fight them off? What? Were they in the wild west now? “What information?”

“As if I can trust you with that! What’s your problem? Don’t pretend that you don’t know how dangerous it is working for your daddy.”

“But if you wanted out... you could, right?” She wasn’t so sure anymore, which was why she was desperate to get West to talk.

He snickered. “Save your sweet sentiments for your TalkieTalks. Your daddy is generous with the favors then wields them like a knife to keep us all in line. He owns us all. Why do you think I don’t want you anywhere *near* my baby brother?”

Was this why West was doing everything in his power to ship her out, short of tossing her over his shoulder? “You didn’t care before,” she said. “You threw us together every day, so you could go off and be all secretive with whatever horrible stuff that you do behind my back!”

“Horrible stuff that I do?” he growled out. “After all I’ve done for you and your family, you

ungrateful, spoiled princess! You can pretend to the world all you want that you don't know what's happening, but not with me. You're not that much of an idiot. Go ahead. You enjoy your pretty dresses and cars and parties, but don't forget whose back you're standing on while you play the airhead on TalkieTalk. I know how you work, and you're not turning those same mind tricks on my brother."

She gasped. How dare he?

"What did you do, huh?" West asked harshly. "Were you mad at me for not falling all over you? Is that why you threw yourself at him? Well, congratulations. You got your revenge, okay? But it's over now. I'm not *asking* you anymore; I'm telling you... stay away from Cole. I'm not letting you take him down with you. Let's go home and make your daddy happy with our *happy* plans together."

Tears pricked at her eyes. Was that how it was? Would she somehow taint Cole's goodness by getting close to him? She hadn't guessed the depths of her family's corruption or that they trapped anyone who worked with them like this, though one thing was for certain, she wasn't going back to West, no matter what.

But what would she do about Cole? She'd never do anything to hurt him!

West straightened as his eyes veered to her tears. "You can't tell me that you actually fell for him that fast... because, honey... I'm sorry, that's a stretch, even for you."

Oh, she'd more than fallen for his brother. She *loved* that man. Cole was everything she needed and more, but knowing that her daddy could ruin the one person who meant anything to her was enough to make her sick. She wrapped her hands around her middle.

"Eva?" West took the seat next to hers, for once dropping the walls that stood between them like bulwarks. His devil-may-care attitude was gone, and he faced her like she was actually his equal, not some bratty child. "You *did* fall for him, didn't you?" he asked incredulously. It wasn't an accusation this time, but a fact. "You care about him."

"Yes," she whispered, not sure why she was admitting this to the one man who could hurt them, only that she couldn't keep back the truth.

He took a deep breath. "You've got to let him go... if you have any ounce of true feeling for him. You know it's the only way, distance yourself from him. Tell him you got tired of him, make sure that he never goes after you—I don't care if that takes us running away together to Cancun, whatever works, as long as you leave him alone."

He'd stunned her with his admissions. Behind his heartless plans was a man who wasn't as hard as he wanted the world to believe. She threw the straps of her purse over her shoulder. "You really love your brother, don't you?"

"What kind of question is that?" It almost seemed like he wouldn't answer, until he said, "I love my family, so what?"

"Enough to even marry *me*?"

The monster.

His face took on regret—had he finally realized that he played his hand too far? "Oh babe, it's not like that," he hurried to reassure her with his false terms of affection. He tried to put his arms around her. She hit him away. Her hand glanced against his hard shoulder.

His brows pushed together as he straightened. Everything about him was as ominous as thunder. He towered over her.

Eva stood her ground, even though she realized she was shaking. "I care about your brother. I'm not going to hurt him. But I'll never pretend that you and I have anything going either. We're worlds different. I *never* lived a lie like you did."

"Oh, you did," West said, meeting her eyes evenly, "more than I ever did. You lied to yourself

every step of the way. It's the only way you can live with who you are."

West's words left her reeling. He had a way of calling things for what they were.

He's right about me.

She nodded in return, through with his games, through with her own. Now that she knew the truth about her family, about herself, she didn't know what she would do about it, except she'd never be like West. *That* she'd already figured out. "Thanks for opening my eyes," she said.

His lips pressed firmly, and he turned quickly away from her. "Just stay out of my way for a while." He went back into the hospital room, leaving her staring at the closed door. Cole was in there, saying farewell to his mother.

She needed to say goodbye to Cole, too.

West was possibly the most misguided, closed-off, mean-spirited troll out there, but he had this right. His brother was a saint, and she was... well, she was an interloper in a family that already had one black sheep to deal with.

Eva had pushed herself into the Slade home because there had been something about them that was so delightful, so beautiful, because even West with all his problems, was better than a lot of guys she'd met in Nashville.

Such a great recommendation!

She had comforted herself that Lily had begged to see her for Thanksgiving, but Eva conceded that almost at first sight, West's mother had quickly relegated her to pumpkin festival duty. Even their saintly mother knew that she was pretty worthless in normal situations.

Eva leaned her head back, unable to keep the stress from the last few hours from coming out in her tears. She didn't belong in the sweet town of Harvest Ranch. She'd suspected it from the beginning, but that reality had been pounded into her further, so that the thought of fitting into this perfect family was absolutely ludicrous.

Pushing her purse into her aching stomach, she concentrated on the leather as she did her best to distract herself from her own pain and how much it would hurt to leave Cole... and everything she imagined their future would've been. A cute little home in the country, inviting over the neighbors for a barbecue, raising farm animals, happy kids... all of her dreams had been cut cruelly from her, so that she was aware that every beat of her heart hurt.

The stress of the past few days, plus losing the Slade Momma was too much, feelings she had no right to feel, but still did.

Eva stood up and ran down the hall, desperate to escape the maze of this hospital. Finally, seeing the exit, she rushed for it and escaped into the bliss of a busy world outside. She hurried past laughing holiday shoppers, done with their Thanksgiving meals and ready for some Christmas deals. She'd been normal like them only hours earlier... well, as normal as she ever was.

Not knowing where to go, she hurried to the hotel that West had reserved over the phone on their way over. They hadn't known how many days they'd be here, though judging by West's phone conversation, it wouldn't be long.

Poor Cole. Poor West. Strange that she could feel so bad for the man who had ruined her life.

Eva tried to catch her breath as she rushed down the street. The sun was lowering over the high rises, and the cloudy sky was swirling above her in a soup of orange and pink. She prayed for strength: *Dear God, I'm sure I'm still not doing this communication thing right with You, but here it goes: I love that man, and I don't want to ruin him, but I feel so awful when I'm not with him. What am I supposed to do? If I'm being an idiot, help me see that and soon, because there's no one I trust but Cole to talk to about this right now, and obviously... that's not going to work.*

Also? West needs You. He's in too deep with my daddy's company and he was too prideful to admit it until now. He was mean and a big jerk, and I'm so mad with him right now, but... is this his cry for help?

She turned the corner and felt her phone vibrating with a call. She picked it up and saw her daddy was calling.

Her stomach dropped, but she answered it anyway.

“Honey! Do you know how worried I’ve been! Why didn’t you answer my calls? I thought something horrible had happened.”

She sniffed, strangling back her sobs. Her flurried emotions were overtaking any reserve she might’ve felt with him after hearing West’s revelations. “Daddy, you love me, don’t you?”

“Of course, baby. What’s this all about?”

She realized that she could fix some of this. West needed to be free of them all. “I think you should fire West,” she said.

“Fire West? What? Why?”

How did Eva do this without getting West killed? If her daddy’s business was stitched solely together by corruption, like the Sopranos, then there was no escaping it *that* easily. “I just think West is having a mental breakdown. He thinks that I’m going for his brother.”

“Now wait a minute,” her father grumbled. “I saw *that* on your little social media stunt. My assistant showed me a clip...”

She forced a laugh. “Ha. Ha. Ha!” It sounded more like an evil snigger, and she didn’t like the sound, but she still pushed through. “That was just me being silly, Daddy. Anyway, you’re right about me attracting bad attention. I need to come back home and...” be trapped under his protection forever. Love was definitely not in the cards for her. Her bleak future crushed down on her. “I just need to stay with you for a while. I miss you.”

“What’s going on?” Her daddy was getting suspicious. “Did West’s brother break your heart?”

“No!” she shouted out, and then she swallowed, trying for a calmer sound. “He’s the sweetest guy I’ve ever met.” And then to her horror, she broke down crying.

Nothing was sure to alarm her daddy more. “Where are you?”

“Charleston. I’m headed home now.”

“I’ve got your phone on my tracker. I’m on my way.”

“*You’re* on your way?” She laughed through her tears. That was a little overboard, but she listened to him shouting out to his assistant. “Cancel my appointments for the rest of the day, and get me a jet to Charleston.”

“Daddy!” She was still livid with him for what he’d done to West. He’d ruined her life... and he didn’t know anything else. He was a big blundering sea lion that squished everything that moved. Her father and Eva were so alike, it wasn’t funny. “I love you,” she said. “Don’t worry about getting me. I’m taking a plane home.” She’d get her bags at the hotel and go.

He argued, but she wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. She had to exert her independence now or she’d never have any say on her life again. “You’ve got to trust me on this Daddy. I’ve got this.” She hung up and walked through the foyer, pressing down the button next to the elevators to get to the twenty-third floor. A burly man stood outside the elevators as she came out. His eyes were on his phone, but they shifted to her. She ducked her head, not feeling like attracting any more attention today.

As she neared the room, she took out her key, suddenly in a hurry. It was weird. She had a strange feeling that the guy had been more than curious about her.

She couldn't explain it.

Glancing back to see if he'd followed her, she saw nothing, only an empty hall that stretched out behind her. Paranoid much? She needed to get home and take a long bath fragrant with gardenias, so that she could forget everything. Absolutely everything!

Turning to the door, she gasped.

Lacy Lynch!

Shock froze her.

The hard man's face leered into hers as he stepped closer. His hand landed on the door with more strength than she remembered from before. His black hair had grown out longer, too. His dark eyes were murderous. Although Lynch had spent the majority of his life behind a desk, he was lean and sinewy like an aging panther.

She hadn't screamed yet. Why hadn't she screamed? Her whole body felt frozen. She took a deep breath and his hand slapped over her mouth. "Oh no, you don't!" He swiped the keycard from her hand over the lock and threw open the door before dragging her inside.

West's hotel reservation was a multi-room suite with all the bells and whistles. The living room stretched out before her with a magnificent view of the city glistening under a sunset that seemed almost otherworldly.

Was she really going to die in here?

"You sent me on quite the goose chase, little girl," Lynch hissed. "I should never have believed you went off to Nashville to show off your new boyfriend to your daddy. You wouldn't want him anywhere near him. I mean, if you were smart."

She had all sorts of snarky comments to make back at him, but she was only able to release a distressed sound under his hand.

Apparently that suited him just fine because he kept talking to his captive audience. "I told you I'd get you back for ruining me... West too! Though, I have a feeling that he would only be relieved if anything happened to you. You've worn out your welcome. Not surprising for a Trout."

She stepped on Lynch's fine European shoes to get him to release her, and when that didn't work, she kicked back at him. Lynch spun her around, pushing her against the wall. She made all sorts of squawking noises before he covered her mouth again. "Don't worry, I'll get West back, too!" he said. "I don't play favorites. The guy's crazy protective of his family. I know, weird, huh?" She struggled, hating that such a jerk could be so strong. It wasn't fair. She couldn't get free. Cole and... West even, could make mincemeat of him. She was so angry!

"When does your new little boyfriend get here?" he asked.

Her body tingled with the additional horror, and she shook her head. "Never!" At least she tried to say it, but it sounded more like an, "Ehmpha."

His eyes ran over her as he watched her with new interest. "Maybe your father will give me a pretty penny for you."

Her father would have his head!

But Lynch didn't seem like he was thinking rationally. He looked unhinged. Fear threaded through her. The usual threats wouldn't work against him, especially when he wouldn't let her speak!

"Did you like my texts?" he asked, sniggering. "I meant every word. Of course, a part of me wonders why I'm wasting so much effort on you... *you*, who nobody cares about really, except as a pawn. You were a pawn when you ruined me, and you're a pawn now. You have to know that it doesn't matter to anyone whether you're alive or dead—you're so worthless, your momma took off without a word, and your daddy only thinks of you as his prized pet; not even that new cowboy of

yours can really love you. He only sees dollar signs when he claps eyes on you.”

That’s when she broke. Everyone was being so mean to her today! She ran her pointy-toed shoes into his knee and scraped the heel down his shin. He bellowed out, but his hand loosened from her mouth leaving her free to scream at him. “You loser!”

She ran for the door.

He grabbed her from behind, dragging her back. She hit back at him, though it felt like one of those bad dreams where nothing she did had any effect on him.

She wanted to hurt him like he’d hurt her. “You didn’t need me to ruin you,” she cried out, “because you already did it to yourself!” He tried to get his hand over her mouth and she bit at him, shrieking as loudly as she could. Someone had to hear her! Were these fancy suites really that soundproof?

Maybe!

Losing hope of recruiting a rescuer, she worked on ripping him apart instead. “You don’t know what love is! You don’t know anything! Cole loves me and I’ll—I’ll die loving him.”

He tugged her back, finally getting ahold of her. “You think so, huh?” He laughed darkly and tugged out a long serrated knife from a side holster. “Let’s wait for this Romeo and see if you’re right.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Cole left his momma's hospital room, his thoughts in chaos over everything happening. It could take weeks for this new heart to fail completely. He couldn't bear to watch, except he would be there for his momma every step of the way.

Stretching out his stiff shoulders, he searched for Eva. She was nowhere in sight.

His stomach sank. He had a feeling a few hours earlier to not let West take off on his own—his older brother had been wracked with grief and possibly more viciously blunt than usual. He must have said something to Eva to scare her off.

