

A romantic couple is shown from behind, embracing in a snowy landscape. The man is wearing a dark sweater and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater and brown boots. They are standing in front of a wooden fence covered in snow. The background is filled with snow-covered trees and a misty, overcast sky. The overall mood is cozy and romantic.

CANNON
CARROLLE

COUNTRY SNOW
AND MISTLETOE

A WYOMING ROMANCE NOVEL

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Dedicated to my late sister, Evelyn (Lynn) Robbins, who did not get to read this book but always encouraged me in my writing. Rest in peace dear sister.

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Chapter 1

Did he *really* just ask her to dinner at their favorite restaurant in the *middle of the week*? And today of all days? It had to mean what she'd been hoping for. And it would certainly take the sting out of this morning's wreck of a meeting.

Lexi Russell waved her colleague, who stood in the office doorway, into the room as she pressed the phone closer to her ear.

“Six would be great.” How would she be able to wait even that long? “No, I shouldn't have a problem getting off by then.” Not now that the deal had fallen through in spectacular fashion. But she would tell him about that later, after he proposed.

“Love you,” she said. Her screen went gray before he said the same. Oh well, he'd never been one to show his emotions—something she'd gotten used to over the last year.

She couldn't help but smile as she placed her phone on the desk.

“Was that Philip?” Simone Talbot came around and leaned against the edge of Lexi's desk. Simone always had a new hairstyle for her thick, black hair. Today, it was a single braid—helped by extensions—trailing down the back of her designer dress. Not a corporate look, but then, Simone didn't care. Neither did her boss. Simone brought in minority clients, which not only helped the bank's public image, but provided lucrative investment deals and the hefty fees that went with them.

Lexi nodded and Simone wrinkled her nose.

Simone had never warmed to Philip. Actually, few of Lexi's acquaintances had. Philip was more of an acquired taste, driven and all business, even in social settings. She'd met him over an investment deal when they'd represented opposite sides. When the deal had been successfully concluded after tough negotiations, he'd asked her out for drinks and they'd spent the entire evening into the late hours talking about contracts, strategies, and tactics.

It had been a relief not to have to apologize or explain to someone who was already in the investment-banking world why she couldn't go away that weekend, why she was late for a dinner a date, why she had to cancel at the last minute. He understood because it was his world, too. And that made him the perfect boyfriend... and now husband.

"Did you tell him?" Simone crossed her arms over her chest.

"That the Blanchard deal blew up?" The morning meeting where the CEO of Blanchard basically called the CEO of Dockside a thief couldn't have gone worse, and Lexi and her counterpart had been unable to prevent it from happening. For that reason, she would have a lot of explaining to do to her boss. But that would be tomorrow's bitter pill. Tonight... well, tonight would likely be bubbly champagne. "Nope. I'll tell him at dinner. We're meeting tonight at Viviana's. I'm sure he'll have some words of wisdom for me."

And likely spend the rest of the evening advising her on what she should have done—and once he popped the question, she'd be all ears.

She'd been waiting months for him to take the hint. After all, they'd been dating for almost a year, and, as time had ground on, she'd become anxious for them to take the next step.

She intended to invite him home to Wyoming with her for Thanksgiving to meet her parents and siblings, and once he

popped the question, it would be the perfect time to pitch it. He'd said he didn't have plans for Thanksgiving, so she'd taken the liberty of buying a refundable ticket for him, hoping she could persuade him.

"Let me get this straight." Simone cocked an eyebrow. "Philip is taking you to dinner at the civilized time of six during a workday?"

It was true they rarely saw each other during the week due to the crazy hours they worked. And, sometimes, not even on a weekend if a deal was in the closing phase, as the Blanchard deal had been. But they made up for it when they did see each other.

"Yes, he is." It was amazing how his phone call had lightened her mood.

Simone tapped a perfectly manicured red nail against her chin. "What happened? Did the guy finally get a heart?"

"You're not being fair. Being in the same job, I have no problem with our dating schedule, and he always understands when I have to work late. That's why he's the perfect guy for me."

"You can do better."

"I don't want to do better. In fact..." Should she tell Simone and wipe that skeptical, judgmental look off her friend's face? "I think tonight is the night."

Simone frowned. "For what?"

Lexi took a deep breath. "I think he's going to ask me to marry him."

"You're serious?"

"Well, it just so happens that tonight marks our one-year anniversary. And, last week when we were walking to a restaurant, I made a point of stopping in front of a jewelry store window to look at the diamond rings on display."

“And did he ask you which one you liked?”

“No, but I did point to one, and he said it was very pretty.”

“That’s not exactly an enthusiastic response.”

Simone’s face had doubt written all over it, and Lexi struggled to ignore the tiny voice inside asking if she was sure. But what other explanation could there be for dinner at their favorite restaurant in the middle of a week?

“It showed he was paying attention. And we are dining at our favorite restaurant. You said yourself that it is the middle of the week... and our first-year anniversary.”

“Did *he* mention that it was your first-year anniversary?”

“No. I’m sure he didn’t want to spoil his surprise.”

Simone took a deep breath and crossed her finely shaped legs. “I don’t see it, but if he’s who you want, I’m happy for you, even if I don’t get the attraction.”

“He’s shared a lot of his investment-banker experience, and he’s given me tips that have helped me close some tough deals.” Lexi rapped a finger on the desk with conviction. “We are very compatible, and we understand each other.”

Simone shook her head. “That may make for a good business associate, but that’s not what I’m looking for in a husband.”

But it was what Lexi was looking for. No one in her family had the slightest clue about what her job entailed. Since she’d decided to study finance in college, she’d felt like the odd person out at family functions.

She needed someone who wanted the things she wanted and understood why she wanted them. Things like financial security. “He’s a good guy.”

“If you want to close a deal.” Simone patted Lexi’s shoulder, as if offering comfort. “I really came in to see how you’re feeling after this morning.”

Talking about the Blanchard deal was a sure way to dampen her mood.

“A little shell-shocked, I’ll admit. I didn’t know where Blanchard was coming from or why he attacked Carl Larson, Dockside’s CEO. And he wouldn’t give me a reason after Larson walked out. Last week, he seemed so eager to wrap up the deal.”

“Wallis is not going to be happy. I’d wear protective armor tomorrow because you’re going to need it.”

Lexi sobered at the thought of debriefing her boss. This was a big deal for the bank, and closing would have meant a lot of money and a nice bonus for her. “I have a call in to Mullen, Dockside’s investment banker, to see if we can smooth this out, because, by not closing this deal, they lost as much as we did.”

“I hope you get some answers. You’re lucky Wallis is out today.”

Boy, was she. Because now she’d be able to make that six o’clock dinner with Philip. And, right or wrong, that was all she wanted to focus on at the moment.

* * *

Lexi slid her fingers up and down the stem of the wineglass as the waiter filled their glasses with the red wine they both liked. There would be a lifetime of fine wine and fine dining in their future together. If only he would get to the point, and, hopefully, before dinner.

While she had hoped to toast with champagne, their favorite red wine was just as symbolic.

She couldn’t help gazing at Philip over the rim of her glass as she took a sip. He was Nordic handsome with blond hair,

blue eyes, and a blond mustache on his upper lip. He always dressed in finely tailored suits, his movements calculated and subtle. He could have been an aristocrat, and the elegance he exuded was part of what she liked about him.

The fact that a man with his refined tastes had chosen her, a ranch gal from Wyoming, as his wife-to-be was a confidence builder, despite the morning's setback.

She'd been trying to catch his eye, but he'd been looking out the window since they'd been seated. He was probably nervous. Surprising, since he was usually so cool and unflappable.

She set the wineglass on the table. "Do you have something you want to say?" she coached.

"Hmmm?" He turned toward her with arched eyebrows, as if surprised she was sitting there. "Yes, well, actually there is."

She smiled encouragement. This would be the moment her world changed. "Go on, then. I'm listening."

"I'm not sure how to say this." He looked so worried.

"Just say it. You'll feel better once you get it out."

He took a deep breath. "You've probably sensed this, Lexi. You've always been intuitive. It's part of what makes you good at your work."

Complimenting her on her work was *so* Philip.

He drummed his fingers on the table. "I've met someone, Lexi."

He... met someone? The words pinged through her mind as she tried to grasp the meaning. "Who?"

"She's a lovely girl. She's a dog groomer..."

"You've met a dog groomer? For Chloe?" Chloe was his cute gray schnauzer, which Lexi had fallen in love with the first time Chloe's wet nose had burrowed into Lexi's hand.

“Well, Chloe is why I met her.” He gulped more of his wine.

He looked like the Philip she knew, except he was sweating and mumbling and saying incomprehensible things.

“Chloe has really taken to her.”

“Meaning?” But the empty, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach told her *exactly* what it meant.

For the first time since the conversation started, he looked her in the eye. “We’re... we are planning to get engaged, and I...”

“You’re what?” The words came out louder than she intended, and a few heads turned in their direction. This couldn’t be happening. But, just like the meeting earlier, it was happening and it was a disaster.

He reached across the table for her hand.

She withdrew it, clasping both hands on her lap, out of his grasp.

“I know this is a shock. Candy and I have only been seeing each other a few months...”

“A few months? While you’ve also been seeing me?” She wasn’t prepared for the pain that shot through her heart and landed in her right temple. She was having some sort of attack right there in the restaurant.

“In fairness, you and I really haven’t seen each other so much, considering our work schedules—”

“I thought that was what you liked about our relationship. You know, we understand each other, understand our work priorities.” Her voice was strange, whiny, and so not her.

The waiter took that moment to stop at the table and ask if they were ready to order.

“No, we aren’t,” she snapped, instantly regretting her tone, but the waiter had moved away before she could apologize.

Philip leaned forward. “Look, the two of us just weren’t going to work, Lexi, precisely because of our work, precisely because we are the same driven person.”

They weren’t the same driven person. She would *never* have done this to him. Out of the blue. No warning.

Philip steepled his hands. “I need a woman who can be there for me when I need her to be, not off closing some deal. That’s *my* job.”

Lexi rubbed her hand across her forehead. “I’m confused.”

Philip brought his hands to his chin as if ready to impart some great wisdom. “Candy makes time for me. She’s there for me. If I have to work until nine, she’s home cooking...”

“You’re living together?”

“Only for the last week.”

This was just too much.

“And, so far, it’s been everything I could wish for. She’s easygoing, doesn’t mind last-minute changes, accommodates my every need. She’s... she’s the one.”

It felt like a craggy rock had blocked her windpipe. She gulped some air, reached for her half-filled glass, and threw back the rest of the wine.

Dignity. She had to get out of there with her dignity intact.

She rose. The room spun as she flung her purse over her shoulder. All she wanted was to leave. And before he did.

“I hope you will be very happy together.” The spinning had stopped. She turned, knocking into her chair and toppling it to the floor with a tinny clunk that echoed through the dining room. She didn’t look back, even though Philip called her name. She kept right on walking past the tables, past the stares, past the murmurs, until she stepped out onto the sidewalk and felt the cool wind against her cheek.

How could she have been so stupid?

Chapter 2

Lexi sat in the window seat of the 737 jetliner and stared at the fields and mountains below that were flowing by like a rushing stream. No way did she want her two seatmates, an older couple who appeared to be happily married, considering the hand holding, to see the tears dribbling down her face.

How had everything gone so wrong? Her boyfriend? Her job?

A week ago, she'd been on top of the world. Heck, two days ago she thought she would be getting married and closing an important deal.

She should have known.

That was what her boss had said about the deal. Turned out, Blanchard's wife was having an affair with Dockside's CEO, and, apparently, Lexi should have known that. That was what a good investment banker was paid for—to know, her boss had said. Actually, he'd shouted that last part.

And shouldn't she have also known about Philip? Shouldn't she have seen the signs?

Last-minute cancellations, no response to late-night texts, no Saturday date nights in the last few months... She'd always been intuitive. Even Philip acknowledged as much.

So why not this time?

She could blame the Blanchard deal for keeping her mind occupied, but, deep in her heart, she knew the real reason. She'd chosen not to listen to her gut. She'd chosen to ignore the signs. She'd chosen to rationalize away the excuses.

She'd wanted the security marriage to someone like Philip would mean.

But maybe not Philip himself.

She'd chosen to ignore that, too. He'd been the right guy on paper—but maybe not the right guy in her heart.

And the sad thing was, she would have settled for that.

She wiped her tear-stained cheeks with a tissue and suppressed a snuffle. She wasn't sure if she was crying over losing Philip, an unfulfilled dream, or the deal that had gone bad.

Whatever it was, she had some serious thinking to do. Somewhere in all this, she'd lost who she was, and she needed to find that person again.

But home—the ranch, Wyoming—was not the place she was likely to find herself. Because, as much as she loved to visit, it wasn't where her life was now. She needed to prove she could make it in the big leagues once again, and the biggest league was San Francisco. But flying to Wyoming might give her some distance so that, when she returned to the city, she'd have a fresh perspective, and, hopefully, a new deal to work on. And then she'd find herself.

Without Philip in the mix.

She didn't need a man. She didn't need anyone. Hadn't she said that when she moved to San Francisco for the job, a city where she knew no one? That was the confident, intuitive, independent Lexi she was looking for. And San Francisco was where she would find her again. After a little respite in Wyoming.

“I can wait until the first of the year. Longer if you need more time to discuss it with your kids and your lawyer.” Cort McClane pulled at the collar on his flannel shirt as sweat dampened his neck. Must be the wood fire in the fireplace of the combined living room, dining room, and kitchen taking the November chill out of the air.

Or maybe it was the momentous debt Cort was taking on that had him sweating.

But Cort would wait until next year if it meant he could own the Russells’ nine-thousand-acre ranch and the water rights and land leases that came with it. “As long as you’re okay with the down payment and holding the mortgage for the rest? ’Cause I don’t think old Curtis over at the bank is inclined to lend me millions of dollars more.”

He’d already sunk his life savings into his late aunt and uncle’s operation, which bordered the Russell ranch, to get it up to speed. But he had run the numbers, and if he could annex the Russell ranch to the ranch he’d recently inherited, he could run a herd that would turn a decent profit, considering the market prices for beef, as well as his intention to breed quarter horses and open it up for tourism and hunting. There was a lot of demand for places where city people could experience a romanticized version of ranching, and he’d love to oblige.

Standing over the wood trestle table, Ian Russell, his graying russet-colored hair askew from removing his well-worn cowboy hat, dug his hands into his work-trousers pockets as he stared at the papers spread across the tabletop. “Reckon it will be like an annuity for us.”

Jewel Russell, her short blond hair neat and tidy, tapped the table with a pencil. “And getting the money over time means less we’ll have to pay in taxes.”

Jewel was the business brains in this cattle operation. Business acumen was a trait that seemed to run in the female

line of the Russell family, if the talk about their daughter Lexi was true.

“She’s figured it all out.” Ian jabbed a finger in Jewel’s direction.

Cort had to laugh. “I’ve no doubt.”

“You’re taking Misty, too, right?” Ian asked, as if the whole deal hinged on that condition.

“If no one in the family wants her. She’s a well-trained horse. I’ve been using her out with the herd, and she’s smooth, like a fine-tuned race car. You could get a lot for her if you sold her separately.” Misty was the kind of ranch horse that every rancher dreamed of owning. Had cow sense, cut cattle like a surgeon, and was a pleasure to ride. She could command a lot of money on the circuit, and Cort wasn’t sure why they wanted to, essentially, gift her to him.

Ian cleared his throat. “You see, Lexi trained Misty. But if we sell, Lexi’s in no position to take her on herself. I mean, what would she do with that horse in San Francisco? Why, she only gets home here a few times a year. Horse like Misty needs regular activity. And, with you, we know she’d have a good home. That’s why I asked you to take on Misty for a spell. See how you liked her. You still use mostly horses. Here, with my arthritis and everything else that’s gone wrong, I’m mostly using ATVs. It’s only when Matt comes to work for me in season that a horse would get used, and, for that, old Sheba has been just fine.”

“I appreciate it and would be honored to add a horse like Misty to my remuda. But Lexi might want to sell her to see what she can get for her. I can’t pay more than what I put in the contract.” Lexi was a first-rate horsewoman. She’d taught him, a city boy, how to ride that fateful teenage summer.

Jewel shot a look at Ian, who shook his head. “Telling Lexi about Misty is going to be harder than telling her about selling the place. But at least we can say we’ve found a good home.

Though, can't say if getting money for the horse will win out with Lexi, considering."

Considering Lexi was all about the money, Cort guessed. Cort had once equated money and success with happiness, and he'd found out the hard way that the two were not the same. With the debt he was taking on, Cort might no longer be in the money, but he was a heck of a lot happier.

"Anything else I can do for you folks now that the snow squall has passed?" Cort had been helping out Ian and Jewel, seeing as their own children weren't on the scene and Cort had ranch hands to work his spread. In the process, he'd been soaking up Ian's cattle knowledge.

Rusty, the Russells' son, had up and joined the Air Force as soon as he was eligible and was in the Middle East somewhere. Junie, the youngest, was married with a child and running a flourishing flower shop in town. And then there was Lexi, the middle kid who'd put herself through college so she could become a big-shot investment banker in San Fran. Not one of them was interested in ranching. And all but Rusty would be at the Russells' for Thanksgiving in a few days.

He'd be sure to make himself scarce. For one, the Russells had yet to discuss the sale of the ranch with all their children. That would take some talking through, and he had no desire to be around for that. At least three generations of the Russell family had worked the land, but Ian and Jewel had come of an age where they wanted out. Cort couldn't blame them. Ranching was a physically hard life, and if you didn't have kids willing to take it on, aches and pains soon took over.

And then there was the bigger reason he wouldn't be around.

"Well, there is something you could do..." Ian stroked his chin.

Something was coming. That was fine. He had the time. Nothing waiting for him at home but some cold leftover

chicken.

“If you have a minute today...” Ian looked at him as if he expected an answer before he finished the question.

“I’m free enough.”

“Great,” Jewel broke in. “Come for dinner tonight. But not to discuss the sale. Just for company’s sake.”

Ian’s eyebrows shot up. “I was going to ask him to help me fix that hay baler.” He shook his head, as if annoyed by the interruption. Ian rarely got annoyed. “I got the part in the other day.”

“And then stay for dinner,” Jewel added.

“Bandit’s with me, waiting in the truck.” The Border collie went pretty much everywhere Cort did these days. Cort had always wanted a dog, but his former lifestyle of twelve-hour workdays hadn’t lent itself to caring for an animal. So, when he was offered the buyout and came to take over his aunt and uncle’s ranch, Bandit was the first addition. The Russells had always been accommodating to the dog, but Cort didn’t like to presume.

“You know that dog is always welcome in here. He’s better behaved than most humans.”

That was true.

“Well, then, yes, ma’am. I’d be obliged.” Lately, he’d been sharing quite a few dinners with the Russells, as Jewel was always ready with an invitation. Not to mention, she was a much better cook than he was. Even Bandit preferred her cooking to Cort’s, as there were always a few scraps and often a bone for the pup.

Ian shot his wife a sharp look.

“It’s settled.” Jewel ignored her husband’s scowl. “You two scoot out of here. I’ve some tidying up to do.”

“Not on my account, I hope.” Cort didn’t want to be an imposition, what with Thanksgiving around the corner. Maybe that was the cause of the look Ian gave Jewel.

“On my own account.”

Ian grabbed his hat. The scowl on his face remained. “Let’s go. You heard the boss.”

* * *

Lexi’s rental car bumped down the gravel driveway, which was still lightly coated with remnants of the snow flurries that had been swirling when her plane had touched down. Halfway down the drive, she caught sight of the white-shingled ranch house, the setting sun’s rays highlighting it as if it was a fine painting. The gloom that weighed on her dissipated like smoke on a breezy day.

As much as she’d run from the vagaries of ranch life, she always felt at peace when she came home. There was something about the big sky, distant mountains, the old red barn, her horse in the corral, the house with its wide front porch peppered with rocking chairs, and the neat and tidy grounds, that she found calming, comforting, and, well, joyful.

A strange pickup was parked near the barns. Had her parents sprung for a new truck? Heaven knows they needed to trade in that banged-up red one, except it was parked next to the new one, along with her mom’s black SUV.

As she rolled her car to a halt, her mother appeared on the porch, as if conjured up by magic. She wore the jeans and sweatshirt that had become Jewel Russell’s uniform. Her mother, it seemed, had been destined to be a rancher’s wife, despite earning a degree in marketing.

Having met bronc rider Ian Russell at a rodeo, her mother’s fate had been sealed. Mom had never hinted that she had

settled when she married Ian Russell, despite the hardships. Maybe the breakup with Philip was a sign Lexi shouldn't settle either.

But the thought of getting back out there and looking for her happily ever after seemed more daunting than ever. Because where would she find her Prince Charming now?

Starting today, Lexi vowed, she would just enjoy being home with her parents, seeing her nephew, Parker; her sister, Junie; and her brother-in-law, Todd. And going for long horseback rides on Misty, even if the temperature dipped below freezing and snow covered the ground.

She checked her smart watch. It was closing in on five o'clock and getting darker. She'd have to wait until after supper to check on Misty. Tomorrow, she'd feel her horse's smooth gait underneath her. That thought brought a surge of much-needed warmth to her heart as she slid out of the rental car and faced the chilly air.

She lugged her suitcase out of the backseat, and when she whirled around, her mother was there, arms open for a hug. A tight squeeze and then her mother rushed her into the house with such impatience, Lexi half expected some surprise to be waiting for her inside as she dragged her suitcase behind her.

Stepping inside, there was no surprise, just the delicious smell of a pot roast cooking on the stove, the warmth of a fire in the fireplace, and the sight of the table set... with four plates.

"Is Rusty here?" Lexi held her breath as the door closed behind her. She hadn't seen her brother in person since last Christmas. Maybe that was the reason for the other truck parked outside.

"No. No change there. He can't come for Thanksgiving, but said he should be here for Christmas, so we'll just have to wait."

"Then who's coming to dinner?"