Cracking open the door to the hospital room, he glared over at West, who perched on the couch, watching their momma sleep. "Can I have a word with you?" he hissed.

West glanced over at his brothers and then their father, who were just beginning to shift with suspicion, before West stretched casually to his feet. He joined Cole in the hall, closing the door behind them.

"What did you do?" Cole asked him.

West scanned the empty hallway for himself, but didn't seem too surprised when Eva didn't reappear. "It's for the best, Cole. We don't need any distractions. We're about to have a tough couple of days here."

Cole knew it! West *was* behind her disappearance.

"Why do you think I need her?" Cole asked. His frustration and worry from these past days swallowed him as he tried to break through his brother's hard expression. "It's like you don't even know what love is."

"Don't lecture me on love. I'm not in the mood."

"Not a surprise; you only see it as a ball and chain. I feel sorry for you. Eva's my lifeline."

And she was gone. The neon lights flickering in the hall were a poor replacement for the brightness of her sunny disposition. She'd been *his* lifeline, but had he been that to her?

"I need her," he breathed.

And Cole had wronged her. He needed to tell his family everything, not hide her in the dark—that's how West had gotten to her. How could Cole be so stupid?

He couldn't even imagine what an enraged West might say to her. Cole had to find Eva, shelter her with his love and bring her to talk to his momma before it was too late. His family had to know about the most important person in his life.

"Where is she?" Cole asked.

West kneaded his forehead, watching him with weary eyes. "Why are you looking at me? Text her. I'm sure she's just sleeping at the hotel."

She'd better be. West could talk a worm into sprouting wings and flying cross-country just to escape him. "My phone's broken." Cole's urgency broke through his distaste of asking West for anything. "I need yours."

"You need my...?" Unsurprisingly, West didn't make a move to help him.

Who was he kidding? His brother enjoyed getting the last laugh. Cole didn't need him anyway. Shaking his head, he stormed past West. Cole would just look for her at the hotel and hope for the

best.

“Hey, Cole... can you just listen to me for a second?” West caught up to him and grasped his arm. “Don’t go running into this like you do when you’re after one of your poor lost cattle. If this is... love, like you say,”—West’s nose wrinkled like he was discussing stinky socks—“then it takes time and work. It’s not something that happens overnight.”

On the off chance that his brother was honestly concerned, Cole turned back to him. “Look at me. I’m a grown man, okay? I’m not the ‘baby’ anymore. You’ve got to trust me. Maybe you never thought that much of her, but *I* see something amazing in Eva, and she sees that in me too. It would be a crime to throw that away. We’ve gotten really close these past few days. We’re made for each other, man.”

West snorted. “You missed your calling in life—you should’ve taken the role of a hero in a cheesy romance novel.”

Cole’s lips tightened. Was that all West got out of what he said? Figured. He shook his brother’s hand from his jacket.

His brother sighed. “What do you want to text her?” He dragged out his phone. “Huh?”

Cole straightened. Was he finally getting his older brother’s blessing, as tortuous as it was? Momma’s debilitating heart disease had been hard on them all. West could just be worn down, but Cole would take his good fortune and run with it. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“It’s not my approval,” West said grimly, “but... well, you’ve got to make your own stupid decisions... just like the rest of us.”

That was almost... touching. Cole reached for West’s phone. “I’ll text her.”

“Nobody gets my phone. Say your piece now, Casanova, or you’re just going to have to live with the consequences of being a total caveman who doesn’t know how to take his phone in.”

Well, he couldn’t expect West to change overnight. Cole sighed. “Just ask her where she went.” He supervised West’s screen to make sure that’s what he really said.

Miraculously, his brother complied: “You awake? Cole wants to know where you are.”

They got an immediate reply. “At the hotel. Come meet me.”

Cole startled at that, and then his heart did a backflip. She hadn’t left. “Tell her I’m on my way!” He hurried for the door.

West stopped him with a word. “Wait.”

“Yeah?” Cole whipped around.

“I just heard from Morningstar. Those guys proposing marriage had an alibi for when you got chased down in the meadow. And the number? It didn’t check out either. They’re not the same guys.”

Cole’s fingers clenched. “I know exactly who it is then.”

“Are you serious? You do?”

“Lacy Lynch.” Cole didn’t want to waste another minute on that guy, but he supposed it would become very necessary when they decided to press charges.

West straightened.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Cole said, “but yeah, the way that creep was talking at the meadow, he wants his revenge. He brought some hired help with him too. I have a feeling he won’t leave Eva alone until we put him behind bars.”

West’s eyes gleamed at the danger. Cole knew he was one phone call away from telling Eva’s daddy, just like she’d feared, but Cole supposed, for now, that it was for the best. He tapped the frame of the door on his way out. “I’ve gotta go. Eva’s waiting.”

After the meadow, he’d sworn to himself that he’d never go without another firearm again, and now he had one in a back holster.

“I’ll keep her safe until we can catch that guy.”

“I’m going to make a few calls about him,” West said. “I’ll text Eva and let you know the second I find out anything.”

Cole nodded. It felt good to be working with his brother again. Maybe it was temporary, but it felt more natural than the other way.

He headed out the door, not able to help the relief that filled him as he escaped the confines of the hospital and all the anguish and pain that it held for him there. His momma’s face had held peace; she had accepted her transition to be with their Father in Heaven, and everyone else had tried to keep their spirits up for her and for each other, but the helpless grief that broke through their eyes at unexpected intervals was unavoidable.

It just felt nice to find some sort of release from all that tension by walking through a world that seemed oblivious to their troubles.

The city of Charleston was still alive with lights and nightlife. The hotel was just two streets over from the hospital. Cole didn’t have far to travel before he could sink into Eva’s outstretched arms and find sweet solace.

He’d beg her forgiveness, too. He was still learning how to love her.

Cole walked into the building, taking the elevator to the twenty-third floor. It hadn’t surprised him that those bumbling trespassers in the barn hadn’t been the root of their problems at Burro Mine. Lacy Lynch—and there was no longer any doubt that they were dealing with him—had hunted them down with vicious and cold-hearted precision.

Eva was in danger. After this moment, it wouldn’t be safe to let her be alone. He swiped his keycard against the lock and strode inside. “Eva?” he called.

She didn’t answer. Was she asleep? Already? She’d just texted.

Cole peeled off the tight gray jacket, breathing in deeply. He could finally relax for a few hours. West would call him if anything changed with their momma. His hands went to his boots next, and he’d tugged one off when he heard a noise in the back room—a footfall. Strange that Eva was awake, but hadn’t answered him.

Wait... West’s guilt about what had transpired between himself and Eva had been smeared all over his face like a stain. Had he said something to make her angry at Cole too? Was that Eva packing? She’d texted him to come over, so she must be ready to let him have it.

Thankfully she had that fiery kind of spirit to face him instead of slinking off into the night. He wouldn’t let her go without trying to convince her to stay.

“Eva?” He went to the room where he’d heard the noise. His hand rested on the door. “What’s going on?”

Nothing.

Suspicious of a different nature washed over him. Lacy Lynch was still on the run and he’d vowed not to rest until he’d found her.

Did Lynch actually follow them here?

God, did I make a mistake? Were those feelings to bring Eva in to talk to Momma really meant to keep her safe? Is she alive? Oh please, don’t let me lose her too!

He jolted to action. Sliding the firearm from the holster at his back, he shoved open the door.

A blast of adrenaline shot through Cole as he stared down Lacy Lynch sitting in the darkness, like a ghoul come to life.

Cole pointed his gun at Lynch, even while his eyes narrowed through the shadows. Using the light from the suite behind him, Cole tried to find Eva. He groaned when he did. Her arms were tied

behind her, her mouth gagged, but she was alive.

Blessedly alive!

Why had the man waited for his revenge? They'd been gone for hours... unless this was it? Lynch's knife was pressed into her side. They'd been waiting for him. Where was Lynch's hired help? Had he warned him that Cole was coming as Lynch's lookout?

Cole's hand tightened on his gun. He didn't want to catch Eva in the crossfire. Even a sharpshooter would have difficulty hitting such a precise target in the darkness. The irony was that he had every confidence that Eva could do it herself.

"You came just in time," Lynch said. "I was beginning to lose hope that you cared. We had a bet going. This trashy airhead said you'd come and rescue her. I said you'd let her rot here. Personally, I was hoping she was right. We were getting bored with just the two of us."

Eva made a sound of distress.

Cole felt sick. One wrong move and someone would be dead. This wasn't like the movies where they'd escape with bullets scraping uselessly past their heads. "Get away from her," Cole said. "I won't lose any sleep shooting you."

"Sorry, that's exactly why I'm not going anywhere." Lynch seemed far too confident, like he no longer feared any retribution, except losing his pride. "I don't feel like getting shot today."

"West is on his way," Cole said, not lowering his firearm, "along with every Slade we've got. They all have guns."

"Then we'd better hurry," Lynch said. His hand tightened on the knife's hilt. Eva sucked in her breath. "Put down your weapon or I'll gut her. I think that's how this goes."

Cole wasn't an idiot, and he also knew what would happen if he lost his upper hand and put down the weapon.

Did he have a choice?

He lowered his gun by inches.

"That's right," Lynch said. "Put the gun on the ground and step away from it."

Cole gritted his teeth at Lynch's superior tone. How long had Eva had to put up with this guy while he'd been gone? Cole's eyes went to hers in sudden worry, but she seemed relatively unhurt, and possibly more angry than traumatized.

That was a relief.

Her blue eyes blazed with emotion as she tried to convey something to him that he definitely wasn't reading. One thing was for certain, it would be stupid to lose his weapon now.

"I'll put my gun down under one condition," Cole said.

Lynch nodded at him to continue, genuinely curious, but not compliant at all.

"Untie her," Cole said.

Lynch's bark of laughter rang through the suite. "I don't think you get what a hostage situation is. I'm calling the shots here."

"If you don't, I'll just assume you mean for us both to die and shoot you and hope for the best," Cole said.

He'd play madman if that's what it took.

Lynch let out an angry sound, but in one quick movement, Lynch cut Eva free. And she did exactly what Cole hoped she'd do. Eva tried to rush away from Lynch, who grappled with her arm to tug her back. Cole ran at Lynch. And still not having a clear shot, he got between her and the knife.

Lynch saw Cole's gun and stabbed at him. Cole blocked it from his chest, his arm screaming out in pain. The firearm clattered to the ground. Cole knocked Lynch's knife away. They'd both lost their

weapons and it was down to fists.

That was how Cole preferred it. He'd gotten into enough fights at Mo's with his twin brothers fighting alongside him to know what he was doing.

Cole's fist plowed into Lynch's stomach. The man shouted like he'd never been punched before. Cole's next attack met Lynch's face. Lynch fell back against a table holding champagne bottles and glasses.

They shattered under him.

Lynch collapsed against the ground, next to his fallen knife. The next instant, he was swinging the serrated edge at Cole, who dodged back from him. Eva screamed and Cole realized that he'd been grazed in the stomach, too. Blood seeped through his borrowed dress shirt. His sleeve was torn. West was going to have both their heads.

Lynch came at him with the knife again. A shot exploded through the room. The window burst into shards behind them.

Cole's chin snapped up. His ears rang as he saw that Eva held the gun. "One more move and you'll regret it, Lynch," she shouted.

"She's not joking," Cole said. He crawled back from the man, even as Lynch moved in on him, making it almost impossible for Eva to get a clean shot. "She can take the wings off a gnat."

Lynch wheezed out a mocking laugh. He raised his knife. His fingers shook on the hilt. The sharp edge came down at Cole again. Another shot split the air before Cole could feel a thing. Lynch's knife was no longer in his hand.

Lynch cried out in panic.

Glancing over at Eva, Cole held up a hand to stop her from the nightmare of killing someone. "Wait, one second...." He dragged himself over to Lynch and cracked him across the jaw, knocking him out for good.

West and Eva's daddy careened around the corner, seconds too late to help, but just in time to see Lynch fall hard to the ground.

"What happened?" West called out. "What'd he do to you?" He hurried to Cole, leaning over Lynch to see the damage.

The man groaned in response.

West glared down at Lynch. "You thought your life was bad before? That was nothing to what we'll do to you now."

"Eva!" Her daddy went to her.

She set the gun on the dresser and launched herself into her father's arms, squeezing his rotund belly around his ugly designer suit.

"Are you okay?" Trout bellowed. "How did I not see that coming? I should've had my men on you, watching you day and night. Will you ever forgive me?"

"I'm okay, Daddy."

Distantly hearing West's exclamations over his shirt—or strangely, more over the person in it—Cole studied Trout. The guy had to know that his daughter wasn't some helpless damsel in distress that needed to be locked up in a tower forever to be kept safe. If Cole couldn't convince him, then he might never see her again.

"She did pretty good for herself," Cole said. "She saved my life."

"Did she?" Trout looked proud. The flat line of his lips stretched from ear to ear. Turning to Cole, his glittering eyes seemed to measure his daughter's latest suitor. "I saw what you did to Lynch, too. Not bad, my boy. You're West's brother, aren't you? You know, I could use someone like you."

West's expression darkened.

"Daddy, no." Eva giggled nervously. She started talking over West, her southern accent thickening her voice. "Cole's a great guy, but he does really well on his own. He's a rancher and—and... he loves what he does. He's a Harvest Ranch man through and through."

"Sounds like just the kind of guy that I need."

"How about we talk about this later," West cut in. His fingers dug into Cole's shoulder. "I think we need to get my brother to a hospital before my momma sees him like this."

"Oh, those womenfolk," Trout said. "They're always coddling their boys. It's good for them to see you've grown into men."

"She's dying, Daddy," Eva said softly. "That's why Cole and West are here. Her heart's failing."