“A neighbor. We only found out last night that you’d be coming early. But I’ve plenty of food, so there isn’t a problem.”

“A neighbor?” Their nearest neighbors, the McClanes, had passed away. Over a year ago Mrs. McClane, in her late seventies, had gone first after catching pneumonia, and then, six months, later old Gil McClane had followed. “Someone buy the McClane place?”

“Let’s get you settled in your room.” Her mother bustled past her, pulling Lexi’s suitcase behind her.

“I can get that.” Lexi trailed her mother down the hall. But it was no use. Her mother was already in Lexi’s old bedroom before Lexi could catch up to her.

“I made up your bed as soon as you called last night.” Her mother wheeled the suitcase to the closet. “I can’t tell you how happy your father and I are that you’re here and staying for more than just a day or two.”

Lexi had decided to stay through at least Monday. Other Thanksgivings, she’d have taken off on the Friday after, having to get back because of work. Right now, she didn’t have a deal in the hopper, so why not stay a few more days? Why not see if the ranch could heal her broken heart and wounded pride?

As she looked around her old room, with its flowered wallpaper, antique oak furniture, and two twin beds covered in matching yellow comforters, she realized it was more wounded pride than broken heart. Her pride had been dealt a blow by both Philip and the Blanchard deal. She’d ignored the signs and paid the price.

“Take some time to freshen up and relax after your flight and drive here. We’re eating in about thirty minutes.”

Earlier than their usual six o’clock suppertime.

“Can I help?”

Her mother wrapped her arms around Lexi, and the scent of vanilla filled the air. The warmth of her mother's hug always soothed her. "I have everything under control. I'm sure you could use some time to recuperate from your travels. I'm sorry it didn't work out with Philip."

Lexi clung to her mother, soaking in the love. "Thanks." She'd told her mom about Philip but not about the deal—for reasons she'd examine later.

Her mother stepped back but kept her hands on Lexi's arms. "Remember, Lexi, that when one door closes, another opens if you look for it."

How many times had her mother said that when things had gone wrong? And she'd usually been right.

"I know."

Her mother's smile was like a beam of light in the dark. "I'll let you know when Dad comes in. He's anxious to see you, but he had to repair some equipment, and the neighbor is helping him." With that, she turned and headed down the hallway before Lexi could ask who exactly was this neighbor.

Guess she'd find out in a few minutes.

Chapter 3

What had been the worst few days of her life grew exponentially worse as Lexi stared across the table at Cort McClane in the flesh. It had been years since she'd seen him. Ten years and three months, in fact.

Unfortunately, he looked better than she remembered.

If only he'd gotten a paunch belly and gone bald. But no. He looked trim and fit and had gained some impressive muscle, as revealed by the rolled-up sleeves of his plaid flannel shirt. His hair was the same rich coffee color, and there was plenty of it, with a lock falling over his forehead. His blue eyes seemed bluer against tanned and weathered skin. And then there was that mouth of his, lit up in a smile as he stared back at her.

Like it was yesterday, she could remember his lips caressing hers as he taught her about kissing. French kissing, to be exact. Her sixteen-year-old self had been in love with him. She hadn't had much judgment at sixteen, and, apparently, at twenty-six, it hadn't gotten any better, at least where men were concerned.

"You must remember Cort from that summer he was here," her mother said. "You taught him how to ride, if I recall."

Lexi forced a smile. "Surprised to see you, Cort." That was an understatement.

"Cort's been fixing up his aunt and uncle's place. You'd hardly recognize the house. He had it painted a lovely shade of gray, with black shutters. It looks so nice." Her mother beamed at Cort like he'd created an artistic masterpiece.

Cort's gaze shifted to her mother, and his smile widened. "Thank you, Jewel. I'm trying."

"Oh, you're doing more than just trying." Jewel leaned in. "You're succeeding. Nice new equipment barn, all the fencing mended. New tractors. He's really pumped up the place."

"It just needed some care."

If Cort had added an "aw shucks," Lexi wouldn't have been surprised. She'd need boots and a shovel to get through her mother's one-person admiration dump.

Lexi glanced at her father. His eyebrows arched, as if to say *don't ask me*.

All she had to do was make it through dinner and then she'd make an excuse and head out to the corral to see Misty. It would be too dark to ride, but taking care of her horse was the best tonic to chase away bad memories.

"This pot roast is mmm-mmm good, Jewel." Cort waved his forkful of meat in the air. "One of your best." He popped the fork into his mouth.

Her mother's cheeks pinkened. "Thank you, Cort."

"How are things going in San Francisco?" Cort's shift in topics made her pulse jump. "Been over six months since I left."

"You were in San Francisco?" Why hadn't she known that?

He nodded. "My company was based there, and I moved there about eighteen months ago because of a promotion. Then left six months ago when the company was sold and I took over my aunt and uncle's place."

Lexi had known he'd been in Silicon Valley with some tech company start-up, but she hadn't known he'd moved to San Francisco. Guess she'd stopped looking him up on the internet when she'd met Philip. Not that she had any reason to check

on him before Philip, but, sometimes, curiosity had gotten the best of her.

“Things are fine in San Francisco.” Except for the housing crisis, the homelessness, the crazy prices of just about anything, and her spectacular failure.

“Good to hear.” Cort took a bite that finished off his meal, probably satisfied he had at least made an attempt to be civil.

“Cort’s been helping Dad out now that he has a paid crew working on his ranch. It’s been mighty kind of him.”

“You’ve needed help, Dad?” Not that she could do anything about it living in San Francisco, but she would have liked to know.

“Some. At my age, things take longer. Nice to have a young person around.”

And Lexi wasn’t around. Nor Rusty or Junie. That was the subtext. The Russell children had been a disappointment because none of them wanted to work the ranch.

“If you need help, I’m happy to pitch in while I’m here, and you know I’m ready to help in other ways.” If money would solve her parents’ problem, she’d see that they had it. Investment banking was a lucrative profession and, though she’d be out a sizable bonus from failing to close the Blanchard deal, she still made an enviable income.

She’d been scrupulous about building up a nest egg in case anything unforeseen happened. Always in the back of her mind was that year the bank had almost foreclosed on the ranch. Just the memory made her shiver, like an ice cube had landed down her back.

“We’ll talk about it some other time.” Her father’s tone was unusually testy.

Her mom gathered up the remnants of the pot roast dinner and put them in the refrigerator. “Cort gave up his job in the tech industry to become a rancher.”

“Why?” That fateful year had shown her just how mercurial ranching could be. A rancher was at the mercy of the weather, the market, and the bankers. It hadn’t taken long for Lexi to realize she’d rather be the banker than the debtor.

As for Cort, as far as she knew, his former company had been successful in the tech world. Why would anyone give up the rewards of a lucrative job for the riskiness of ranching?

Cort shrugged as his gaze glided over Lexi and lingered on her face. Little tingles sparked in her body all the way to her toes.

“Company got acquired. I got a good buyout. Happy to be my own boss these days.”

She shifted in her seat, determined to ignore those tingles. “But working a ranch is ten times more physically demanding than working in the tech industry, and the payoff a lot more uncertain.”

“Maybe that’s what I like about it.” A slow smile spread across Cort’s handsome face, causing her body temperature to rise like steam from a hot shower.

Lexi stood. The fire must be getting to her. “I’ll take your plates.” Lexi turned to take Cort’s, but he’d already jumped out of his chair and was walking his plate and utensils to the sink. So, she picked up her father’s and mother’s place settings and met Cort at the faucet, where he was rinsing off his dish. He reached for the dishes in her hands.

“What are you doing?” He seemed awfully comfortable in her parents’ home.

“Cort often comes for dinner these days, and he helps by loading the dishwasher.” Her mother smiled as she closed the refrigerator door. “He’s the best guest we have, besides Bandit.”

“Bandit?”

Cort motioned toward the fireplace at the far side of the room, and Lexi caught sight of a dog, a border collie, stretched out between the couch and the fire, warming himself. As if sensing he was being talked about, the dog raised his head and looked at Lexi through his sleepy eyes. The black-and-white collie had a black band of fur around his eyes, undoubtedly the source of his name.

“I didn’t see him there. He didn’t move when I entered the room.”

“He’s the best-behaved dog I’ve seen since Scamper.” Scamper, a lab and Irish setter mix, had been the family dog when Lexi was growing up and had died while she was away at college. The mention of his name brought an unexpected tug to her heart. Something else she hadn’t thought about in a while.

Relieved of her dishes, Lexi strode to the dog, bent down, and ruffled his furry coat. Bandit nuzzled her hand as Lexi stroked his side. This dog wouldn’t put up with grooming by some flirt named Candy.

She’d probably never see Chloe again. Right now, that thought made her sadder than never seeing Philip again.

Once she’d gotten her fill of petting Bandit, she rose and looked back at the scene of her mother and Cort bustling about the kitchen. She had to mentally shake her head at the strangeness of it.

“We have dessert,” her mother announced. “I made your favorite, Lexi. An apple pie.”

As much as she wanted to escape to the corral, she would never refuse a piece of her mom’s apple pie.

“I can’t stay, Jewel.” Cort rubbed the back of his neck. “Chores are waiting at home. Even with the men there, I need to check up on things.”

“Then take some with you.” Her mother patted Cort on the back as if... as if he was one of the family.

“I won’t say no.” Cort strode to the hooks beside the door where an array of jackets hung. He shrugged into the tawny-colored ranch coat.

Lexi grabbed the dessert plates from the cabinet—a special set with a center sketch of a horse in motion. Though she tried to concentrate on setting the three dishes and accompanying silverware around the table, she couldn’t help but watch her mother and Cort out of the corner of her eye. They seemed as chummy as two ducks in a puddle as her mother set to wrapping up a substantial portion of the homemade pie. She motioned for Cort to add some slices of pot roast to a plastic container, and he obliged, snapping on the container lid with a click.

“Thanks for helping, Cort,” her father said.

Cort nodded, tucked the pie and pot roast container into the crux of his arm, and patted his leg. Bandit rose and obediently came to Cort’s side.

With him gone maybe her breathing would return to normal.

“I thought we’d stop by tomorrow and look in on your place.” Her mom took her seat at the table as Cort headed for the door. “I want to show Lexi some of the changes you’ve made.”

“Mom, I plan to ride Misty in the morning. In fact, after dessert I’m going out to the barn to see how she’s doing.” Lexi wished she could saddle up her horse right then and escape into a long ride.

Her mother coughed. Her father hung his head. Cort stopped at the door as Bandit plopped onto the floor.

“Misty is being worked by Cort these days. She’s staying at his place,” her mother announced.

Had she heard correctly? Lexi glanced from her mother to her father to Cort. “Why?”

“Dad doesn’t do much riding anymore—”

“Is that true, Dad?”

Her father looked at her from under his brows. “I’ve been using mostly the ATV these days.”

“Since when?” Her father had always loved working cattle with a horse. He said cutting cattle on a horse was like a choreographed dance.

Her father leaned forward, as if ready to answer, but her mother cut him off. “His arthritis has been acting up.”

Her father rubbed his knee. “Misty needs the work, and Cort was nice enough to take her on.”

“Nice enough? Misty is a first-class ranch horse.” And *her* horse.

Cort stepped closer to the table. “That she is, Lexi. Gil didn’t have many horses, so I’ve been slowly adding to the herd, and having Misty to depend on has helped a lot. You trained her well. I’m honored to have the opportunity to ride her.”

He should be honored.

Jewel waved an arm. “Misty would have wilted away standing in the corral day after day. Your dad thought this was a great solution.”

Lexi sighed. She couldn’t argue that point, though this was the first she’d heard that her dad wasn’t riding anymore. He’d had arthritis a while, but it had apparently gotten worse. If her father had health problems, she should know about it. Regardless, the fact remained that Misty wasn’t in the corral. “I’d hoped to ride her while I’m here.”

Disappointments these last few days had piled up faster than ants building a hill.

Cort tugged the brim of his hat. “She’ll be at your disposal the whole time you’re here. I won’t take her out on the range.”

“So, every time I want to ride, I have to drive over to your place?” Like a balloon deflating, the excitement at the thought of riding Misty seeped out of her.

“The McClane ranch is just a few miles down the road, Lexi. And it’s less disruptive for Misty if she stays there, isn’t it?” her mother asked.

Lexi crossed her arms over her chest. Of course she wanted to do what was best for Misty, but she had so little time to ride as it was.

“I’ll tell you what, Lexi. Come over tomorrow with your mom, and ride Misty back here and keep her here until you’re ready to leave. Then ride her back. Agreed?”

That was accommodating of him, considering Misty was her horse. “Thank you.”

“I’ll give you a tour of the place, too.” He winked... at her or her mother she wasn’t sure, but she could feel the heat from the fireplace again.

More time with Cort McClane was not what she needed, but to get Misty back, she’d do it. Because any way you sliced it, the man was too attractive for her own good.

Cort looked out over the barn and corrals from the undersized front porch of his ranch house. Water from the melting snow puddled along the gravel paths, making things messier than they needed to be. The sun was already high in the sky, warming the ground, and the air was crisp and fresh with the scent of hay and horse. Good day to get some repairs done while the ranch hands tended to the cattle and fencing.

There was the tractor to tune-up and a new woodstove to install in the calving barn, if he could figure out the directions.

And Lexi Russell was coming. To his ranch.

He might not make the big bucks Lexi made these days, but the ranch looked prosperous now. Maybe this visit would help Jewel ease into a discussion about selling their ranch.

“Lexi certainly won’t be interested in coming here after she learns her parents are selling, now, will she?” Cort said to Bandit, who sat dutifully next to him on the painted porch floorboards, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth as he patiently waited for Cort to move. “She wouldn’t even be here now if it wasn’t for Misty.”

This might be the only opportunity he’d get to see Lexi for another ten years... or maybe ever.

He’d expected to miss seeing her altogether this trip, and he certainly hadn’t expected her to arrive as early as she did, what with her important job that, according to Ian, commanded all her time and attention.

And a boyfriend. Jewel had mentioned the guy might be coming for the holiday.

But no boyfriend had been in attendance last night, and no one had mentioned him.

When Cort had seen the unfamiliar car parked in front of the corral, he’d worried Lexi had arrived early with her guy. And was surprisingly thankful when he entered the house to see the table set for only four. Bandit had settled by the fireplace, and Cort had waited in anticipation as the sound of footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor.

How would she look? What would she say when she saw him? Would he feel anything after all these years?

Would she?

Lexi had crossed his mind more than a few times in the intervening years, but he'd always been too busy to look her up... or lacked the courage.

Perspiration had tickled the back of his neck as he'd watched her come down the hall, hips swaying, that beautiful hair flowing over her shoulders, her eyes downward as she shoved a cell phone into her pocket.

She'd raised her gaze, stopped in her tracks, and stared until her father rushed over for a hug. But even in the embrace of her father, Lexi had turned her face toward him, her eyes wide. She'd always had beautiful eyes

Unfortunately, the expression on her pretty face had been more *what the hell* than *glad to see you*.

Guess he couldn't blame her, but what had happened between them was years ago, when they were young and he, at least, had been one mixed-up kid. By what was going on with his parents. By life.

Lexi had definitely taken his mind off his problems back then. Had made those months in exile bearable. But then things had hit the fan, reality had come crashing in, and a sweet summer interlude had come to an abrupt end.

He ambled down the porch steps and headed for the barn, Bandit keeping stride. The mud made a sucking noise against his boots, and the cool breeze nipped at his face. He closed the zipper on his field jacket and tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

She certainly looked good. Better.

She'd been pretty as a teenager. She was beautiful as a woman. Long, loose chestnut hair suited her better than the tight ponytail she'd always worn back then. Smooth skin, paler than he'd remembered. Pretty hazel eyes that revealed her every thought. And her thoughts yesterday had not been happy ones. And lips. Rosebud lips, perfectly shaped and, as he remembered, highly kissable.

She'd been a fast learner.

But first loves were just that—first loves. Innocent. Sweet. But not sustainable.

People changed too much.

Lexi had been a ranch kid, in love with horses and dogs and wide-open spaces, only to become a city girl obsessed with money... or, at least, that was how he thought of investment bankers. He'd been around a few when he'd worked for the start-up. Investors were always showing up at the behest of the company's founder, and Cort would be the one to trot out the latest developments. He hadn't liked a one of them. Too interested in the money and not in the vision.

No wonder Jewel and Ian were selling. None of their kids had ranch dreams. And certainly not their investment-banker daughter. It would work out well for him. Besides the cattle operation and land, he'd be getting first rights to much-needed water and BLM leases, which would allow him to enlarge his herd and expand into breeding horses. Though his savings would be depleted by the purchase, with hard work and a little luck the expansion would enable the ranch to pencil out. He'd run the numbers, and the numbers didn't lie.

“You think Jewel and Ian have told her yet?” he asked Bandit as they entered the equipment barn. Bandit stared up at him as if in doubt. “Me neither.”

As her mom drove the pickup down the gravel drive, Lexi leaned forward, stretching her neck to get a fuller view. The McClane place looked different—better, successful. Lexi hadn't seen it in years—had no occasion to stop on her brief visits home—but even back in the day it had been rundown. The McClanes had been an older couple, a great-aunt and

great-uncle of Cort's, and their age had caught up with them. Their only son had lost his life in Vietnam, and they'd had no one to take over the ranch until...

"Cort inherited this, I guess." It was more statement than question.

"Yes, he did." Her mother turned the old pickup toward the barns. "They were fortunate that he had an interest. Despite having a successful career."

Lexi glanced at her mother, whose bland expression gave nothing away. At some point the family was going to have to face what would become of the Russell ranch. Gratefully, that seemed a ways off. Lexi was hoping by that time, Rusty would be tired of roaming the world and would plant roots in Wyoming at the ranch.

"He's done wonders with the place," Lexi had to admit.

"He's invested a lot of his own money in this. I take it that he got quite a bit from the sale of that start-up he was involved in, but you'd know more about that kind of thing than I would."

"Depending on his stake, being in a start-up that gets acquired can be very lucrative." And risky, but in this case, it appeared the risk had paid off.

Her mother pulled the truck to a stop in front of a fence. If the gleam bouncing off the buildings was any indication, it appeared they'd all been updated.

"He replaced two of the barns with prefabs. The equipment barn is metal, more fireproof than our wood one." Her mother pointed toward the house. "He's done a great job of fixing up the house, too. Don't you love the paint job?"

She craned her neck to see the ranch house painted in a mellow gray tone with black shutters and looking tidy. The narrow porch ran the whole length of the house but held just one rocker, as if the owner didn't expect much company.

Their family ranch certainly could use some sprucing up. Who better to help her parents invest in the property than Lexi? She could help them with the bank. Use her expertise.

“I think our house would look nice with a new paint job. And maybe a little investment in other areas of the ranch, too,” Lexie said. Their equipment barn had holes in the wood siding and a failing roof, if she remembered correctly.

Her mom scooted out of the car, and Lexi followed, shielding her eyes from the sun’s glare. She should have brought sunglasses.

As the car doors slammed shut, Cort appeared out of the new barn her mom had pointed out, Bandit keeping pace with his long strides. With his hat on, Cort looked all cowboy, long, lean, and tempting.

It was the tempting part that worried Lexi.

Good that her heart was still bruised from Philip... and the memory of Cort’s abrupt departure all those years ago.

“Howdy, ladies. I’m glad to see you have on your work boots, ’cuz it’s muddy out here.”

Mom laughed. “Lexi had to borrow an old pair of mine because all she has are fancy boots. You’d think she’d know better.”

“I didn’t expect to be mucking about.” She should at least get points for remembering her heavier jeans and a warm jacket to bundle up in.

Jewel’s eyebrows arched. “You did expect to go riding, though.”

“You got me there.” She wished she was on Misty right now instead of on Cort McClane’s land.

“Welcome to my ranch.” Cort spread out his arms.

“You’ve done so much, Cort. Gil would be proud.” Her mother swiveled her head a hundred and eighty degrees, as if

she'd never seen it before.

“They left me good bones to work with.”

“Love this equipment barn.” Her mom walked toward the barn Cort had just exited.

“It's got heat now, and I installed a pulley system so you can store stuff up high and use the pulleys to get it down.”

Lexi followed, tempted to ask Cort how much it had set him back. Likely several thousand dollars.

Inside the barn, everything was lined up on shelves—plenty of room around each piece of equipment—and tools hung neatly on the walls. Such a difference from the Russell barn, where things had multiplied like rabbits and were tucked into nooks and crammed into corners.

“You keep a neat place.”

“I find it's easier to locate things when there's some order to it.”

“Wait until you've been ranching as long as we have,” Jewel said.

“Maybe he's more of a toss-it-out rather than keep-it-forever kind of guy.” Her father and mother were definitely the latter.

Jewel shrugged, as if it was of no matter to her. “We'll see.”

“Misty's in the corral behind the livestock barn.” Cort waved his hand toward the east. “You can check out her accommodations as we head through it to the corral.”

“You put your horses in the barn?” Her parents had a mere lean-to to shield the horses from stormy weather and the wind. Seemed that and a good blanket was all a horse needed, even through Wyoming winters. The horses were used to being on the range.

“If it dips into the teens. Least, that’s what my foreman says. I’m still in learning mode.”

Misty was definitely getting spoiled.

“Where’d your foreman come from?”

“He was running an operation in Texas.”

“Well, that would explain it.” Snow and low temps weren’t seen much in most parts of Texas.

“He’s good.”

“I’ve no doubt. Just, Texas is different than Wyoming.”

“So he reminds me every day now that it’s getting colder.”

He motioned the ladies to follow him out the door. They passed a smaller barn that could be the calving barn, considering the smoke stack butting out of its side. A necessity for when a heifer got in trouble giving birth.

The larger barn was made of wood, but was freshly painted in traditional brick red. Cort pulled on the door handle to slide it open. Stepping through, Lexi was amazed at how clean it was. It looked like it’d hardly been used. Metal Dutch gates secured paddock entrances, and grates topped solid half-walls, providing views into the stall while keeping horses enclosed. The center aisle floor was concrete, but the stall floors were dirt—better on a horse’s legs. The barn looked more solid than their old lean-to shed.