Trout's mouth flopped open. Cole felt some grim satisfaction that the news might stop West's employer from running his brother ragged. Someone had to tell the brutish man, and Cole had a feeling that Trout was the last person West would confide in.

"I thought we arranged for that transplant?" Trout exclaimed.

"It didn't work," West grumbled. "It's only a matter of time before we lose her."

Trout tugged off his cowboy hat, holding it solemnly over his heart. "I'm sorry to hear that. You get this boy to his momma." His eyes lit on his daughter. "Eva, say your farewells, darlin', we've got to get you somewhere safe."

Cole's stomach dropped. It was just as Eva feared. Her dad was going to put her under lock and key. It wasn't necessary. She *was* safe... with him. "We took out Lynch," he said. "You don't have to take her back with you now."

"Sorry," Trout said, "but I won't rest easy until I get my baby home. I'm sure you understand my concern."

The rest of his security detail wandered in behind him. They were strong men that looked like blocks of muscle. They must've been locking down the perimeters. They brought in another man that Cole didn't recognize, though that hateful gleam in the lackey's eyes showed he was likely the one who'd partnered with Lynch at Burro Mine.

"I want you long gone before we call in the authorities," Trout told Eva. "We've got to let them do their job."

That wasn't usually the way these things worked. She'd be an important witness. Cole shifted, feeling weak from loss of blood. Nothing felt right about this.

"Let me at least say goodbye to Cole, Daddy."

"Keep it quick, honey. You'll see him again."

Eva turned to Cole, her eyes almost unreadable as she took him in. He grew even more uneasy at the hint of defeat that he saw there. The turquoise depths glistened with unshed tears.

"Do you want to stay?" he ventured. He'd never let anyone take her if she didn't want to go.

She gulped. "You... need to go with your brother. Get that taken care of." She knelt down beside him. Her hands slid around his neck as she held him tightly. "I love you, Cole Slade. Never doubt that." He wouldn't, but at the same time he didn't trust those tears. Her lips found his, and she kissed him with so much passion that he almost forgot—but not quite—that retreating had never been what she wanted to do.

He returned her kisses, but drew back to run his hands through her hair. "I'll follow you. How about that?"

"No," she said it, too forcefully.

West's hands found his shoulders. He tried to help Cole stand. "Momma needs us."

Cole's eyes didn't leave Eva's. "You sure you don't want to go in and talk with her, before—before you can't?"

Another tear slipped down her cheek. "You know I'd love that more than anything." Her lips quivered. "It just won't work," she finished in a whisper.

He'd have to accept her answer... for now. Lynch had ruined a lot of things, including a beautiful farewell between Eva and his momma before she drifted out of their lives, but Cole wouldn't let the man ruin their future together. "I'll come for you, Eva," he said. "Soon."

"Yes. Yes." She nodded, though she didn't seem convinced. Maybe he was just being paranoid. Maybe he was going into shock after bleeding from that fight, but this parting felt a little too final for his liking.

Eva exchanged glances with West. "Take care of him," she said. And then she left with her daddy.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eva began to understand West more and more these days.

And she hated it!

She'd lied through her teeth when her daddy asked her if she loved that rancher from Harvest Ranch. *"No, no, Daddy. I appreciate everything he's done, but... we're just not right for each other. I need a city boy."*

After West had opened her eyes to the way things were, she'd do anything to keep Cole safe from the family business, especially after hearing about the passing of his momma only a week after they'd said goodbye.

"Pass the butter." The man by her side at their dinner party had a well-groomed beard against a sculpted jaw. Dressed fashionably, he was a paper cutout of every man that she'd ever met in the party scene.

Cole would die if he saw him.

Eva sighed and passed the butter.

No doubt her daddy wanted her to fall madly in love with Mr. Gionet and join their two powerful oil dynasties. A part of her wondered if she should. It would make her forget the freedom and happiness she'd felt with Cole.

Perhaps marrying someone else would be the only way to keep him from contacting her.

Before she'd gotten her new number, she'd called Cole and explained that she thought he was wonderful, but she didn't think that they'd work; she'd shut off her social media and every possible way he could contact her after that.

Rumor had it that he'd come by the place and got unceremoniously ejected by her daddy's butler. She hoped that he'd lose interest and move on.

Not that she would ever do that.

It had only been a few weeks, and her heart felt heavy and bruised. She'd never forgive herself for abandoning Cole when he needed her most, but mostly for worming her way into his life in the first place.

Her eyes met West's across the table. The wickedly handsome Slade brother had a way of drawing her gaze to him, though she was no longer madly in love with him. He'd tried to get her alone more than once, so that they could "talk."

Forget that! It would never happen. She was already wracked with guilt for being a plague on his family. She certainly hadn't been able to free West from this shady business. Nothing she could say had convinced her daddy to sever their professional connection.

The last time she'd tried, her daddy had patted her arm briskly and kissed her cheek. *"I'm sorry things didn't work out between the two of you, sweetheart, but I'm sure you'll learn to live with each other's decision to break things off. You'll see. You might even become friends in time. He might not be the perfect fiancé, but he's one of my most loyal men. He's not so bad."*

Of course West wasn't. He was stuck. Stuck! Why couldn't she free him?

Her arms wrapped around her middle. Distantly, she heard Mr. Gionet ask about her favorite pastimes.

Milking cows. Taking care of a soft and fussy baby one, to be exact.

Eva cleared her throat. "Shopping," she answered and let out a light laugh that she was so not feeling. "I like buying clothes for men who don't know how to dress."

Mr. Gionet appeared surprised. His perfect forehead creased.

"Don't worry," she said. "You're safe. I can tell by the way that you trim your beard that you buy all your clothes at Sandbarrel."

She winced. Why was this conversation turning so lame?

West lowered his head, hiding a laugh.

Jerk. He'd always been so snide in the face of this imprisonment.

She couldn't take it anymore. "Daddy." She tried to get his attention with a little wave. "I'm not feeling well. Can I be excused?"

Nothing was sure to cause more of a commotion than this dire announcement. The men stood, all of them exclaiming at once their apologies over her ill health—all of them except West, who watched her with the probing look of a man who'd escaped more than his share of family dinners by playing similar tricks.

It fell on Eva to feign enough illness to get out of this dull evening, but not too much or she'd never get a moment of peace.

Finally her daddy let her go when Mr. Bobbin (or the guy who had some name like that) secured his attention with talk of Saudi Arabia.

Eva set down her napkin. "Oh, please sit," she told Mr. Gionet. She waved him down as she retreated from the room as fast as she could.

She just wanted to be alone.

Breathing a sigh of relief out in the hallway, she was disturbed that it was also wracked with torment. Part of the shock had been at seeing West so soon after his momma passed. That man hid his sorrows well. He looked more or less the same.

She'd never been able to help him.

Retreating to her room, she shut the door and leaned against it, staring at the decorations from Tiffany's, the soft blankets and pillows strewn over her bed and the sofas in her cute sitting room. This place used to be her solace, especially after her momma had left when Eva was only twelve, when she was still trying to grasp what it meant to be a woman.

Despite all the fancy décor, the suite felt pretty empty to her now. She should get a puppy.

Eva began to slide out of her sequined red dress, realizing as she did so that her shoulders were shaking and she kept tearing up.

She missed Cole!

Why did she have to be away from the happiest, most perfect person in her life? Couldn't she just sneak back to Harvest Ranch? It would feel so nice to throw her arms around him and hug him so tightly so that every bad thing would go away.

But it was too late. She'd deserted him when he needed her most!

A light knock sounded on the door. Tempted to tell whoever it was to leave, she threw on the rest of her PJs and ripped the door open. She stepped back when she saw West on the other side.

"You going to cry yourself to sleep, you drama queen?"

She rolled her eyes and turned from him. "What do you want?"

"I keep telling you that we need to talk."

"No, no." She chopped her hand through the air, as she walked away. "I don't want to *hear* about how I'm not good enough for Cole and how if I get near him that I'm going to drag him down and..."

and..."—she swiveled on her heel to face him—"...to marry *you* instead! Because if I did that, well... I don't want to destroy him... because that would, you know! He does care about me. He does." She burst into more tears. "But—but maybe if I just keep a real quiet profile then he'll forget about me and everything that we *were*... and—and yeah, I'll be the most miserable girl in existence after that. I'll hit the social media channels again because I'll have nothing... nothing..." She choked on a sob because she was crying so hard.

"Breathe," West said. He laughed with amusement.

She tried to slam the door on him and he caught it with his hand. He studied her face before sighing. "I don't know who's worse. You or Cole."

"Cole?" she whispered. Was he okay? Even if she'd blocked him completely from her life, she was desperate for some news of him.

West closed the door behind him. "Yeah, Cole. You want to hear about him?"

Of course, idiot!

She nodded wordlessly.

"Where do I start?" He settled on the edge of her bed, watching her like a clinical scientist in a lab, and she was the rat.

She tried not to make any fast moves to give him the wrong idea about her. She wasn't as bad as he thought.

"I heard that you tried to get me ejected from the family business because I'm mentally unstable," he said. "Nice try."

She shrugged.

"When are you going to stop making me your project?" he asked. "Believe it or not, I'm actually good at what I do, and I make a lot of money. I don't do bad for myself. Just because I think this kind of life isn't good for Cole, doesn't mean that it's not awesome for me."

"Could've fooled me," she muttered and eased down next to him on the quilt. He was back to lying about how he was "just fine." Nothing had changed at all.

He sighed, looking down at his hands as he kneaded his bruised knuckles. "Look, I'm sorry for... well, for what I did to you. I never should've asked you to marry me."

And yet, if he hadn't brought her into his life, she never would've met Cole. He was her light in these dark times. She wiped at her eyes. "How is he?"

West took a deep breath. "My brother's having a hard time of it."

How could he not? After Lily's passing, she'd pulled something like this? She played with the edges of her silky PJ shorts. "I'm sorry about your momma."

West's tongue flicked over his lips. "I'm not here to talk about my momma."

Her chin shot up in sudden indignation. Not a surprise. He'd divide himself even further from his emotions now that he'd lost everything! Well, Eva was about to let him have it! "That was always your problem, you know. You kept yourself so closed off from me that I wasn't sure if you had a heart anymore! You're human, you know that? And people don't want to be around you when you act like a robot. Oh, but I'm sure that fits you just fine! You'd prefer to snuggle up with your money and die all alone."

His brow rose higher and higher with amusement as she yelled at him, until he finally cut her off. "Come back," he said.

"To you?"

Why would he never give up on that? They were so completely wrong for each other. She needed a living, breathing man... preferably one named Cole who was as warm as they got. Her

shoulders slumped.

“Never,” she whispered forlornly.

He laughed grimly under his breath. “No, that’s not what I mean. Come back to my stupid baby brother. He’s impossible to live with right now and... the funeral’s in two days. I mean... the celebration of life.” His sigh showed that he did not approve of his momma’s last request. Eva knew that he’d honor it anyway. “Cole needs you to throw your arms around him and let him cry like the big baby he is.”

She straightened. She could do that. “But what about my—my daddy’s business?”

West pressed his thumbs together. He peered over his laced fingers at her, his eyes glittering. She’d never seen the man look more ready for a fight. “I’ll take care of that.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Momma had sent them, just like she'd promised.

The snowflakes drifted through the sky as the family prepared for her celebration of life.

All their neighbors in Harvest Ranch were invited. Momma's friends and family strode next to the house and across their lawn powdered in snow.

Cole noticed that he wasn't the only one who'd brought a favorite flower as a tribute to her memory.

A hard feat in the winter, but some of his neighbors managed to do it with crayon drawings, silk flowers, and cleverly crafted petals that they'd constructed themselves. A few had even driven to the florists in Charleston to find fresh flowers.

As for himself, Cole had brought a Frosted Flame Snapdragon. He carried the red-and-yellow flower with roughly the same pride that he had when he'd cradled them in the grubby hands of a four-year-old when he'd presented them so proudly to Momma.

Only years later had Cole heard the story from her point of view. Apparently she'd cried because she'd been so frustrated that he'd cleaned out her flowerbed of her prized snapdragons. He hadn't a clue—she'd been so sweet about the whole thing. Momma always said, more than once, that her gardens were wonderful, but her boys were even more so.

And now, as Cole looked around him, he realized that Momma had left behind her magnificent gardens for her sons to nurture and enjoy. This was her final gift to them. She always had a way of making things beautiful. And somehow, she'd found the prettiest time of year for her celebration of life and also, perhaps, the most symbolic.

The gentle falling snowflakes were like angels dancing and flying through celestial pathways as they settled over the rose garden. The frozen elements crystalized the bushes and trees in place, forcing the vegetation to wait through a stark winter until they could bloom again in the spring.

Presently, they appeared as statues that would stay fixed for eternity, but just like Cole's loved ones—temporarily lost—they would wake again.

Pip howled in anguish ahead of where Cole walked. He wailed about a toy car he'd left behind in the truck while Liv tried to console him. She carried her sweet four-month-old baby against her bosom while she tried to settle her tormented six-year-old. River was too far away to help. He wrestled with the baby carriage to get it across the lawn. The guitar he planned to play for Momma's celebration was strapped over his shoulder.

Cole scooped up Pip, setting him on his shoulders. His light gray jacket pulled at his arms where his stitches were. The wounds from Lynch's attack were healing, but his heart wasn't as lucky.

"No, no," Liv said, laughing slightly, "not with your suit, Cole."

"It's all good," he said. It wasn't like he was in his Sunday best.

The usual black used for mourning was expressly not allowed. They'd all been told to dress in something cheerful, and so Cole had complied, though that meant his second-best dress coat, a white dress shirt, and light gray jeans.

He'd almost laughed grimly at the thought of Eva catching him in jeans again, but she'd given him these ones, so he figured they were okay. They were stylish, but he had no intention of ever

wearing them again after this.