“I’m guessing you did a major upgrade to this.”

He nodded. “Gutted the whole thing and built the stalls from scratch.”

“You haven’t used the stalls much yet this season.” The straw on the floor looked untouched.

Cort shook his head. “Hasn’t been that cold yet, but I guess that’s coming.”

“Soon.” As they walked past the empty stalls, Lexi moved ahead. She would be seeing Misty in just a few moments.

“Only you ride her?” She directed her question to Cort. The idea of some yahoo cowboy getting on Misty did not sit well. Cort, she remembered, had become a first-rate rider that summer, and a patient one.

“Only me. She’s definitely my horse of choice. As I said, you did a great job training her.”

It was some comfort to know that Misty was getting the exercise she needed by a man who appreciated her, but still...

She glanced into the tack room as they passed without breaking stride. Neatly hung bridles decorated one wall, while individually stacked saddles claimed the other wall. Towels and sundry bottles were in cubbies on the far wall.

Stepping out into the corral, she shielded her eyes from the sunlight and spotted the chestnut mare in the far corner, grazing next to a dun-colored horse. Seeing the horse she’d worked hard to save up for and bought two years into college seemed to make everything in that moment lighter and brighter.

She’d chosen Misty, four years old at the time, because of Misty’s alert temperament and the fact that her coat was the same color as Lexi’s hair. She shared a bond with that horse that made coming home sweet and leaving difficult.

She whistled and watched as Misty’s head popped up, and, within a heartbeat, the horse swung around and galloped toward her. Misty hadn’t forgotten her even if it had been over six months. Lexi dug into her pocket and produced a carrot, which lay in her open palm.

Misty reached her, pulled up, and nuzzled Lexi’s hand, munching on the carrot.

“How are you, Misty?” With her free hand, she caressed her horse’s neck, enjoying the soft coat and warm body. “So

wonderful to see you, girl.”

Finished with the carrot, Misty’s lips brushed her hand, looking for more.

“Are you happy here?” she whispered as the horse twitched its ears.

Lexi stepped back and took in the striking white streak down the horse’s nose. She had to admit that Misty looked healthy and well cared for. “You’re my sweet girl,” she cooed as Misty nuzzled Lexi’s stomach.

“Doesn’t she look great?” her mother asked.

“Good enough to ride. My saddle’s in the back of our pickup.” Yet she didn’t want to tear herself away to go get it.

“I’ll get it,” Cort offered. “You get reacquainted with your horse.”

Why did he have to be so nice? Ten years ago, he’d seemed to be the boy of her dreams—until he hadn’t been.

“He’s been such a help to your father. And you can see he’s taken good care of Misty.” Her mom didn’t speak until Cort was out of earshot.

“Seems so.”

“I know it was a shock about Misty, but, really, it’s for the best.”

“Why do I feel though there’s something you aren’t telling me?” Lexi petted and cuddled her horse, but she stared directly at her mom.

Mom didn’t respond, but turned back to look in the direction of the barn exit. “He’s coming. I’ll drive back to the house, and you go on your ride. You have your phone on you?”

Lexi nodded. “But there’s no guarantee of cell service.”

“So don’t go too far. At least on your first day here.”

Don't go too far had been something her mother always said. On thousands of acres of land, it was hard to know what too far was.

“Mind if I ride along with you for a bit?” Cort asked as he came closer, balancing the saddle on his shoulder. “I’m heading out to the herd anyway, and if you’re going through the trails, we’ll be going in the same direction for a piece.”

“That’s a lovely idea, Cort.” Her mother was all smiles. “Give you two time to catch up.”

There was no way to politely refuse his request, though Lexi had been looking forward to getting out alone and clearing her head. Not to mention, they had nothing to catch up on. Ten years ago, he’d left abruptly without saying goodbye and she’d never heard from him again.

But he wouldn’t be with her long before she could veer off onto her own land, and she might just use that time to find out about some things. Like why her father needed so much help from a neighbor. Why her mother had been so anxious for Lexi to see the McClane ranch. And the real reason her father was no longer riding horses on a regular basis.

“I’ll meet you back at the ranch, Lexi.” Her mother’s smile was awfully broad as she stepped toward the barn. “Enjoy your ride together.”

Chapter 4

Cort didn't have to check on the herd—he had men doing that. Instead, he should have been tuning up the tractor, following lessons from Ian. But it was a good excuse to spend a little more time with Lexi. Alone.

She hadn't mentioned that summer, but she hadn't reacted as if she'd been pleased to see him either.

As they set off down the trail toward the boundary to the Russell ranch, the brisk breeze slapping at his face, Cort felt the burden that secrets often created. He shouldn't be the one to tell her about buying her family's ranch. That was Jewel and Ian's news to deliver, but it didn't stop him feeling unsettled because, when she did find out, she wouldn't be happy.

Marco's smooth gait allowed Cort to relax as the two horses walked side-by-side. The muffled *clip-clop* of the hooves as they hit ground provided the soundtrack. He glanced in Lexi's direction. She kept her seat in the saddle and her back straight, as if she were a queen surveying her kingdom and he was just along for the ride.

"I'm sorry you found out about Misty like you did." And he was. He couldn't fathom why Jewel and Ian hadn't broken the news before she got home. "Your father was just helping me out. He's been like a professor of ranching to me."

"It appears there are a few things I haven't found out about," she said, keeping her gaze focused on the path.

"Like what?" He didn't think she had any inkling about the sale. Ian and Jewel had said they would discuss it with Lexi

when she came for Thanksgiving. They'd already discussed it with Rusty, perhaps in hopes the Air Force staff sergeant would give ranching a go. But they'd told Cort they'd sworn Rusty to secrecy, and since Rusty hadn't grabbed at the chance to run the ranch, Cort couldn't see him telling his sisters ahead of time.

"Like why my father isn't riding much anymore." Lexi shook her head, her hair tumbling around her shoulders.

He remembered loosening her hair tie many a time that summer just so he could run his fingers through those silky russet strands. He'd loved the feel of her hair, of her.

She swung her hazel-eyed gaze toward him. "I knew he'd bought an ATV, but I never thought it would totally replace riding for him."

This should be an easy one, but from the question in her eyes, Cort wondered if she knew Ian's whole story. "Lots of ranchers use ATVs these days as well as horses. Each has its place."

"But he sent Misty to you."

"Maybe he's not feeling up to riding. He's getting on in years." And having complications, which Lexi *should* know about.

"He's not so old. Just sixty last March."

"I'm just saying it's not so unusual." Wasn't his place to tell her Ian's news either. "Some ranchers, albeit smaller spreads, only use ATVs. I was around the last time your father moved cattle, and he was on the ATV doing just fine. I rode Misty, and Matt, the cowboy who works for him in season, was on that bay horse of your Dad's."

"Sheba? She's always been Dad's horse."

"Well, I'm sure he has his reasons. Ask him." And maybe Ian would tell her everything. Cort knew all about family

secrets. Knew the harm that could be done if people waited too long to reveal them.

She slouched in the saddle. “I think our ranch could use a little sprucing up, like you did for your uncle’s ranch.” She’d changed the subject, but to one just as dangerous. “I’m worried that Dad’s too proud to ask for my help. Maybe you could broach the subject. See if he’s got any plans in that direction.”

Now that might be a problem.

“Sure. I could mention it.” And when she found out he was buying her family’s ranch, she’d be madder than a hen that’d lost her chicks.

“I can’t believe you’ve become a rancher.” She shook her head, and her hair brushed against her shoulders. “You hated the ranch when you visited that summer.”

“At first. I’d grown up in a New Jersey suburb near New York City. A place where there was a downtown and stuff to do. I was sent out here, and the only thing to do was work. Hard, physical work. Most of it involved horses, and I didn’t even know how to ride. So, I was relegated to cleaning out stalls and corrals, loading hay. It was pretty sad.”

For the first time since he’d begun, a smile teased her lips. “When I saw you try to mount without putting your foot in the stirrup, that was my first clue.”

“I was as green as a pine tree. But then this nice girl took pity on me and taught me how to ride. The right way.” And he was thankful she had. The last six months had brought a calmness he’d never known before despite the physical labor involved.

She actually laughed, seeming pleased at the memory. “You took some pretty bad dumps on the ground trying to learn. By the end of the summer, you were a real cowboy, though.”

“I had a good teacher. And I was hooked on being a cowboy.”

Her eyebrows arched under her cowgirl hat, and she straightened in the saddle. “But not on the girl, as I recall.”

He had been, until life interrupted. “We were young. What did we know?” A breeze rustled the grasses, as if nature was signaling its agreement with his statement.

“And one of us...” She pointed to herself. “Didn’t even know about kissing.”

“That was my contribution.” He tried to hold back his smile, but to no avail. “You were a fast learner, as I recall.”

Sitting pretty on her horse, he’d like to see how his student was ten years later. But the way she sat with her back straight as an arrow, her focus on the path, he didn’t think he’d ever get a chance to find out.

She cocked her head. “Guess I had a good teacher.”

Now that was unexpected, as was the quiver that zipped through him. He put his finger to his hat in a salute.

“I had it all planned, you know.” He’d always had a plan back then. “You could come visit me over the winter. I’d come back to the ranch during spring break. We’d keep in touch. You’d email me. We’d text. We’d see how things went.”

“Really? Because as I recall, one day you were here, and the next you weren’t. And you didn’t call, text, or email. And we certainly didn’t visit. Ever.” Her voice dropped low on the last two words.

He looked down at the saddle horn as their horses lumbered along.

She was right, even though there’d been many times during that fateful year he’d thought about contacting her. But the weeks had dragged by as he’d tried to survive a new school,

the absence of his mother, and no friends... until it seemed too late.

He raised his gaze to meet hers, surprised to find her staring at him with an intensity that could have singed leather, causing a tug in the region of his heart.

“That morning, I woke up and my uncle told me I was wanted home immediately. He took me straight to the airport so I could catch the flight my parents had booked for me.”

“And you couldn’t tell me? Call me? Text?”

That would have been the reasonable thing to do, but reason had flown out of his mind by then. “I could have. Except they sent for me because they had filed for divorce and wanted me home so they could tell me who I’d be living with, where I was moving to, and who I wouldn’t be seeing for a while.” The wind seemed to sear right through his jacket, like the pain of that day. “They weren’t going to discuss this with me. They were simply telling me what their plans were for me. And I hadn’t seen any of it coming.”

Although he should have. There’d been signs. But not the flashing-light kind of signs. Just nuances. Father working late. Mother never home. No more dinners as a family. “They never fought. At least, not in my presence. I really didn’t have a clue.”

She pulled up Misty, and Marco stopped of his own accord, as if sensing something was wrong.

“Sometimes, it’s difficult to pick up on things.” She bit her lip, causing it to turn red. “Especially when it’s something we don’t want to see.”

That was the most understanding thing she’d said to him since she’d come back.

“As an only kid, my parents were my security, my anchor. For the longest time, I thought it must be my fault. And that was the reason they sent me away.”

Just saying those words sent a familiar stab through his stomach. He couldn't tell her all of it. No reason to. It wasn't like he'd see Lexi again after this. He'd apologize and leave it at that.

The lines around her mouth softened. "I'm sure that wasn't the case."

She had no idea. Neither had he. "Regardless, I'd been mad at the world. Mad at my parents. Mad at my aunt and uncle because I'd figured they'd had to know something was up but they'd never let on. I hadn't wanted to see anyone, especially not a girl who'd seemed to have it all—great parents, stable household, and *horses*, for God's sake. And who lived thousands of miles away."

There was one more thing for him to say. "I'm sorry. I hadn't been able to handle what was happening to me, and if I hurt you, I sincerely regret it."

Her eyes searched his face like she was looking for something. "I can only imagine what you were dealing with then." She shook her head. "Thanks for telling me, because—I won't lie—sixteen-year-old-me was hurt. But twenty-six-year-old-me is just fine."

That was a relief, although something in her eyes didn't have him quite believing it. And when she heard about the sale of the ranch, she might not be so forgiving.

"Friends?" He'd try for at least that. For as long as it lasted—which likely wouldn't be too long.

She smiled, and, like a warm caress, it seemed to momentarily block out the cold wind. "Friends."

Lexi rode Misty along the path that led to the winter pastures. The wind had dried out the ground enough so the trail was navigable. She'd left Cort at the property line of their ranches. He'd seemed to want to continue with her, but Lexi

had said a quick goodbye. She wanted to be alone, riding her horse, enjoying the solitude. Enjoying the scenery she'd once taken for granted and that, now, after being away from it, seemed all the more majestic and beautiful.

For the first time since her dinner with Philip, her mind wasn't shifting through fifteen different scenarios at once, trying to figure out what she should have done differently.

Instead, she was thinking about what Cort had shared. Even being ten years removed, she was glad to know she hadn't been the cause of his leaving. How many times had she replayed their last day together, trying to figure out what she might have done to cause him to split? Turned out, it was circumstances he'd had no control over. Circumstances that had hurt him.

She couldn't imagine her parents splitting up. Didn't want to imagine it. They were her rock. Her safety net. Cort had lost all of it with one phone call.

All these years she'd nursed a hurt from his seeming rejection and indifference. At sixteen, she'd felt everything was—or should have been—about her. What teenager didn't think the world should revolve around them? She'd never looked for another explanation. And though, in her heart, she'd chastised him for not calling her, she hadn't made any attempt to reach out to him either, so sure he'd simply used her and thrown her away. So sure that he'd always intended to leave that morning and never tell her or contact her. So sure she'd merely been a diversion.

She'd fallen for him, her first real boyfriend. And the hurt had run deep when he'd abandoned her. Deeper than learning of Philip's betrayal.

But hearing his story had opened up a tiny chamber in her heart where teenage Cort had once wormed his way in, and where memories of their time together resided. She would try the friendship thing as he'd asked—but nothing more than that

for so many reasons, even if seeing the cowboy in action had brought all those memories to the fore. Whatever she was feeling was simply physical attraction. A sentimental, first-love kind of deal. That was all.

Friends.

That would be as far as it went.

Chapter 5

“Cort McClane’s coming to Thanksgiving dinner?” Lexi stared in dismay at the seven china plates her mother had handed her to set around the table.

Her mother stood at the sink, with a clean apron covering her black pants and embroidered white western shirt as she picked up a carrot to peel. “He has nowhere to go. His mother’s in Paris, and his father has remarried and has a new family in New Jersey. Where’s your charity, Lexi? We have plenty of food.”

Lexi had just finished peeling a whole bag of potatoes and the turkey must weigh at least twenty pounds. There was so much stuffing it couldn’t fit into the bird, large as it was.

And Cort had nowhere to go.

Part of her heart softened at the thought, but the other half stayed rock hard. Spending any more time with that man was likely a huge mistake if the dream she’d had last night—with *her* teaching *him* how to kiss—was any indication. All she wanted was to relax in the comfort of her family. But if Cort was coming, she’d have to be on guard the whole time.

“I just thought... well, I just wanted to spend some family time. You know, talk about how things are going. What you might need.”

Her mother had spent most of last evening in the kitchen, baking pies and making the stuffing, and though Lexi had helped, there hadn’t seemed to be much interest in conversation beyond what ingredients were needed and how many minutes to put on the timer. Her father had quickly

dozed off in his recliner, and, before she'd known it, her parents were heading to bed.

"Plenty of time for that after dinner because he's not staying for dessert." Her mother set the peeler to the carrot using short, firm strokes. "He said he gave all his men the day off and he's got to look after things. Speaking of which, did you take care of Misty?"

Of course she had. "She's all settled until after dinner."

"Maybe you can take Parker for a horse ride before dinner. Keep him busy."

She couldn't wait to see her toddler nephew. From the pictures and the video chats, the baby had turned into a little kid already, and she'd missed most of it. "I'd love that if Junie is okay with it."

Her mother rolled her eyes. "That boy would walk around all day with pads on if it was up to Junie."

"I'd probably be the same way, Mom." If she ever found a man to settle down with. "Babies seem so fragile."

"Well, they are in some sense. But you have to find ways to allow children to explore their world safely. Preventing them from exploring is the easy way out. Harder to figure out how to let them do it without them getting hurt."

Sounded right and consistent with the way her parents had raised her and her siblings. Lexi had been riding ponies on her own by the time she was four—though with a helmet on, which she'd hated at the time. "I'll convince Junie to let me give Parker a ride if you'll be okay getting dinner on the table without my help."

"You've done a lot already, and Junie will be able to help." Her mother set down the peeler and wiped her hands on her apron. "And Cort is always ready to pitch in if need be."

She'd noticed the other night that he'd been mighty comfortable in their kitchen. "Does he come over a lot?"

Which would mean she'd be running into him whenever she came home.

Her mom nodded as she rinsed another carrot and began peeling. "He's been a godsend for your father. Not only is he helpful, but he's company. And he asks your father for a lot of advice, which Dad is all too happy to supply, so it's a nice friendship. Dad's going to mi..." Her mother stopped in midsentence with a frown, as if she'd been about to say something she shouldn't.

"Dad's going to what?" Lexi picked out seven sets of silverware from the drawer.

Her mother went back to peeling. "Going to enjoy having him for a neighbor."

Lexi imagined that was true. "Why is Dad only using ATVs now instead of horses?" Lexi seized on the opportunity to ask some of the questions that had been niggling at her since her arrival.

"Dad uses Sheba now and again, but... his arthritis is acting up. The cold weather isn't helping."

Lexi had spent most of last night trying to figure out how to help her parents. Now was the time to try out some options on her mother. "Maybe you should keep Matt around all year. I could pay part of his salary if money is an issue."

Her mother whirled around from the sink, holding the half-peeled carrot and peeler. "Maybe we should talk about the ranch after dinner. After Cort leaves. With Junie here."

"That'd be great." And a relief.

With that, the hurried patter of little footsteps could be heard on the porch steps. Junie and family had arrived.

A turn of the handle and the door burst open.

Running toward her mom was a cherubic little boy in his jacket and boots, eyes wide, blond hair flying. Lexi had to

wait her turn for his wet kisses. In the meantime, she contented herself with hugs from her sister and brother-in-law.

Once Lexi got her wet kisses, and jackets were collected, she settled on the couch in front of the fire with Parker on her lap. He'd grown so much since she'd seen him last spring.

Junie, dressed in fancy jeans and a blue turtleneck sweater, settled next to her while Todd went to the barn to see what her father was up to.

“Mom told me about Philip. I’m sorry,” Junie said.

Junie was the youngest of them but had married first. Go figure. She had their mother’s blonde hair and blue eyes and, if Lexi was honest, was the prettier of the two of them. At five-feet-six-inches, Junie wasn’t small, but she was small boned, giving her a very feminine appearance. At five-feet-eight-inches and definitely larger boned, Lexi took up more space than her sister.

“It’s probably for the best. In retrospect, I don’t think he was the one for me.” She covered Parker’s eyes and then uncovered them. “Peek-a-boo.”

Hearing his little laugh, her heart expanded.

“You know what Mom always says. ‘One door closes, another one—’”

“Opens. Yeah, I know.” The last thing she wanted to discuss was Philip. “Peek-a-boo.” More laughter. “He’s getting so big, Junie.”

Junie smoothed down his hair as if she was petting him. “He is. And getting into two-year-old trouble. I’ve had to put him in daycare because he doesn’t keep still enough to bring him with me to the store anymore.” Junie didn’t look too pleased with the arrangement.

“That’s tough. But I take it the flower shop is doing well?”

Junie nodded. “I’m hoping I can swing taking on another person to work up front. Then I could be in the back arranging flowers and have more flexibility to keep Parker with me more often. Just keeping him occupied now is the problem. He wants to explore everything and go everywhere.”

“Speaking of which…”

Lexi was interrupted by the opening of the back door. She swiveled her head in time to see Cort fill the doorway.

The collar of his leather jacket was standing up and his hair was messed from the wind, but he looked as attractive as ever. Unfortunately.

“Howdy, Jewel,” he said.

Parker wiggled off Lexi’s lap and made a beeline for Cort.

She watched Parker toddle forward until Cort swung him up in the air as Parker giggled.

Something inside her tensed at the realization that Cort had probably seen Parker more than she had these last few months. And, clearly, had established a bond with the little guy.

“Hey, Junie. Lexi. Happy Thanksgiving,” Cort said, with Parker looking comfortable nestled in his arms.

Junie bounced off the couch and sidled over to Cort. “Happy Thanksgiving to you. How’ve things been?” Junie opened up her arms to take Parker, but Parker shook his head.

Apparently, Cort was a favorite with her nephew. She’d always thought she’d be the favorite aunt. The cool aunt. And though Parker hadn’t been averse to her peek-a-boo game, clearly, she’d just been one of many people to laugh with, not someone special.

Lexi rose from the couch. Now was the time to step in and be that cool aunt. “I thought I’d take Parker out for a ride on Misty before it gets dark. Keep him busy.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Lexi,” her mom chimed in.

Junie looked from Parker to Lexi as frown lines formed between her brows. “I don’t know. He’s only been on a horse with Cort.”

She wouldn’t even be the first one to give Parker a ride. Cort had beaten her to it.

“And that was on Misty,” Cort said. “You know, Junie, it was your sister who taught me how to ride.”

Junie frowned. “I’d forgotten. But—”

“I’ll go with them,” Cort offered. “But you know Lexi wouldn’t let anything happen to him. And it *is* Misty.”

Lexi watched the tension in Junie’s expression fade as Cort beamed a thousand-watt smile in her sister’s direction.

“I guess so. If you go with them.”

The warmth of humiliation climbed her neck. Humiliation that Cort had to convince her own sister that Lexi was capable of safely giving Parker a ride.

She was about to tell them to forget it, when Cort spoke. “Want to go on a horsey ride, Parker?”

“Yes.” Parker’s response was quick and decisive.

Well, now she had to go through with it. With Cort in attendance as the protector.

“Great. I’ll help Mom then.” Junie kissed her son’s cheek. “Take good care of him, Lexi.”