Eva was the fancy one.

He was just the rancher who loved her.

His stomach tightened like it did with every thought of her. He'd failed her. He should've known that she was saying goodbye that night. Her daddy had locked her in the tower, and he couldn't even find a strand of hair to climb back into her life.

"Don't you dare get your uncle dirty, Pip," Liv warned her son, breaking through Cole's dark musings. "Sorry, Cole, it's just that you look so nice."

He nodded in numb acceptance. All the guests lent brightness to this wintry setting with their cheery colors, and his ex-sister-in-law was no exception. She wore a flowy floral dress. He cleared his throat, trying to act as chipper as he was supposed to. "So do you, sis."

She jerked in surprise at the term of endearment, but Cole wasn't about to take it back. Liv might not be married to West anymore, but she'd always be family.

"What do you think, Pip?" Cole asked. "Do you like all the pretty colors of dresses?"

The little guy had immediately stopped crying as he surveyed the world in his newly elevated perch. "Uh huh." His daisy whacked Cole across the forehead.

"Did you bring that for Mamma?" Cole asked his nephew. He'd never been sure which grandchild had nicknamed his momma that, because both Charlie and Pip had troubles saying "Grandma" in the beginning.

"Yes!" Pip said solemnly. "She's in heaven."

"She will love your daisy," Cole said. "Of course, she loves you even more." He squeezed Pip's side, making the boy laugh. Cheering up West's son made Cole feel better, even if he was infuriated with his older brother.

He hadn't seen much of West since their momma had passed away. His brother had gone up to Nashville where he was likely hanging out with Eva. Cole had done everything to get to her, had even driven over to talk to her, but she was hiding from him.

Eva wouldn't do that if she was lying to him about the way she felt. They were right for each other, and she knew it. West had done something to get in between them. Cole was absolutely certain of it.

His insides felt tight and uneasy at not seeing her; the feeling was different than how he mourned his momma. He'd miss her until they reunited again in heaven; she was a bright light missing in this world, but Eva? Eva was *here*. Her soul called out to him. She needed him, and yet she was hiding where he couldn't reach her.

Turmoil wrestled with his hurt, keeping him up most nights because he couldn't get to her.

The instant that West showed up at their momma's celebration of life, Cole would get to the bottom of this mess, even if he had to drag his older brother through his momma's rose garden and shake the truth out of him.

His momma wouldn't be happy to see them wrestling in all their finery, but she'd understand his heart was in the right place. Cole had spent hours talking to her about Eva and how things were between them. That was before Momma had lost her ability to comprehend, and then he took turns with his family holding her.

Their last hours together had been both tender and heartbreaking, something that no one would be able to understand unless they'd gone through the process of losing a loved one this way, but throughout his ordeal, one thing that kept coming to him was the importance of a loving family.

They were the ones who were with you when it mattered most.

Eva was meant to be his family.

He had to find her. He could read every expression she had by now. Her eyes could mask nothing from him. Let her tell him face to face she didn't need him.

Cole set Pip back on the ground as they reached the rose garden. He ran to Liv, waving his daisy through the air in his excitement. "I want to give this to Mamma!"

"You will. You will, honey," Liv reassured him.

There was a platform in front of the greenhouse where everyone could give their thoughts on Momma and place their flowers and artwork in a basket that already overflowed with gifts and flowers. Rows of chairs had been set in the courtyard under a green canopy warmed with space heaters. The tables and chairs were arranged to make this look more like a garden party than a funeral.

It was exactly as Momma wanted.

Cadence stood at the front of the greenhouse near the plaque that said: "Consider the Lilies of the Field."

Oh, Momma. God will always be watching out for you.

Cole's sister-in-law wore a pink cardigan with a sweetheart collar that seemed so delicate against her golden brown skin. Mimi's dress was red. Her hair was just as brilliant against her pale cheeks spattered with freckles. Emily had on a soft blue sweater. She plucked at the strings of her guitar, tuning her instrument. As soon as River entered the garden, he pulled his guitar out of the case to join his sister. He was dressed to the nines just like Cole's brothers were. All were in their best boots, jackets, slacks, and Stetsons.

They looked good. Momma would clap her hands together with joy at how well-turned-out her family had become, if even just for her celebration of life.

Cole wouldn't be shy about sharing his feelings with the group of well-wishers drifting into the rose garden. He was among those who loved her most. The Bridges took a table near the front. Kris was Momma's best friend. Her husband Merritt clasped her hand tightly while she admired the grandchildren she shared with Momma.

The twins came up behind Liv's mother and wrapped their arms around her, each taking a cheek to kiss like they used to do to Momma. Kris wiped at her eyes, crying and laughing at once.

Cole swallowed.

Funches, their normally grumpy neighbor, sat subdued to the side. He met eyes with Cole and stood, scraping off his hat in deference. He'd taken the time to slick down his sparse hair and part it down the middle. "Your momma was a good woman," he got out gruffly.

That meant a lot coming from the crusty old man. He was always free with his criticism, but he kept his flattery to a minimum. He was one of those truth tellers, and he looked broken up at the loss of his neighbor.

Cole took his hand in a firm handshake. "We sure appreciate you coming to pay tribute."

"Of course," Funches said. "Your family has come to mean a lot to me." He looked over at Hudson as he came near. Cole's oldest brother was barely holding himself together. He was more sensitive than he always let on, but then again, he was the one who'd accidentally started a sick house for wounded animals, so it wasn't like it was a surprise or anything.

Mimi squeezed Hudson tightly around his middle, a fiery sprite comforting the giant. He rested his chin against the top of her head.

What Cole would do to have Eva here with him, and have things be the way that they were.

Everyone else who meant anything to them had come. Even the Morningstars were in attendance.

Their family had been their rivals in everything growing up, but as these things usually went, petty differences were laid aside. The sweet scent of spiced nuts and hot chocolate permeated the air—Momma’s favorite treats in winter.

Kylee would be the saint behind those. Her bright gaze met his, and he nodded to her in greeting. He couldn’t bring himself to face her energy-sapping condolences yet, but he promised himself to thank her for everything that she’d done for his momma. She really was a sweet girl... even if Eva thought that she had ulterior motives.

All of their neighbors and friends in Harvest Ranch had gone above and beyond in their service to Momma during this past year. The Westbrook family was there—William, Bridgett, Wynn and Judd. Allie and Jocelyne Ward had also come. The twins had gone to school with Nash and Porter, and they’d been up to more than their share of fun together throughout the years.

Nash and Porter greeted them warmly. Allie leaned against her husband, Brandon. Each of them cradled a twin daughter while they shared stories about Momma. Jo had brought Cash. Riele joined the circle with her husband. Swayzie and Lucky wandered in, chatting with Grey and Sky. More and more of their friends crowded into the rose garden.

Momma was pulling off the party of all parties!

The kindly faces blended into one as they celebrated Momma while also mourning with those who mourned.

Stepping back from the noise of their celebration, Cole saw his father standing under the arches of the rose garden. Jase Slade was in his best suit. Somehow, miraculously, he’d pressed it without Momma’s help. His bolo tie was perhaps a little off center, but his hair was combed and he’d brought his cleanest Stetson.

His hands clasped tightly to the broad-brimmed hat as he studied the hordes of friends and family swarming inside the iron gates, all of them there to celebrate Momma.

Emily set down her guitar and let out a cry when she saw her father-in-law. She broke from her brother to get to him.

She wrapped her arms around his neck.

It was exactly what their father needed. His face crumpled in grief and gratitude. Mimi and Hudson were quick to claim a hug from him, too, and somehow he seemed less lonely in the face of his loving family.

Pastor Brown took Cole’s hand and squeezed it. Although a comforting presence, he wasn’t conducting this celebration of life, Cadence was.

Cole’s sister-in-law had been in whispered discussion with his momma in the hospital over what was to happen during this memorial until Momma had finally smiled with satisfaction and patted Cadence’s hand, declaring that it was good.

No one would’ve blamed Momma for falling apart when she’d basically been handed a death sentence, but the Slade matriarch had found purpose in making her party plans. She was a strong woman for thinking of so many besides herself in her last moments... so was Cadence.

Clearly, Cadence was heartbroken, but Porter’s wife greeted guests with a calm, clear voice. “Thank you!” She hugged the Slade’s elderly aunt, Martha, close to her. “The garden is exactly how Lily wanted it—I enjoyed every second of it with her. I hope *she* did too.”

“Of course, dear,” Aunt Martha assured her. “Lily loves everything about you. Never forget that.”

Cadence’s eyes turned bright with emotion. Cole noticed that she held a manila envelope in her hand, and though she was pregnant *and* in mourning, her shoulders were back, her spine was straight.

Emily joined River in the gazebo. The brother and sister team picked up their guitars and played a pretty duet that blended into a sweet harmony drifting through the courtyard like the fallen snow. Cole choked back his emotion when he heard the lyrics of the song they'd written for Momma.

"Think happily of Lily and her roses red

Her hugs are soft with fragrance, her gardens like a painting spread.

Bright, abundant, cheery, real, all she grows lives on still."

At the corner of his eye, Cole caught sight of a movement.

West had shown up and he wasn't alone. Eva was with him.

Cole froze. His heart lifted and fell all at once. Eva had gotten the memo to dress brightly—boy, had she! She was in yellow. Her hat was smothered in flowers draped stylishly over her eye. She was chic as always, and heart-wrenchingly beautiful.

What was she doing here?

And with West?

His older brother leaned over his kids, inspecting their flowers and pulling the brightly colored posy from his lapel to show them what he'd brought. He'd disobeyed Momma's wishes and was in a black pinstriped suit, though his tie was yellow—the exact shade of Eva's dress, to be exact.

Cole tried to swallow the anger that ached against his throat. Why had she disappeared like she had, and then, without warning, reappeared with West like Cole's heart didn't matter?

His jaw felt stiff. He was gritting his teeth, wasn't he?

Eva made a big deal over West's children, buzzing Charlie's cheek with gloved fingers. She grasped a white lily—her tightly clenched fingers the only sign that she wasn't as calm as she appeared. And still, she seemed amazingly chipper.

Disturbingly so.

He'd been driven to madness over how miserable he thought she'd been when she was trapped with her father, but Eva looked freer and more radiant than ever, like the lighthearted will-o'-the-wisp that she was. She'd always been good at hiding her distress.

But what was real? What was the act?

Confusion completely immobilized him.

What if West had been right about her all along? Had she used him to get his brother back?

It killed him to even suspect that she'd pretended to be anything other than who she was with him.

A breeze caught at her dress, maybe not as violently as it had done Marilyn Monroe's, but it seemed like it might carry Eva away as easily as her daddy had done before.

This time, she dug her heels into the snow-powdered ground and turned until she caught eyes with him. She brightened with a smile that was more brilliant than her hat, if that was possible. His knees feel like they were melting.

He needed to go to her. No, he needed to throttle West for keeping her away from him.

Wait, no, no, this was *not* all on West, was it? He groaned as the truth shook him. As much as he wanted to believe that West was the villain here, it was Eva who'd taken a razorblade to his heart and sliced it to shreds with careless fingers.

Resentment burned through him, easily replacing the useless hours he'd wasted worrying about her. She was perfectly fine, wasn't she?

Somehow, seeing her beaming at him made him realize how little she cared about what he'd gone through when she'd broken things off. It was like nothing at all had changed from that day she'd accidentally kissed him in the barn.

His love for her warred against his hurt pride. His ravaged emotions churned chaotically through his veins.

He needed to clear his head... or maybe... just maybe talk to her, though he feared more than anything her hurried apologies about how “things sometimes aren’t meant to be,” followed by her pleas of “Let’s be friends... no, brother and sister actually. How cute is that?”

He groaned, knowing he’d turn on his heel and leave her talking to herself.

For all his vengeful thoughts, he was having trouble getting his feet to work to go to her.

River and Emily’s song ended. It faded into the adventure cry of birds flying over the garden with the powerful beat of their wings as the flock followed an undeniable instinct for warmth.

Eva watched Cole through the crowd. Her confidence seemed to waver with her smile until she took a hesitant step towards him.

West whipped around. His hand went to her wrist to stop her. Cole stiffened when his brother’s defiant eyes met his in a challenge. When Cole didn’t make any move—towards them or away—those blue eyes narrowed on him.

What did his brother want from him? Did it matter? Now that West had gotten involved, he’d never keep Cole away.

Cadence clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention on the platform between him and his prey. “Please, everyone sit down. I’d like to say a few words before we start our celebration of life for our sweetest Lily Slade.”

Love you, Momma, but this is poor timing.

Cole’s fingers clenched around his momma’s snapdragon and he stopped himself from going after West. He blindly found a seat at the nearest table.

West rolled his eyes at him and tugged Eva into a seat next to him. Too roughly.

Cole snarled low under his breath, feeling like he could gladly land a punch in his brother’s smug face. Those bruises from before had faded. He needed some new ones.

A soft hand rubbed his knuckles. Turning, Cole jumped when he saw Kylee. She smiled over at him.

Cole licked his lips, realizing that the sudden attention from Eva’s rival could either be an extreme case of good luck or bad. His focus was all on Eva. Her serene expression from before had tightened.

Was that from jealousy or annoyance?

He had every intention of finding out.

Chapter Thirty-Five

“What are you doing?” Eva hissed. West had practically dragged her into this seat to keep her from going after Cole.

“I’m saving you from yourself,” West whispered beside her with a shrug. “*You* don’t go to him, not after what you did.”

That was exactly what Eva should do! She should’ve explained to West her plans on the ride over. She’d been up all night imagining the moment she threw herself into Cole’s arms and begged for his forgiveness... although judging by West’s knowing face, he had suspected as much. “I’m the one who hurt him,” she reminded him.

“Exactly, and he’s not going to want anything to do with you.”