“And tell Todd and Dad if you see them that it will be about a half hour until dinner,” her mom said.

Lexi took in the scene of beaming smiles from her mom to Junie to Parker to Cort. Cort had definitely burrowed his way into the hearts of her entire family.

* * *

Cort settled Parker on the saddle in front of Lexi and couldn't help but notice the nicely formed legs covered by her jeans and a pair of turquoise-and-black cowgirl boots. His pulse kicked up, confirming what he'd been afraid of—he was attracted to Lexi Russell.

Yesterday, she'd barely agreed to be friends.

After their talk, he'd realized then how much his abrupt departure all those years ago had hurt her. But he'd hardly been able to cope with the fallout from his parents' divorce and had given little thought to anyone else. He'd looked her up out of curiosity on social media a time or two in the intervening years, but had never had the courage to do anything about it.

He'd been surprised as all get-out when he'd learned she'd moved to California and was making her living in the banking world, of all things. He'd had her pegged as a country gal through and through. The kind that would have stayed to help her father on the ranch.

He stepped back. Lexi looked natural holding Parker on the horse. He had zero concerns about Lexi keeping Parker safe and had been surprised at Junie's momentary reluctance. After all, it wasn't so long ago that Junie had stopped by his place on the way to her parents' ranch to pick up a tool he'd borrowed and her father had needed back. He'd just mounted Misty, when Junie had pulled in with Parker in the backseat. The little boy had gone crazy over the horse, and Junie had handed him up without hesitation.

“Just put your hands on the horn,” Lexi now coaxed. Parker immediately obliged. “I'm just going to ride around the corral a few times.”

Cort nodded, and the pair started off on Misty at a leisurely walk.

He'd been thinking a lot about Lexi since she'd arrived. And he shouldn't. Hadn't Jewel mentioned a boyfriend?

She also had a job in San Francisco that was so far from where he was now, not only in miles, but in values, that even thinking what he was thinking was stupid. She was only going to be here for a few days before going back to that life, while he'd be staying put. She hadn't been told yet that he'd be buying the ranch and her reaction was unlikely to be a happy one.

Still, as he watched the pair riding around the corral, he couldn't stop his mind from imagining what it would be like if she was his wife, if Parker was his kid, and if this was his ranch. That was the life he wanted. He just had to find a partner who wanted it, too, and that woman was not Lexi Russell.

Standing in the corral under the single light that cast a glowing circle around them, Lexi held Parker as Cort, gentleman that he was, removed Misty's saddle and began to groom the mare now that the ride was over. Parker was holding a rubber curry comb, and Lexi was letting him run it over the back of the horse, coaching him to be gentle.

She felt she'd made some strides in bonding with Parker on that ride. He wasn't reaching out for Cort, but seemed content for her to hold him. She kissed the top of his head, enjoying the fresh smell of little kid hair.

Junie had it all. A great husband, a great job, a great baby.

And what did Lexi have? A great job? It didn't feel so great since that deal had fallen through. But it would again; she had to believe that. This week had just been a run of bad

luck. Next week would be better. *She* would be better, if just for having this time with her family.

“Thanks for taking care of Misty,” she said, wanting to acknowledge Cort’s efforts. It wasn’t his fault that her family liked him so much or that she was still attracted to him.

“No problem.”

All Lexi could see was the top of his head bobbing away as he bent down on the other side of Misty. “I think Parker enjoyed his ride.” She kissed the little boy’s cheek.

Cort popped his head up and glanced at her over the back of the horse. “I’m sure he did. Spending time with his aunt—and on the back of a horse. What little boy wouldn’t enjoy that?”

Finished with the curry comb, Parker squirmed in her arms, as if to make a lie of that statement. “Down,” he demanded.

“Let me just take Misty to the other end of the corral, little buddy.” Cort grabbed Misty’s lead and walked the horse away from the lean-to, the thumping of hooves on the ground filling the air. Of course, Misty proceeded to leave a pile of manure in her wake. One more thing to clean up after supper.

Parker squirmed with more determination, so Lexi set him down, holding his gloved hand in her firm grip... until his hand slipped from his glove and he toddled forward at full two-year-old speed, laughing as he did so.

Lexi sprinted after him, but not before he ran smack into the pile of dung and fell forward. Lexi screamed, but Parker, stunned for a minute, turned his face toward her and started to laugh.

Grateful that he seemed unfazed by it all, Lexi started to bend down to pick him up, but Cort was there in a flash. He crouched on his haunches and lifted Parker upright as he checked him over.

“There now, Partner. You’ve just been initiated into the cowboy brotherhood,” he drawled. Cort turned his gaze back to Lexi. “He’s okay. All that padding from his snow suit and the pile of manure saved him.”

What a relief, because the acrid smell of manure was bad enough. “Careful or you’ll get it on your own jacket.” And she’d be buying Cort a new one.

He shrugged as he rose and grasped Parker’s dirty hand. “It’s a hazard of the job.”

She stared into his deep-blue eyes. Something about his nonchalant attitude coupled with that sexy half-smile of his sent pulses through her body. Pulses she hadn’t felt in a while.

What would Philip have done in a situation like this? He wouldn’t have gone near the child. Would have left it to Lexi to handle. Wouldn’t have worried if the child was hurt.

She shook those thoughts from her head. “We’d better get him inside. He’s going to need a bath before dinner.”

Cort nodded, and the two walked, hand-in-hand, like a father and his son. She could hear Cort talking to Parker about the bath he was going to get and he laughed about the smell. He’d be a good father.

And that was a thought she’d never had about Philip.

Junie had been duly upset, chastising Lexi for not watching Parker more closely, wrinkling her nose at the smell—which was pungent—and leaving the bathing chore to Lexi. With Junie overseeing, of course, complete with arms crossed and frown lines in place.

It took a half hour of splashing with lots of soap and lavender scented shampoo, but Parker emerged from his bath

smelling like a garden. By the time they'd finished, Cort had washed up, his hands being the only point of contact, and Parker's snow suit and mittens were already in the washer.

As they sat around the large wooden table, six adults and one high-chaired child, Lexi savored the family feel in the room. She looked over at Cort as he shoveled in the turkey and stuffing, complimented her mom on the meal, and talked to her father about winter preparations. He might not be family, but he fit right in. And her parents certainly treated him as such.

Cort would make some woman very happy... now that he'd settled down. Around these parts where everyone had grown up together and the good ones got snatched up early, he would be considered a catch. Good-looking, kind, well off—if the improvements to the ranch were an indication—single women would be knocking on his door, if they weren't already.

What would have happened if Philip had come? Somehow, Lexi was sure things would have been more restrained, more formal, stiff. Instead, laughter over the incident, now that all had been put to rights, flowed easily, and it was clear this event would be added to the family lore, stories that reached back through the generations and were told on nights like this.

Too bad Cort wasn't living in San Francisco now. Too bad he had given it all up to become a rancher. She never would have dreamed all those years ago that Cort would end up in Wyoming. She'd once contemplated running into him, maybe in an airport, at a tech convention, or his company becoming a client.

“Lexi, are you listening?” Her mother sighed with exasperation.

“Sorry. I guess I drifted off for a moment.” Daydreaming about what-ifs.

“Solving some big financial problem, I bet.” Junie practically sneered. Apparently, she still wasn’t over Parker’s little incident quite as much as her laughter may have suggested.

“Thinking about the ranch actually.” And the cowboy neighbor.

“Cort asked if you wanted him to feed Misty for you.”

She looked Cort’s way and her pulse kicked up as if she’d been running. A large grin was on his handsome face and his blue eyes held amusement.

“We kind of got interrupted, and I thought I could go out and finish up for you.”

“I’ll go. She’s my responsibility.” And her horse.

Odd that she didn’t want him to leave just yet when, earlier, she hadn’t wanted him to come.

“I’m going out anyway, so I can take care of Misty for you. That way, you could have more time with your family. And dessert.” He winked and her heart skipped a beat and her cheeks warmed while all eyes turned toward her.

“That’s very nice of you. Thank you.” And she meant it. He really did seem like a good guy despite how it had ended years ago. Too bad he’d decided to become a rancher. And how ironic that if it hadn’t been for what had happened to the ranch that fall after he’d left, she would have probably been thrilled with his chosen occupation. Instead, she’d become a city gal, and he’d become a country boy.

He nodded his head, then pushed out the chair and rose. As apparently was his custom, he took his plate to the kitchen sink. No one spoke, not even Parker, as Cort picked his jacket off the hook by the door, shrugged into it, then tipped his finger to his forehead in a salute.

“Thanks again for a wonderful Thanksgiving. And you, Partner”—he pointed a finger at Parker—”stay away from

manure.”

Parker beamed at being singled out.

With a twist of the doorknob, Cort was gone.

It felt like a great wind had just died down.

“Now there is a truly nice guy.” Junie rose from her seat and began clearing the table.

Lexi, choosing not to remark even if she agreed, stacked several dirty plates to take to the sink. She wasn’t about to let her little sister do more to help her mother than she did.

Her father and Todd, carrying Parker, headed for the TV set and proceeded to switch on a football game while Parker contented himself with the stackable blocks her mom had put out.

“Don’t you think he’s hot?” Junie asked, seemingly affronted at Lexi’s lack of response.

Hot? The guy was pure fire. “He’s good-looking,” she said, hoping to sound nonchalant.

Junie set the used silverware on the counter with a huff. “You don’t fool me.” Junie came close to Lexi’s ear and whispered, “Because I caught you many a time kissing him that summer. And you were a mournful old soul when he suddenly disappeared. And now he’s back.” She returned to normal volume. “He’ll need a partner to run the enterprise he’s fixing to create.”

“A life partner or a business partner? In either case, not interested. I’ve got a life in California. A job that needs me, remember?” Because she sure did.

She placed six dessert plates, napkins, and utensils around the table

Junie shook her head as she plugged the coffeemaker in. “I bet he’d be worth giving it all up for. And he’s got money.” Junie set about filling the dishwasher in that methodical,

every-dish-has-its-place way that was pure Junie. Rather than risk putting a plate in the dishwasher the “wrong” way, Lexi rinsed the dishes and handed them to Junie to load.

“Don’t try to play matchmaker. Especially with someone who hasn’t shown a grain of interest and lives thousands of miles from me.”

“In Wyoming. Your home state.”

“But not where my job is. I’ve worked too hard to get where I am. I love what I do.” At least, she did when things turned out well and she collected the bonus. “I make good money. I have no desire to give it all up, much less for a man. Besides, he had his chance. He wasn’t interested then, and he isn’t interested now.”

Junie shook her head. “You were children then. Just now, he offered to take the time to feed your horse so you could spend more time with your family. That sounds like interest to me.”

“As you said, he’s a nice guy. He’d do that for anyone.” But the offer had touched her.

Their mother rose from the table. “You could do a lot worse than Cort McClane.”

That was the problem with an open-concept floor plan—nowhere to hide.

“I’m sure that’s true.” She could have married Philip, who, in contrast, was looking a lot less appealing. “But the circumstances aren’t right.” And, thankfully, she wouldn’t be at the ranch long enough to be tempted to start up something that had no future. Not to mention, Cort had given no indication he’d be tempted.