She whimpered out in confusion. “I didn’t mean to.” West hadn’t explained any of these complications a few nights ago when he’d proposed this plan. Did he think she was a complete space case and she’d never get the male mind? “I just need to tell him why I did what I did.”

He snorted and lowered his head next to her ear, so that she’d be the only lucky recipient of his counsel. “Look at him for a second. You see him and Kylee?”

Of course she did! She sneaked another glance over. Cole’s jaw was set. Kylee was the one leaning, actually, but he didn’t seem to be inching away at all. It was like he was a statue for how much he was trying to escape that flirt. Eva’s whole body ached with tension as she watched the conniving Morningstar slowly but surely try to claim Eva’s man.

Kylee would be sitting on his lap soon!

“Yeah.” Eva let the word reluctantly move past her irate lips. “Don’t just sit there gloating. Tell me what to do about it.”

Cole didn’t need someone putting the moves on him at his momma’s memorial; the man needed a hug of compassion. He needed Eva!

“If either of you wants this to work out between you,” West muttered, “then he can’t sit there like a pile of rocks. He needs to go after you like a knight rescuing his lady from the snapping fangs of a dragon.”

What? Was West supposed to be the dragon? Stupid. When did West become such an expert on love anyway? He wasn’t. This was partly his fault! A sound of frustration escaped her lips. Trying to make each other jealous was so *not* Cole and Eva. Those kinds of mistakes had only been for West. “I’m not playing games with your brother,” she whispered.

“Too late,” he said. “You lied to him, instead of telling him why you ran off like a scared rat, so... now we do this my way.”

She didn’t like his way. She wanted to smother Cole with kisses and promise she’d never be able to tear herself from his side again.

Eva sat back, crossing her arms. The space heater warmed her legs, making her feel overheated. Watching Kylee with Cole wasn’t helping things. He wasn’t about to get away with giving her the cold shoulder. She stared at Cole until she caught him sneaking a glance at her.

She knew it! He was very aware of her.

She met his gaze evenly, arching her brow at him.

He turned away with a scowl.

Oh no, he didn't!

Cadence tapped the microphone. Emily set down her guitar next to the gazebo and picked up a basket of flowers to assist her sister-in-law. “Lily,” Cadence said, “for your celebration of life, we’ve brought all sorts of flowers and artwork and whatever other pretty thing we could find to remember you.”

Cadence smoothed the petals of a tiger lily resting on top of the flowers. Had she chosen that as her remembrance of Lily? The flowers that each of them had brought were supposed to be their favorite flowers that best represented Lily *and* themselves. The fierce tiger lily was a great symbol for Cadence, who was both sweet and feisty.

“I brought this flower because it’s us together,” Cadence said, “and... well, we always made a great team. I’m not sure how well I’ll keep these gardens alive without you, Lily, but I need you to know that... you’ve made a difference in my life and everyone else’s lives here by being who you are. I’m better because I knew you.”

Eva stared at the white calla lily gripped tightly in her fingers. The flower happened to be her favorite, but bringing a flower bearing the name of Cole’s momma seemed almost presumptuous, maybe even thoughtless. When Eva had spied the lily at the floral shop, she was immediately drawn to its simple elegance. Her mother had always left a cut of those flowers in a vase in their foyer.

That was before everything had changed at home. Perhaps that was the reason that Eva always wanted lilies for herself. They weren’t only nostalgic—it was like taking a physical reminder of her childhood with her when things used to be simple and blissful.

Eva had tried to fight the urge to pick up the lily at the shop, but in the end, she’d given in to its siren call.

Was that the wrong decision?

She stroked the velvety tender petals. They seemed both strong and angelic—that wasn’t quite Eva, but it was Cole’s momma through and through, and Eva wanted to be like Lily more than anything in the world.

She took a deep breath, wondering how such a thing was even possible.

It wasn’t.

Cadence set the tiger lily in the basket to the side of them and picked up a manila envelope that she’d set aside earlier. “We wanted to make this celebration of life about you, Lily, but... you didn’t want that so much. You wanted to talk about us, instead. You said that you live on through your family and friends, and so Lily, we’ll honor your wishes.”

Cadence ripped open the manila envelope and shook out a bundle of letters, all tied together with pretty pink, blue, and yellow ribbons. Painstakingly charming, looped bows decorated the ends.

“These envelopes contain personal letters from Lily to members of her family,” Cadence said. “She wrote them this past year while she waited for her heart. Lily said she felt that she didn’t have long. She tried to make her time count while she had it. She was getting ready to say ... g-goodbye.” Cadence stumbled over the word.

Steadying herself, Lily’s beautiful daughter-in-law slid out a sheet of stiff paper that was also in the manila envelope. “She dictated this to me while we were in the hospital, and if you don’t mind, I’ll read to you what she wanted you all to hear. ‘Everyone says how much I love my vast gardens. They are pretty and have given me so much joy in this life, but it’s my family who I really love. They have my heart and soul.’”

Cadence smiled gently at the sentiment, her eyes going to her new family. Eva didn’t blame her

—they were a sweet group. Hudson and Mimi sat on either side of Liv and Mimi’s momma, scooting their chairs forward to console Kris as she dabbed at her eyes with a hanky. The twins’ tender eyes were on their wives. Porter watched Cadence with fondness, but also concern, like he was afraid that his pregnant wife was overexerting herself.

To the side, West’s kids elbowed each other, though they carefully guarded their mompa’s flowers from any harm.

And then there was Cole. Always good and thoughtful Cole, who rubbed his fingers over his forehead before moving to support his chin with his hand. Kylee kept moving in on him, but his eyes met Eva’s, instead. This time they stayed longer before they moved away to Cadence.

His sister-in-law started to name all the people that Lily wanted to thank for their help over the years, starting with her husband and sons and daughters-in-law, then grandchildren. Then she extended the list to best friends and neighbors and even acquaintances.

Eva’s hands tightened on the lily. Her name wasn’t mentioned. Her back began to ache from her sudden attack of nerves. She felt like even more of an imposter.

“There are many more of you,” Cadence read Lily’s reassurances to the group, “and I honestly cannot remember who I have brought up yet or not. My mind isn’t working like it used to, but I know your faces. If you have played a role in my life, then you must believe me—you had a place in it.”

Eva wasn’t so sure that was true. She started to see herself like any sane future mother-in-law might. First Eva had entrapped Lily’s struggling son in an engagement that he didn’t want, and then she’d further entangled him in her daddy’s shady business, and to make things worse, she’d basically cheated on him with another beloved son... kinda.

Eva’s breath caught as she reviewed all the charges against her. No, she didn’t belong here, did she?

Cadence continued reading Lily’s words. “This is my final letter—I dictate it during the decay of autumn. You are all familiar with this time of a happy thanksgiving and waiting for the first snow to fall. The smell of moldering leaves and vegetation is fragrant in the heavy air saturated with change and transformation. One could say this rotting aroma is almost pleasant. And why not? Isn’t this season a part of all the four? It fulfills its purpose, too—nature is always beautiful in its final season before winter, though it is also cruel in its realities.”

Eva let the meaning of Lily’s words settle into her heart. Of course, Cole’s momma wasn’t just speaking of autumn, but of the nature of life. Lily was also a poet, it seemed, very reflective of the world they lived in and the one to come.

“The flowers are dying, though the roots are good. Rest assured, they will bloom again. They are not truly dead, though the vine has withered away. My love is like that as well—always alive. Even if you no longer feel my arms around you, know that I will continually embrace you.

You must believe! My love will be with you always, though the ground hardens as the cold settles in. This season of preparation is all part of the plan. This waiting too shall pass, and with it, shall the winter be ushered in, followed by a brilliant spring when we shall meet again.”

That sentiment was so beautiful.

Eva squirmed, wondering how appropriate it really was that she should be sharing this moment with Cole’s family and closest friends, listening in on a mother’s last words to her loved ones. Coming here unannounced might’ve been a dumb move. Picking up the phone to ask Cole if he’d be comfortable with her being at his momma’s memorial would’ve made this better.

Her silly romantic side wanted to surprise him.

Apparently West’s *non*-romantic side did too.

She wasn't supposed to be here. Looking over at West, she squeezed his arm. "I should go," she whispered to him.

He gave her a distracted look. "No," he hissed. "Let's just get through this memorial, and we'll figure this out." That's when she noticed how stiff he'd gotten. In fact, every part of him was as rigid as a board.

Oh no! The sentimentality of the memorial was setting him off.

Eva hadn't liked how hard and jaded West had turned after his momma had died. Some of that was part of his mourning process, but still something had felt off. West always turned angry when normal people got sad. And now, his profile looked chiseled from granite as his eyes narrowed on Cadence reading from the letter: "I have waited too long for this heart that didn't want to come, and I often wondered if it could possibly replace the one I have now anyway, for in mine was so much love for you. How could I find one that has brought me as much joy as this one?"

West flinched then glared at the ground. His hands pressed into each other until the knuckles turned white.

Eva bit her lip. He'd been impossible to deal with before, but now as she watched him, she realized that he was steeling himself against his momma's every word.

"I have a message for my boys. To my dearest Hudson, West, Nash, Porter, Cole... and Jase; this is for you too, my love. As God does allow, I will watch over you as an angel."

Well, West might fight his momma on her angelic mission every step of the way, and he'd never let Eva in, either, and besides! Eva had her own problems. She had officially crashed a funeral. Had she forgotten who she was? Who would want the heiress of a corrupt empire at the memorial of the most beloved lady in town? Trout's daughter! Eva cringed, feeling like the splinter in a sore thumb that everyone wanted gone... now.

She sighed, forcing herself to stay still and not cause a scene.

Eva and West were quite the pair, weren't they? Maybe they *did* belong together, except she could no longer put up with all that pain masked as sarcasm.

Tuning out West's almost palpable resentment as best as she could, she glanced back at Cole. The snapdragon quivered in his strong hands as he took everything in. The petals knocked up against his knees. Cole was wearing those jeans she'd given him. He wouldn't do that if he'd completely thrown out the idea of them being together, would he?

He might.

Still, he looked good. Kylee was still leaning too close to him. Cole seemed to have forgotten all about her, maybe Eva too, as he bent forward, listening.

"I want my boys to remember that my prayers have always been with you. And now that we are no longer together, I plead with you to know God as I do. He sees you as I see you—my perfect, beautiful sons—strong, capable, virtuous, loving, protective—men of God. These were the ones I raised, and I am proud as you become what you were always meant to be, day by day. Never forget that it is only by God's Grace that you will truly reach the potential that I know is inside each of you. God's grace is like my love—given freely, if you just accept it."

West straightened. "Okay," he muttered to Eva. "We'll sneak out the back."

Not a chance. Not like this. Eva might not fit in with the rest of Lily's friends and family, but she'd never do the woman such a disservice as to aid and abet her errant son's escape from her memorial.

Her hand went over West's arm to keep him in place. "Don't even think about it," she whispered. "I'm not kidding here."

“Let the beauty of this garden remind you of my love, though always remember that God’s love is even greater still. Warmly, your momma, your wife, your friend, your Lily,” finished Cadence.

West sighed softly. “She should’ve fought harder,” he muttered.

Eva glanced over at his pale face.

Oh no, he was wrong. Lily was still fighting.

Some things a momma never gave up on.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Cole watched his sister-in-law fold up his momma's letter and tenderly slide it back into the manila envelope. Her bracelet with Lily's name slid over her wrist.

She still wore it.

Her friends and family stood with her. Despite losing the fight, the war was won.

"You do us proud, momma!" Cadence plucked up the feisty tiger lily she'd brought to celebrate Momma, and she threw it through the air. Everyone else joined in the fun, tossing their flowers to brighten the white sky with colors not usually seen in the winter. It felt almost as cheerful as a wedding. Cole watched the sunny petals settle over the white snow. His momma's gardens were once again covered with beauty.

It only made Cole think of *her*.

He couldn't help it. His gaze traveled back to where it had wanted to go since the moment he'd seen Eva. She sat next to West. Her fingers clamped both sides of the seat after throwing her flower.

She was having a tough time of it too, but then again, she'd always been sensitive.

His arms ached to hold her. What would she think if he came to her now?

And yet, she'd come waltzing in here with West, dimpling and laughing like nothing was wrong with how they'd ended things.

How could he forgive her after that?

"You make everything bright and full of life, Lily," Cadence said. "Thank you for brightening our lives with your beauty."

Funches started the clapping. That was quickly followed by Mimi's gruff Pops, who shot to his feet, grim faced and determined, as he brought his hands loudly together like he was cheering for his favorite bull rider. Everyone else in the courtyard was happy to add their boisterous appreciation for Lily until they were all cheering and smiling. Some even hugged.

A flood of emotions washed over Cole as he thought of how close they'd been to keeping their momma. He'd told God that he'd accept whatever happened, but during moments like these, the shock forced him to remember that she was really gone.

And yet... it was like she was here in the midst of this cheer. Momma's words from her letter still burned into him. She sure loved her boys, didn't she? To become even a fraction of everything that Momma thought they were? Well, that would take some doing.

It was a little intimidating, to be honest, and absolutely impossible without the grace of God that she kept talking about.

Cadence still clutched the small bundle of letters in her hand, and as soon as the clapping settled down, she held them up. "So, Lily has flowers for all of you here. They remind her of you. She also wrote a letter for each of her boys."

Cole startled at that. There was more? What had Momma done?

"Also, she has something for you too, Dad," Cadence said to Jase. Cole loved that she'd already taken to calling him Dad. If Cole wasn't mistaken, their old man liked it too. "Lily wanted me to give her gift to you, first."

Their father straightened as if sensing the heavy responsibility of continuing as the head of their

family without Momma by his side. Gone were the complaints about keeping their nosy neighbors at a distance and keeping themselves to themselves. Not normally a social man, their father braved the memorial for his beautiful Lily.

Cadence turned back to their friends and neighbors. “So is this a Celebration of Life or isn’t it? Lily didn’t want a funeral. She wanted to celebrate, so enjoy the food, chat with your friends, talk about your happy memories with Lily and whatever fun thing you’d like.”

And with those words of encouragement, Cadence gathered the basket of flowers while everyone broke into chatter around them. Grimacing at Kylee, Cole peeled away from her and the table that held him back from Eva. He needed space and Kylee felt worse than cuddling up to a heater in the middle of summer.

And still, he couldn’t bring himself to go to Eva and her rosy cheeks.

Making his escape, Cole drifted through the crowd and listened to stories of Momma. Nash especially had some good ones. Kris Bridges kept exclaiming how her best friend would’ve loved this absolutely perfect day.

Emily and River picked up their instruments again at the gazebo and broke into one of their cute songs. Yeah, momma would’ve loved this. Cole noticed Cadence hop off the platform to head off her father-in-law. She handed him a beautifully decorated envelope.

Their old man’s fingers shook on the envelope as he tried to open it, but Cadence shook her head “No, no, read the letter when you can get alone,” she said. “It’s best that way.”

His father nodded and tucked the letter in his pocket, constantly touching the brightly colored envelope like he was afraid that it would sneak away. Cadence handed him a sprig of lilacs next. He smiled at that. “Lily knew I loved how these smelled. I always did tell her to get a perfume made of that.”

Porter was quick to join his wife, kissing Cadence’s cheek. He got a letter and a tulip in return. Hudson couldn’t be kept back after that. He made his way over to take his envelope. Cadence also gave him an iris, talking low to him. Hudson bit down his trembling lip as he accepted the gift. Rarely had Cole ever seen his oldest brother so gripped with emotion.

Cadence seemed to search the crowd for more of Lily’s boys. Cole steeled himself.

Have mercy, Momma. Sheesh! I can barely hold myself together as it is.

Nash let out a groan next to Cole, like he was fighting through his own inner turmoil. He shot past Cole and embraced Hudson, patting him loudly on the back before turning to Cadence. “Oh, man,” Nash said. “Okay, this is happening.” He reached for his letter and also got a sunflower for his pains.

Cadence bent over his ear as if to explain why Momma had thought of giving him that bright, cheerful flower. It was kind of obvious. Nash must’ve said something cheeky in return to get her and his twin to laugh so hard like that, and still Nash held his letter in a grip that would stop anyone from wresting it from him.

Momma’s boys sure loved her.

They loved their women too.

Nash wandered over to Emily while she played her guitar next to her brother. He grinned at her and made a heart sign with his hands over his heart.

Such a dork!

Porter brought Cadence close and kissed her, crushing the basket between them. Mimi just held Hudson.

Cole ached at the sight. What he’d do to have Eva at his side again.

And that was stupid!

Anger sputtered through him, ruining whatever peace he could've felt at his momma's memorial. What was West thinking coming here with Eva anyway? He was through avoiding the both of them. He glanced back at her, seeing his brother's deep scowl. West ignored Eva as usual.

He always ignored her. Was that what she really wanted?

Cole had it! Eva deserved what she got. West did too! He was going to let his brother have it, and send him packing back to Nashville if it was the last thing he did.

"Hey!"

With a jerk of sudden awareness, he noticed Cadence had left Porter to mingle with more guests while she had made her way over to him with her basket of flowers.

"Cole...?"

It was like his momma called out to him through his sweet sister-in-law. His chin jerked up. "Yeah." Cole forced the word out. It was his turn to get his letter and his flower, and for some crazy reason, getting a final gift from Momma felt unbearable. He didn't feel like crying in front of Funches, of all people... or *someone else* for that matter, not after he'd been so wronged.

He was dying here!

Cole clutched to the snapdragon he'd brought with him. He couldn't bring himself to throw it away like the others had, though now it was almost forgotten in his crushing grip.

Cadence's eyes found the flower too and her chin lifted, so that she could smile at him. "You and your momma think alike. She thought of the snapdragon for you, too."

"Is that so?" Cole's eyes glistened with emotion at the coincidence, but also at the joke. "I don't suppose it's because I picked them all out of her flowerbed when I was four?"

Cadence threw a hand over her mouth to hide her light giggles. "You didn't?"

"You bet I did. I thought I was the best son ever."

"I'm sure she'd agree." Cadence retrieved a fresh snapdragon from the basket she carried with her—one a little less crushed than Cole's. It was so bright and cheery that he relaxed at the sight of it. "Lily told me everything she knew about snapdragons," she said, "but she told me even more about you. Did you know in ancient cultures that snapdragons represent three things in folklore—grace, might, and love? She happens to think you're all three."

Cole took a deep breath. His momma had put so much thought into all of this, but she also saw him as more than he was. "She's a good woman," he said, "but what is she thinking? Grace? I'm grace?" He almost laughed at the thought.

"Yes, grace." Cadence doubled down. "Grace is for poise under a blistering sun, brightness in the face of tragedy, unexpected goodness and cheer."

Yeah, but where did he fit into all this?

Cadence must've sensed his skepticism because she smiled over at him. "Believe me, everyone sees it, even if you can't. Snapdragons are also known for their might because they stand tall in the wind, vibrant and unafraid, growing more profusely than any in the field."

Cole took a steadying breath. He'd always been the biggest of the brothers. They'd dubbed him the wrestler. Was that what his momma was saying?

She was very sweet.

"And love," Cadence said, "because the snapdragon was traditionally sent to lovers separated by distance. It was used to beg for forgiveness."

Now *that* sounded familiar. With difficulty, he kept his eyes from going to Eva as the hard truth that had tormented him all afternoon finally broke through his jealous thoughts. Cole hadn't protected

her when he should've. His brother had even warned him that her daddy would try to separate them, and Cole hadn't listened. No wonder she'd gone for West in the end. His sins stretched before him in a desert of error and regret.

What would Eva do if he gave this snapdragon to her?

"And so, Cole, Lily says that though you've the grace of a dragon," Cadence said. "You also have it in you to love like a dragon and fight like a dragon. Never give up, never surrender, never turn your back on the ones you love."

Cole felt like he'd been slapped on the side of the head, thrown upside down, and shaken by a heavenly hand to make him pay attention. *This* was what he'd been missing.

Without wasting a second more, he let his eyes wander back to Eva and stay there. For the first time that afternoon, he saw her for what she truly was.

"I won't turn my back on anyone," he said with more conviction than he'd ever felt before.

What did it matter if his pride had been hurt?

She'd smiled too much when he'd been in pain?

And maybe she didn't even want him? It sure looked like it. What was that to love? Over and over, he'd been given the charge of charity, even if it was hard.

His gaze ripped from Eva to his sister-in-law. It made sudden sense why Momma had chosen Cadence to be the spokeswoman to express her final words of sentiment on this earth. Cole tried to explain what was running through his mind to her, not sure why he felt the need, except... this meant a lot to him. "My momma was the glue, and I promised her before we lost her that I'd take over that. Family meant everything to her." He gulped, as the full meaning of what he'd said dawned on him. "It does to me too. Maybe I won't be the best at keeping us together, but I won't turn my back on anyone... not the ones in my life now, and not the ones who are meant to be in it."

They were brave words. He wanted, more than anything, to back them up. Cole could only pray that when it came down to it, he could do it, for Eva, for West... even if his brother meant to steal everything he ever cared about.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Was West right? Would Cole come to her?

Eva's stomach hurt from its ache of disappointment. She could barely hope that he'd actually slay dragons for her after what she'd done. Still... at the very least he had to hear her out.

Right?

Her doubts made it so she could barely stay in one place.

Cole talked to his sister-in-law near the railing of the gazebo. He took a steadying breath through those expressive lips that Eva still remembered feeling against her own. Cole held a fiery orange snapdragon.

Of course, his momma had chosen a snapdragon for him. It was one of Eva's favorites and it was exactly who he was—so fiery and lively and full of life. Even now, Cole gathered his sister-in-law in a generous bear hug. His jacket was a little tight against his muscles, a common look for him. The memory of those arms around her had also been seared in Eva's memory.

She groaned. Great! Just perfect. She'd forgotten nothing. His kisses, his tender looks, his hands! Cole stepped back from Cadence, tucking the flower into the front pocket of his jacket. He pushed his fingers into his pocket, and then changing his mind, ran them down the sides of his jeans, like he didn't know where to put them.

Eva had plenty of ideas for him.

Why couldn't she run to him, hold those fidgeting hands, rub his fingers consolingly, kiss his cheek?

Oh, what she wanted didn't matter, did it? She was the worst! The horrible part was realizing how right everyone was about her—she *was* a spoiled princess. She needed to beg Cole for forgiveness, not play these games that West insisted on.

Cole turned then and locked eyes with her through the crowd. She froze, feeling the strength of his passionate gaze fixing her in place. Straightening his shoulders, Cole patted his sister-in-law on the arm and left his comfortable hangout spot near the gazebo to head straight for Eva.

This is it.

She steadied herself. Her heart raced like it belonged to a frightened animal. What if Cole planned to let her have it for crashing his momma's funeral? He had every right to be angry at her, for leaving him, and for—for leading him on! Eva hadn't, of course—she was still madly in love with him—but Cole would still accuse her of playing with him.

Well, at least they'd be talking!

The guy looked far too attractive to be putting her in her place. His jaw tightened as he came for her. His blue eyes were devastating. She couldn't read him at all right now.

Kylee came up behind Cole like a crocodile and wrapped her arms around him.

Eva startled.

No, no, no! Kylee tried to pass off her flirtatious move as purely charitable. She rubbed Cole's broad shoulder as he turned to her to accept her consoling words. She wrapped herself around him. The girl was a python!

Eva glanced over at West. His stupid plan for her to play a damsel in distress was backfiring.

“Do something! Cole just got attacked by the scone mauler again. She’s ruthless!”

West wasn’t paying her any attention. His face could be set in stone. He was too busy playing the dragon. Talk about getting lost in his role! He shrugged off all condolences. That chiseled scowl of his turned more vicious as yet another well-wisher dared approach him. He wasn’t playing anymore.

He’s going to cause a scene.

All thoughts of Cole’s attacker fled her mind as Eva’s hand tightened over West’s sleeve. This wasn’t healthy. She’d failed to reach him so many times before, but she had to try this time. He was suffering horribly. Her heart broke for him. She put her mouth to his ear to whisper out her help, “Please, just... try to enjoy this for what this is... for your momma.”

“What?” he exploded. He swung around to face her.

There it was—turning his pain into rage. Eva called him on it, still keeping her voice low. “You’re so full of anger. Is that your only emotion? It’s getting really boring. You have to open your heart to something other than your anger at losing your momma. For once. For her!”

The flashing storm in West’s blue eyes narrowed on her.

She’d gone too far, but he’d better think again if he thought she’d back down. Saying her piece was too long in coming. He needed to hear this, even if it shattered the torn remnants of what was left of their friendship. “It’s okay to just... *feel* something that’s not toxic,” she said.

His lips firmed. She braced for the scathing set down. She was ready for him.

“There you are, West,” Cadence said to the side of them. His sister-in-law sifted through her envelopes carrying his momma’s letters. She found a pretty blue one in the center.

West’s attention veered to the neat pristine handwriting—his momma’s, no doubt. Swallowing, he lifted his brows at Cadence, turning the challenge in his strained eyes on her. His jaw was tight with the effort of keeping in whatever emotion that he couldn’t let go.

“You, West, are her ‘Beloved,’” Cadence said.

Oh, that elicited a response from him, all right! His cheeks flamed like he’d just been slapped.

The Beloved? His momma had given him her favorite rose... or as Eva called it, the Beauty and the Beast rose.

Cadence reached into the basket hanging over her arm to retrieve a pot that held a velvety rose that rivaled any other with its flush, deep red petals.

It was gorgeous!

But Eva wasn’t such a heathen that she didn’t know the Beloved meant something much, much more, especially to West’s momma. It would be almost religious in its symbolism.

West would get that too.

“You know your momma loves that rose,” Cadence said softly. “She waters it carefully, nourishes it just right. It flourishes with the warmth she’s given it. She never wants it to go away.” Cadence held out the potted flower for him to take.

West jerked back from it. “Wait, wait, what do you want me to do with this?” His question seemed more defiant with the rash of stark emotion glistening in his eyes.

His sister-in-law didn’t act intimidated in the least. In fact, her gaze gentled on him. More than anyone, she might understand where he was coming from. She harkened from a rough background and had done things in her life that she hadn’t always been proud of. “I’m sure your momma would love for you to take care of it.”

“She’ll love that, huh?” he snarled. “How is that? I don’t see her around here. You’re really so sure about that?”

Eva’s jaw dropped, even as Cadence gave a shrug of her delicate shoulders. His momma’s

brave new messenger purposely misinterpreted his rough tone by giving directions for its care. “Make sure it’s warm. The Beloved was meant for a steamy, tropical climate; one might say a rougher, unforgiving one.”

“Is that so, huh?”

Cadence matched his tone. “You know what? The Beloved is alluring, I’ll give it that, but it’s also one of the toughest flowers out there, so I doubt you’re going to kill it, even if you try, which you always do! Lily raised it from a bud and those roots are strong! She told me the Beloved will always be hers, so it doesn’t matter how much the world tries to snatch him from her grip. She wants her Beloved with her. To stay.”

His forehead wrinkled. He knew exactly what she was saying. They all did.

“Uh huh,” West said in a distracted way. “Real cute...” His fingers brushed over his pockets like he searched for something. His eyebrows were knit together. He turned his head aside to Eva. “I need a smoke,” he said under his breath.

“You quit,” she hissed in return.

Growling out in surrender as his fingers met nothing, West met Cadence’s eyes again. “What do you want from me?” Cadence waved the beautiful blue envelope at him. Her head tilted at him as if to take her dare. West’s chin lowered and he snatched the letter from her, ignoring the rose. He stared down at the sealed envelope. His lips curled. “I’m almost afraid to read what she has in here for me.” He went silent, lost in his thoughts as he studied his momma’s elaborate cursive spelling out his name.

Eva shifted.

West cleared his throat, laughing a little. It ended in a choke. “I’m her Beloved?” He shook his head. “That’s... so... stupid.”

His hands tightened on the unopened letter.

Eva took pity on Cadence and reached for the potted rose. Lily’s composed daughter-in-law probably wanted to pass out the rest of her flowers to more grateful candidates. “I’ll take that.”

West shook his head and peeled the pot from her grip. “No.” Eva half expected him to return the Beloved to Cadence, but his hands clenched the flower in a death grip. “I’ve got it.”

Disbelief threaded through her, even more so when she glanced up to see Cole had somehow escaped the clutches of the evil scone mauler and stood near her elbow.

Eva jerked in surprise.

Cole seemed to be taking in the situation with a quick scan before he turned to West, who held the Beloved to his chest.

West scoffed at him, not letting him get out any insult that he couldn’t top himself. “Yeah... you can pack your jaw away. I know what I am—that never stopped Momma from seeing what was in front of her. She...” West took a deep breath, “she was... an angel. Uh... Eva...” His eyes were getting too bright. “Just take...” He pushed the Beloved at her.

Take it! Don’t take it! Make up your mind.

The next split instant, Eva understood the necessity of saving the potted rose when she noticed his shoulders hunching. “Yes, yes, of course!” she cried and grabbed it before he could drop it.

He indignantly wiped at his eyes. “Why? She... she...” A strangled sound escaped the deepest recesses of his soul. “The beloved, huh? Yeah... right... if I was... why couldn’t I save her?”

Eva’s hand went to her mouth.

His words were getting lost in his grief as he turned his back on them all. “I can’t...”

She knew she was asking for trouble, but still she moved forward, every instinct begging her to comfort him. “West?” She touched his back.

He arched away. “Why do you keep trying to push... she was my... heart, okay? And she’s gone.”

She was his heart?

“It’s all... gone,” she heard him say. “I don’t care anymore.”

A flood of shock and sadness coursed through her. So that’s what he’d done! She’d suspected it the moment she’d set eyes on him at that dinner party. He’d dumped what was left of his cold heart the instant he’d lost his wonderful mother. Eva felt her own tears leak helplessly from her eyes.

Maybe this wasn’t anger she was feeling exactly. It felt a lot like it, though.

Cole and Cadence weren’t handling this very well, either. Cadence sniffed. Cole, on the other hand, had turned very stiff. So far he’d refused to even spare Eva a glance and his eyes on his brother seemed almost resentful.

Some celebration of life!

“Eva, take that—that Beloved, or whatever it is you want to call it, and...” West glared at it. “Take it back to the greenhouse. It doesn’t belong with me.”

Cole made a disgruntled sound and stepped in front of Eva. “You know what? West...”

West glowered at him. His hands curled into fists and he looked eager for the fight.

“I just want to say that... well...” Cole sighed. “Oh, forget it!” He wrapped his arms around his brother. West deflated instantly. Shockingly. Unbelievably. Miraculously.

Eva took a step back, her fingers tightening over the pot.

In some strange twist of events, West’s eyes closed like he’d finally let go of his anger enough to surrender to his grief. Tears squeezed through his lids.

A shaking hand found West’s back, and Jase Slade joined his sons to hug them from behind. “She’s never gone, my boys, you know that, right?” He rubbed West’s arm. “A mother’s love reaches past every boundary... there’s no wall she won’t tear down to come after us if we need her. You can be sure of that.”

Porter made a strangled sound behind them and immediately grabbed West on the other side. The rest of the brothers were quick to follow in a family hug. Nash and Hudson crushed them like the ends of a sandwich.

They’d all forgiven West for whatever he’d done to them. That was clear. Eva noticed the flowers they held in a splash of color. Lilacs, tulips, irises, sunflowers—they all kept a piece of their momma with them.

West seemed to hold his breath under all those arms, bowing his head. Eva could see his guilt eating him from the inside out. Would he ever forgive himself like they had?

A happy shout split the air and Charlie and Pip ran to their dad so fast that West let out a gruff grunt of pain as they barreled into his stomach and knees. Their mother grinned over them. Obviously she’d sent them to join in the fray.

Jase’s hand found his grandsons’ heads, and he ruffled their hair. “We might have lost our Lily,” he said over his son’s heads, “but we haven’t lost our family. We’re just an extension of you, my girl, and we’ll just keep growing.”

Eva couldn’t stop the torrent that had become of her tears now. It seemed hypocritical to keep any of them back after she’d told West to “feel something.”

Oh, that beautiful Lily! She’d created quite the circle of love for her family on this earth. Not many got to experience this little piece of heaven. Eva’s tears, she realized, also came from loss, not just because Lily had passed, but from Eva’s own regrets and disappointments.

She wasn’t worthy to be a part of this amazing family. What had she been thinking anyway? Her

own momma couldn't stand to be in the room with her for one hour.

Eva noticed almost distantly Lily's daughters-in-law running forward, their arms finding their husbands and their new brothers. She was missing in that. And still... the neighbors wandered over, too—even Liv and River and others that she'd only been introduced to at the pumpkin festival. They joined their friends in a big group hug, their flowers twined together like a summer wreath frosting in the cold winter wind.

Okay, Lily, good idea. Your celebration of life was pretty good.

Eva felt torn about joining them. She should offer her love. No, she should leave. Or maybe she should stay? She always loved a good party. That was her problem, wasn't it?

This wasn't about her.

She lowered the pot carrying the Beloved onto the ground and let out a sob. To her dismay, she lost the strength to get back to her feet. Instead, she folded over the plant and covered her face. It just hurt to see the roots, branches, and blossoms of this wonderful family tree and know exactly what she'd lost. She should've been smarter, more capable, more—more... perfect to keep Cole!

A hand touched her back. Embarrassed, Eva ripped her hands from her eyes and saw Cole standing in front of her. Wow, he was like a giant when she was crumpled over like this. Tearing away from the Beloved, she straightened, trying to even out their heights a little.

It didn't do much good.

Taking a deep breath, she faced him. "Hi."

He had her in a tight hug before she could get any more words out. There wasn't any condemnation coming from him, no more of that anger she'd sensed when she'd first entered the garden. His momma's celebration of life had taken all of that away, and in its place was love.

She lost her breath in his embrace.

Cole was right! She hadn't truly known how powerful God really was until she'd felt the personal touch of heaven in her life—she felt it with Lily's words, Cole's family, with him!

This complete turnaround was a miracle.

No matter what happened between her and Cole, she'd never forget how it felt to truly be loved, even in the face of all the horrid things that she'd done to hurt this man. She truly was God's child.

She rested her chin against the crook of Cole's arm. Despite the warmth she felt emanating from him, she didn't want to get her hopes up, not again, not if she was misreading him. Emotionally, she couldn't handle being rejected by him right now. "Do you—do you really forgive me?" she asked.

"For what?" he asked, drawing back.

The strands of his dirty blond hair were messy from all this love. Eva couldn't help reaching for his hair to smooth it back from that widow's peak that she adored. He smiled in return, pulling her closer. Well, well, fussing over him was a bad habit that bore repeating, she supposed. Their noses almost touched, and she felt the roughness of his cheek run up against her ear.

She couldn't keep back her smiles. She'd missed Cole so much!

Was this really happening?

And though it killed her to ask, she still forced herself to get to the bottom of what they meant to each other. "Do you forgive me for... well, first for loving you, and then I guess, now for wanting you back?"

"Honey." He barked out a laugh. "Are you serious right now? Sure, yeah, I forgive you for loving me seventy-times-seven... now for leaving me? That's one crime I plan on taking out on your hide." He slipped the snapdragon from his pocket, his eyes resting on her tenderly the whole time. "Funny thing about snapdragons—they're supposed to be passed on to a lover to beg forgiveness."

She accepted the fiery little flower, her fingers trembling. “I should be giving this to you.”

He caressed her cheek. “Absolutely not. That’s from me for not coming over here sooner.”

She laughed in relief. How could he be so accepting when she’d been so wrong? She wanted to say a million flirty things to him in response, but more than that, she wanted to explain herself to him, even if it didn’t seem to make a difference. Cole was taking her with him on this adventure of life. She was absolutely sure of it.

She didn’t deserve it. At all. Why didn’t that matter to him?

None of it made sense. There was still so much standing between them. She felt the smooth petals of the snapdragon against her fingers. She was so ashamed of her coming confession. “I left you because—because my daddy’s business is... uh... well, it’s shady... and I didn’t want you to be a part of that.”

His forehead wrinkled in surprise.

“But you don’t have to get mixed up in it anymore,” she explained quickly. “My daddy knows that my husband isn’t going to have anything to do with the family business. Uh...” She glanced over at West, seeing that he was hugging his children. “Your brother talked to my daddy,” she said in an undertone. “And my daddy agreed that nothing’s too good for his baby.” She bit her lip, wondering how crazy that sounded to Cole. Her numb fingers held on to his snapdragon a second longer before she handed it back to him. “It’s okay now. I’m free. He’s cutting us both out of the family business.”

And his will, and all that boring stuff... and it’s okay because I don’t want anything to do with the money that crushes people like West. I won’t even touch it!

Cole’s eyes darted over her face as he studied her. It made her quite breathless. “I would’ve done anything for you,” he said.

“I know,” she said solemnly, “but I don’t want that life for us, I want yours... I want your life, Cole. You understand? I want—want God, you know? He’s a part of my life now, and I want the country life, too, but most of all... I just want... well, you!”

His hands tightened over her waist. “I want you. Eva... you’re family now... you’re a part of us, a part of me. You know that, right?”

Her breath caught. She wasn’t so sure about fitting into the Slades’ world, even if she desperately dreamed of such a thing. “Really? I mean, do you think Lily would approve of me?” She almost bit her lip to keep it properly buttoned because she didn’t want to know the answer when it really came down to it.

And yet she did.

“Approve?” Cole ran his hand down her hair, his touch promising more to come. “I love my momma, but we Slades always make our own choices in this family, Eva. We’ve got to live with those choices ourselves, nobody else does... though, in this case, honey? Yeah, Momma *loves* you.”

“She does?” How? Eva would have to go by faith on this one, because she never did look that good on paper. And still, she wanted to prove herself. “You know I might be taking over your life, but I’m not a total leech. I’m planning on giving you everything that you *don’t* have.”

His nose wrinkled. “Clothes again? Eva!”

“No, no.” She laughed. “Like I’m giving you a doting wife—that’s supposed to be me, by the way! And—and kids, really, really happy kids... and maybe a dog. Actually, *definitely* a dog.”

She’d always been jealous of West’s... that might’ve been most of the man’s allure, when she thought about it.

“Eva!” Cadence was all smiles as she came over. “Don’t think you can get away without getting one of these!” She slipped an envelope into Eva’s hand. Her heart practically somersaulted over itself

as she stared at it. Was this really from Lily? She'd written Eva? That woman *was* a saint. Cadence handed her a sweet-smelling gardenia next. "Intoxicating, thrives in warmth, and Lily's favorite scent, if you have to know. She definitely thinks you're adorable. She always wanted you to be a part of this family."

Eva's hands clenched over the gifts, scarcely believing what she was hearing. She noticed that Cadence held jasmine. That was yet another perfect fit for... her new sister.

They were going to be sisters!!

And yes, yes, Eva was jumping to thoughts of marriage already. So what? Eva was going to be with this man. She didn't care what obstacle stood in her way anymore.

As Cadence walked away, Eva noticed the flowers in the hands of everyone at the party. Mimi brought a red orchid to her lips. Emily cradled a Pink Lady's Slipper.

More sisters?

"You believe me now?" Cole asked. "My momma knew you belonged in this family, just not with West. When I told her about you, and that... I loved you, she was beside herself with joy."

Eva didn't think it was possible to feel more happiness than she felt right now—or that she deserved it, and yet, here she was. She searched around the courtyard to find Cole's older brother again, but he must've slipped away. "West will find love," she said with a nod of certainty, and perhaps a flush of guilt.

Maybe Kylee.

She giggled, pretty sure that both of them would object to her matchmaking.

Cole made a sound of disbelief. "I'll believe it when I see it. Anyway, he's got his own decisions to make. This is about us... it always was."

"Yes," she whispered. "We were always meant to be." She couldn't keep back from him anymore, and neither could he because he kissed her right in the middle of the courtyard in front of every family and friend he ever had.

Only Funches shouted out in surprise.

Eva snuggled into Cole's broad chest, so glad to be in his arms again. Cuddling with her big strong cowboy was the happy little fairy tale that she'd wanted for so long, and now she surrendered herself to her dreams.

After all, she was Eva Trout. That's what she did.

Epilogue

—Early March—

Dearest Eva,

Well, sweetheart, I'm impressed. You caught the eye of one of my sons and stole the heart of the other.

I wrote you a different letter months ago. I won't lie.

I thought you were going to be with my West, and though I saw that your relationship seemed a little unusual, I hoped that you'd have a good influence on him.

Your energy and smiles are contagious—so is your creativity, your optimism, your generous heart, and fun-loving spirit.

Everything that makes up you, I'd hoped would rub off on my West.

But there is only so much that you can do, or I can do, or anyone but West can do. I don't blame you, in the least. It appears that he lost out, and that's on him. My heart is the one that's failing, and yet his healthy one still doesn't know how to take care of someone as amazing as you are. Honestly, Eva, I'm crazy about my beloved boy, but until he learns how to properly love a woman, he does not deserve a wonderful one such as yourself.

But that's neither here nor there.

I've since thrown that other letter to you in the trash. That's how sure I am that you are meant for my Cole. I heard you come from a long line of gamblers, so I'm sure you'll understand... I'm gambling on you. You seem like a smart girl. I think you'll come back to the one who completes you the most.

Bring me lots of happy grandchildren blessed with your smile and Cole's honest heart. My son told me about your family situation. And though I understand that you'll want to continue to nourish those relationships, please know that we are also your family. We are here for you. We love you!

Hugs, your Momma-in-law, Lily

PS: The other letter I had written to you was much longer, I admit. It was pages and pages of advice on how to deal with West, and this one? It's barely a page. My dear, I don't think you'll need a handbook to understand your soulmate. Lucky girl.

Eva folded the letter and tucked it into the pocket of her overalls on her way to bottle-feed Dopey in the barn.

Lily Slade was a saint! Well, an angel, more accurately. Eva *loved* that woman!

Eva had caught sight of her mother-in-law's letter on top of a box of personal items earlier when she was moving in her things to her new home, and she'd decided to reread it.

She hadn't been sorry!

It reinforced everything she felt for her husband and more when she'd married him... only two

weeks ago, so that all Eva had to do when she finished the letter was utter a breathless, “Amen, sister.”

God is good!

The ground in March was hard and slushy with light snow still drifting through a frozen sky. Eva’s gold boots brought her safely through the worst of it. Of course, she saved them from the swamp. It’s not like she’d actually leave such fantastic boots behind. After scraping off the mud, they made the perfect touch to her outfit.

And warm, deliciously warm. Winter was holding on, just like Lily had warned would happen in her letter to the family, but it only made Eva more excited for spring and its rebirth.

She couldn’t wait to experience her first glorious spring in Harvest Ranch with fragrant buds and green pastures. Only last night, Cole had caressed her hair on the sofa, filling her mind with tales of how beautiful the land would be.

They’d had no choice but to talk the night away... they were experiencing electrical outages in their new home, and so snuggling to a movie was out. And still, setting up candles and eating cold leftover pizza was far more enjoyable, especially with her handsome husband.

He made everything fun.

Last night, they’d talked nonstop about their plans for the future.

Their sister-in-law, Cadence, was already planning new additions to Lily’s five acres of gardens. She’d have her twins in a few days, so she’d need plenty of help from Eva in the spring since the children would be so young. Emily had also offered her services with the garden, in between writing songs and her own visits to the OBGYN. She was also expecting. Mimi’s soap business was thriving, and well, so was the ranch. The men in the family had consolidated their land for the cattle and were working together again.

Cole was in his element, swapping jokes with the twins and learning the ropes of veterinarian work from his hero, Hudson. And Eva? She was just excited to be a part of it all!

She’d taken to country life.

Eva wandered around in her boots, flannel jacket, and coveralls. Absolutely no one on TalkieTalk would’ve recognized her as the girl she was four months ago. And now that she was off the grid—so to speak—she was deliriously happy.

Entering the barn, she gratefully sighed under the cozy warmth of the heater. Cole and his brothers were working on rewiring the electricity in the newlywed’s tiny new cottage, but until then, she had to layer—that and cuddle with her husband to stay warm.

Not a sacrifice.

But seeing that she never really needed a reason to cuddle, they might as well get that fixed. Besides, she wanted to make a cake tonight for Cole’s birthday—a carrot cake.

Her nose wrinkled at the disgusting recipe she’d gotten from Mimi.

How in heaven’s name was that cake anyone’s favorite? It had real carrots in it! But Cole loved it, and she was just starting to learn how to cook, so he’d doubly love it because he proclaimed everything she made was gold.

He was such a liar.

A cute liar. He just wanted her to feel great.

And it turned out that his evil plan always worked. She was loving life, and learning to cook was a lifelong dream. This *all* was—just like it was to find her own handsome cowboy.

Eva was living her very own fairy tale.

She cheerfully greeted Sleipnir and found the stall where Dopey munched on his sweet hay.

“Hey, baby,” Eva called out to the oversized and awkward beast. Her heart melted a little when Dopey’s big eyes settled on her, and he let out an eager cry. He knew that she represented food, but a part of her liked to imagine that Dopey was also pleased to see *her*.

A girl could dream. And she often did! She brought out his bottle and the calf began to dance around. She giggled a little under her breath. Dopey thought he was a human sometimes. Eva hoped that wouldn’t be a problem later on.

It probably would.

She carefully arranged the bottle for Dopey, finding a stool, since this was going to take a while. The cute baby wanted to nuzzle her as he sucked out the milk. She’d take it. The adorable move was better than Dopey trying to eat her clothes.

Arms slid around her from behind. Now *that* came from a human.

Glancing up and to the side, she met Cole’s brilliant eyes. She knew his touch anywhere. He grinned at her and slid behind her on the stool, but of course, there wasn’t much room, and so he just ended up stealing her seat. He made up for it by scooping her up and resting her on his lap.

Dopey let out a disgruntled grunt as the bottle jerked from his mouth. Eva cooed consolingly, and rearranged herself so everyone was happy. Soon the sounds of Dopey’s content sucking filled the stall.

Cole buried his face into her neck, sending blissful tingles through her. “You smell good.”

See? A liar!

She playfully pushed him back with her shoulder. “No, I don’t. I couldn’t get a shower because our electricity is out. I am so not taking a cold one!”

“Hmm.” He smelled her again, like he was trying to find the source of her fragrance. “Well, it’s not the coveralls, I’m smelling. Did you wrestle the pigs in these?”

Now he was the worst! She wriggled so that he couldn’t get his hands on her to smell her again, but that really wasn’t going to work when she was sitting on his lap. She had no desire to move away from him anyway. “Even if I did wrestle the pigs,” she argued, “I’d come out smelling like roses. That’s just the way I roll. Besides, you just said that you like the way I smell!”

“Yeah, I do... just not your coveralls... you should change.” He tugged at the straps.

Oh, he was making a move on her. She smiled, always fascinated by what Cole thought looked cute on her—it was never what she expected. “Change into what?”

“There’s a red dress I saw hanging up in your closet.”

“Hmm, well, it *is* your birthday.” She leaned back against his chest, resting the back of her head against his shoulder. “Any other requests?”

Besides that horrid carrot cake... not that I’m refusing to make it, but still...

“Let me think.” He rested his chin against her shoulder. While he deliberated on it, he sneaked a kiss next to her ear, and then another on her forehead, and another and another. Her cheek lifted under his lips as she smiled.

They were still very much honeymooners. They’d gotten married in that sweet little Harvest Ranch chapel in February.

For once, she wasn’t the only one rushing to the altar.

Cole had even helped her plan the wedding—from the colors to the decorations to the food. He hadn’t minded a bit—in fact, she suspected that he enjoyed it. They were like two peas in a pod, debating on what cake tasted best and which flowers were best for the bouquet.

They’d pondered almost religiously on the flowers, which made sense, since it was the best way to honor his momma.

Holding their wedding reception in the barn was as glorious as she'd imagined and more. Her momma had even made a surprise appearance, though her majesty Mariah Swede—as Cole dubbed her after he'd found Eva crying—had to cut out early due to the “noise.” Her father had proved more resilient, grinning broadly from ear to ear during the cake cutting and the bouquet throwing. Anything for his baby.

Devlin Trout had even grown misty eyed during the daddy-daughter dance.

And that was the thing—he was still her daddy, no matter what, even if he'd treated the whole wedding like she was playing house. He'd made all sorts of comments meant to entice her back to the glittering lifestyle in Nashville that he'd raised her in, but she was nothing like her momma. She had every intention of staying in her marriage for the long haul!

Daddy seemed vaguely disappointed with her talk of calving season and taking on Lily's garden and raising a calf named Dopey, but he'd change his tune when the grandbabies came.

He was a softie. A criminal, but a softie.

Bless the man.

“Okay,” Cole said, finally coming to a decision on his birthday requests. He rested his head against hers. “I'm thinking a mermaid outfit with shells, definitely shells.”

“Mermaid?” She shook with fake outrage. “You're still going on about my clothes?”

“Oh, I must be getting to you.” He brought her closer. “That southern accent's coming out.”

“I thought maybe you'd tell me what you want for dinner.”

He broke into a grin. “No, you didn't.”

Maybe not.

She liked it when he was scandalous. “You're going to have to save your pennies if you want this mermaid outfit, Cole, but don't forget... we're still saving up for our anniversary trip to Hawaii.”

Her daddy had meant it. He'd officially cut her from the business, along with Cole—that meant no allowance, no surprise trips, no expensive gifts, so they'd only gone to Virginia Beach for their honeymoon. Still, starting fresh with her husband wouldn't have worked any other way, and Eva couldn't be happier.

Their sweet little cottage had been built in the middle of the maze in his momma's rose garden. Cadence had mentioned to her how Lily had always wanted to put a guesthouse in there with a sun room that made up almost half of the structure. Anyone could look out the windows in the guest room and fall asleep and wake up to roses.

Not incredibly practical, but the brothers had all been convinced of its importance when Cadence pointed out that it was also walking distance to the barn, and so the newlyweds could take care of the animals from there.

Win, win.

Eva loved her glass home—though she loved the privacy of her kitchen, bedroom, and living room even more. As delightful as she thought it would be at first, sleeping under the glass dome was not going to get a five star review from Eva Trout Slade!

Waking up to a maze of skeletal rose bushes covered in tarps was in a word, unimpressive. The rest of that yard still needed to be cultivated, and the winter snow was super blinding and annoying in the mornings.

Still, it didn't matter. Her eyes were all on Cole.

Exactly how they were now. Cole smoothed her hair from her face and neck, having full access to her skin, so that he could surprise her with his kisses.

Joke was on him. She was never surprised. She anticipated every single one... with impatience.

Laughing, he squeezed her tightly while arguing his case for the mermaid outfit. “You’ll need something to wear in Hawaii.”

“Shells? Ha, we’re not *that* poor.” She’d never thought those words would ever slip from her mouth, but in a way, starting fresh as a newlywed felt very, very good. Swinging around, she caught her husband’s lips with hers to show him that they didn’t need to hurry their trip to Hawaii to have a good time.

With no strings attached to her daddy’s purse, Eva had never felt so free... and so industrious. Lately, everything she ate, created, and bought came from the labor of her hands and Cole’s.

That kind of teamwork felt incredible.

Cole drew back, closing his eyes as he rested his cheek against hers. “You don’t mind that you don’t have all the things that you used to have?”

Was he being serious right now? Searching his suddenly sober expression, she hastened to reassure him. “Babe... we’re rich. I have you. That’s all I want.”

He smiled and quite suddenly jerked her from Dopey, pulling her into the hay. Well, that fresh move had surprised her! Dopey let out another sound of complaint when she let go of his bottle. She stared up at Cole, feeling like the most beautiful woman in the world as he studied her. His fingers explored her hair before his face lowered to hers where he found her lips and kissed her *absolutely* senseless.

She took her breaths when she could get them, never wanting him to release her, though his perfect, pert nose definitely needed to go—it kept getting in the way of his mouth.

Her phone buzzed.

Cole’s hands tightened over her wrists. “Who’s calling? Don’t people know we’re newlyweds?”

She rolled her eyes and laughed, even more so when Cole dug into her pocket, his fingers tickling against her side to get to her phone. She saw the caller ID. “Oh, it’s only West.” She grabbed the phone from him and tossed it behind her into the hay.

West was still working for her daddy. She’d told him over and over how she’d do everything in her power to get him out of the business, but her brother-in-law still acted like it was the money that was too much for him to resist.

After everything she’d seen and heard, she doubted it. As usual, West wouldn’t talk about how stuck he was.

Lily would be so disappointed, though probably not surprised.

Soul saving takes time.

Cole’s attention drifted to her phone. “You’re not answering it?”

“No,” she argued. “We’re celebrating your birthday. He can call later.”

Her husband groaned, though his hands grappled for the phone above her head. “He doesn’t call unless it’s important.”

She stilled, concern consuming her. She remembered those bruises from before. Hopefully this trouble didn’t have to do with her daddy again.

Cole had finally retrieved her phone. “You mind?” His eyes begged her to let him answer it.

“Go for it.” She worked on pulling the hay from her hair. Even though West would only be on the phone, he always felt like the disapproving older brother that she could never please.

“West?” Cole answered. He turned silent, listening to his brother on the other end. The expressive lines on Cole’s face sobered as he nodded. “Yeah, yeah. No! Get over here. Definitely, not a problem. We’ll be waiting.”

He hung up.

That actually sounded serious. “What was that?” Eva asked. She sat up.
“West just ran into trouble.” Cole’s eyes locked with hers. “He needs our help.”

The End

Thank you for coming with me on my Harvest Ranch adventures. I sure have a lot of fun getting to know these families, and I hope you do too!

Interested in more? **West’s Redemption** comes out soon! Check it out [HERE!](#)

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AUTHOR BIO



Stephanie Fowers loves bringing stories to life, and depending on her latest madcap ideas will do it through written word, song, and/ or film. She absolutely adores Bollywood and bonnet movies; i.e., BBC (which she supposes includes non-bonnet movies Sherlock and Dr. Who). Presently, she lives in Salt Lake where she's living the life of the starving artist.

Stephanie plans to bring more of her novels out to greet the light of day. Be sure to watch for her upcoming books: including books from her Hopeless Romantic Collection, Adventurous Romantics, her YA fantasy “Twisted Tales,” romantic suspense, an apocalyptic science fiction series, Greek Romance Regencies, Steampunk adventures, Dystopian, epic romance, and more—many more—romantic comedies. May the adventures begin!

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