Her mother shoved leftovers into the packed refrigerator and turned to the girls. “Leave the rest for now. Your father and I would like to have a family meeting with you both.

Todd's going to keep Parker occupied. After, we'll have dessert."

Lexi stilled. "This sounds serious."

"It's nothing bad. In fact, Dad and I feel it's something good. But it's something we need to discuss with the family. Not that Todd's not family."

"I can listen from here," Todd called out. "It's important for your parents to have your full attention, though." Todd hit the remote, and the TV volume lowered.

Lexi glanced at Junie. Her sister averted her gaze. Her mother had said it was something good. She hoped that would prove true.

Chapter 6

“Selling? To Cort McClane? Now?” Lexi’s pulse banged her temple like someone was nailing a coffin closed. She felt just as panicked as she sat next to Junie and across from her parents at the dining table. “This is our home. This is the Russell family ranch. Has been for generations.”

How could her parents ever think this was good? She glanced at Junie, who looked too calm for this to be a surprise. “Did you know? Did everyone know but me?”

Junie brushed a hand through her hair. “I knew he’d offered. I didn’t know Mom and Dad’s decision.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me? Warn me?” So much for sisterly solidarity.

Before Junie could answer, their mom jumped in. “We asked her not to. You were coming for Thanksgiving, and that would be time enough to discuss it. We did discuss it with Rusty over video chat since he wasn’t going to be here.”

“And he’s okay with this?” She’d known this day would come, but not so soon.

“He is.” Her father’s voice, usually so low and even, boomed the answer as if the volume alone would shut down further discussion.

But Lexi had too many questions. “Why? Things were dire ten years ago, and you didn’t sell. Why now?” It didn’t make sense. “You know if it’s money you need to fix things up, I’m willing to help.” She should have made this offer the last time she was home. Which was all the way back in the spring, for Easter. If only she’d realized.

Mom glanced at Dad before answering. “We appreciate it, Lexi, but it isn’t just about money.”

Lexi’s gaze shifted from her mother to her father. They both looked grim. And reticent. “I need to understand what’s going on.” Ten years ago, they’d shied away from telling their children how much the drought that year threatened to ruin their lives until the bank was ready to put up a For Sale sign, so whatever had brought on this change in circumstance had to be worse.

“Tell her.” Junie’s tone was firm.

Her mother sighed. Her father looked away.

“I’ll tell her then.” Junie swiveled in her seat to look Lexi in the eye. “They didn’t want to worry you.”

Fear climbed up Lexi’s spine like a spider running up a wall. “About what?”

“It’s over and done with,” her mother chimed in, as if whatever it was couldn’t be changed.

“You see,” Junie continued, “this summer Dad... well, he had to have an operation. They had to repair a heart valve.”

“A heart valve? Did Dad have a heart attack?” Her mouth went as dry as the sand in a desert. She wished the coffee was ready; she could use some. Strong and black.

“He had some symptoms. Shortness of breath. Fatigue. Some mild discomfort. So they did some tests and found a leaky heart valve and—”

“And no one told me?”

“What would you have done, Lexi?” Her mother’s tone was sharp with annoyance. “You are over a thousand miles away. You barely called home in the last six months. You didn’t exactly send a signal that you wanted to be bothered. And Dad came through it just fine.”

Her mother's words draped over Lexi like a cloak of lead, making it hard to breathe. She had been consumed by work in the last few months. She'd been busy. Her parents had seemed fine. What would she have done if she'd known? "When did all this happen?"

"In August." Her mother rubbed her hands together, as if she needed to warm them.

In August, Lexi had been knee-deep in another deal. One that had provided a nice bonus; she couldn't have come home. Her cheeks warmed. "And now?"

"Of course he has to watch his diet."

"I've got a lot more pills to take," Dad huffed.

"The point is, Lexi—" Her mom shook a finger in her direction—"your father is not getting any younger. With his arthritis and now his heart, he can't exert himself like he did before. This past year has been a struggle, both financially and physically. If it wasn't for Cort helping out, we wouldn't have been able to bring our herd to market this October. Since none of you are interested in taking over this ranch, and I don't want to lose your father before his time, selling it to Cort—someone who's responsible and has been such a blessing since he moved here—seems like the best recourse for us."

Lexi struggled to pull in air. "And you, Dad. Is this what you want?"

"What I want is to pass the ranch on to the next generation. But since that's not going to happen, I'd like to enjoy the years to come. Cort's offer will let us do that. Maybe go to Arizona or New Mexico where the climate's better. I don't want to be in pain six months of the year from the cold. I just can't work the way I used to, the way I need to in order to properly run the ranch."

Lexi crossed her arms. "Selling the ranch should be a last resort. There have to be other options. What if Matt could work here full time?" She'd known that selling the ranch

would happen at some point, but that point was supposed to be in the future, when she had a family of her own. When her children would have spent some time on the ranch, getting to know where their mother had grown up.

She'd have to close a lot more deals, but she'd do whatever it took to raise that money. It always came down to money. Which was the reason she'd become an investment banker to begin with.

Jewel shook her head. "Matt goes to Arizona and works a ranch there during the winter months. He doesn't want to stay in Wyoming during this time of year any more than we do. And it isn't easy to get ranch hands these days. The larger ranchers pay better and have better accommodations. We just can't compete. We're lucky we've had Matt this long."

"But you'd be away from Junie and Parker if you move." They couldn't be leaving the ranch where generations of Russells had grown old. Not yet.

"That's an issue, for sure." Her mother brushed a hand on the table like she was spreading out crumbs. "But I've worked out the numbers, and we could afford to rent a small apartment in Gillette and rent or own a small home in Arizona or New Mexico with the deal Cort is offering."

"How much is Cort offering? Can he afford it after what he's put into his own ranch? Has a lawyer looked over the contract?" The questions gushed out of Lexi like water over the Lower Falls.

"Our lawyer is reviewing the contract now. We'll get his assessment in a few days." Her father's voice had dropped back down to a more reasonable decibel. "The offer is decent in our eyes. And we're going to hold the mortgage."

"Hold the mortgage? That's all kinds of wrong. And risky. And—" She shook her head as her mind raced through all the reasons this shouldn't be happening. "I was wrong when I said he was a nice guy. A 'nice guy' wouldn't ask you to hold the

mortgage.” She pointed at herself. “Take it from an investment banker.” Cort had been looking out for himself. Looking for a sweet deal, knowing what had happened to her father. Taking advantage. Tempting her parents. “Cort has some gall offering to buy our ranch.”

“*We* asked him if he wanted to buy it.” Her father looked down at his hands, roughened by the elements, still tan even in winter, his fingers gnarled and slightly curled. “*We* asked *him*, Lexi.”

So Cort knew they were desperate. “And if Cort goes belly-up? Takes on too much? You’re putting your faith and future in the hands of an inexperienced stranger.”

Her mother held up her hand as she’d done many a time when they were younger and quarreling. “Hardly a stranger, Lexi. He’s here most every day and helping your father in so many ways. He’s become like another son to us. And if he can’t make it work, the ranch will revert to us, so we’d lose nothing, really.”

Ian nodded.

The back of Lexi’s neck was damp as she tried to analyze the news. Her father’s health, the need to sell, the fact that neither she nor her siblings wanted to take it over, and Cort stepping in to take advantage. *Before* her parents even listed it. A developer would pay a premium for land that had water rights. “Did you have it surveyed? Did a real estate agent give you an estimate of what it was worth before you decided on a price?”

“I know the price of acreage. A few years back, before my heart condition, I looked into the possibility of buying the McClane place.”

In real estate, things could change in a year, much less a few years. Demand for housing had shot up recently, particularly in Wyoming. “Will you show me the contracts? Let me look them over? I *do* work in the banking world.” And

she would have thought they would have wanted their daughter's expertise.

"Sure, Lex," her father answered, but not with enthusiasm.

"And if I can find you a better deal?" She'd helped a client purchase a large Texas ranch for development a while back, her background in ranching being more than anyone else's at the firm.

"We want to keep the ranch as a working ranch. Not some housing development. So, unless the lawyer finds something wrong, we'll go with Cort." Her father's tone brooked no argument. "He's been good to us."

Wormed his way in was more like it. For his own gain.

"I'd still like to look over the contract. Promise me you won't sign anything until I explore a few avenues. He's not pressuring you, is he?" She wouldn't put it past him.

"No. He's been very patient," her mother said. "And remember, we approached him with the idea."

That pounding at her temples intensified as one unsettling thought edged it way in among many. "What about Misty?"

"Cort's likely interested unless you have other plans."

The pressure inside her head increased as if it was between the jaws of a vise and someone was turning the screw. Misty was *her* horse. The horse she'd spent endless hours working for. The horse she'd trained, trying out her skills. The horse she'd ridden in college competitions. The horse that reminded her of her cowgirl roots. The horse she loved.

She looked up at her mother, hoping the tears in her eyes did not drop.

"He gets everything, then?"

Jewel sighed. "Let's have dessert and coffee and table this conversation."

Lexi definitely wasn't hungry, even if it was apple pie. They should have told her about their struggles. But they thought she was too busy. She'd evidently sent that message loud and clear. This was her fault.

"I'm sleepy," Parker wailed, breaking the tension like lightning streaking a gray sky.

"What kid says that?" Lexi asked, having always tried to stay up as long as she could as a kid.

"Parker likes his sleep." Junie rose from the table. "If we're done here, I'll help Todd get him into his pajamas. We'll have to take our dessert to go, Mom."

Lexi was defeated before she'd begun the battle. Junie seemed aligned with Cort. Rusty didn't care. Her parents had given up. And her horse was already being placed. "Just get me a copy of that contract. I'll look over it tonight." And, tomorrow, she'd likely have a few chosen words for one Cort McClane.

* * *

Cort straightened from cleaning out the birthing barn when he heard the thunder of horse hooves barreling into the ranch from the dirt path that stretched to the border of his property. Bandit's ears perked up as well.

"It's okay, boy," he told the dog in a soothing voice.

One glance at the slender rider on the chestnut mare with hair flying under a knit cap and Cort knew who the caller was. He sucked in a breath. Undoubtedly Jewel and Ian had discussed his offer with Junie and Lexi after dinner as promised. By the look of things, Lexi was anxious to talk to him. Or scream at him.

It was her childhood home. He needed to be sensitive to that. Give her time to adjust.

When he'd returned home that summer to learn that his house was on the market, his parents were splitting up, his mom was leaving for Paris in two weeks, and he'd be living with his dad in a condo in another town to finish out his senior year, it had felt as if someone had laid a sheet of ice under the foundation of his life and he'd been slipping off the edge.

The difference with Lexi's situation was that Lexi was a grown woman. Had her own life in San Francisco. Had a job she loved. She certainly didn't need a ranch that was barely in the black.

But he did. Needed the water access and acreage if he was going to increase his herd. Needed the outbuildings and the house if he was going to open it up to hunters in the fall. Needed the BLM land that the Russells now leased. It would be a win-win for Lexi's parents and him—if only their kids would see it that way.

If only *Lexi* would see it that way.

No doubt she was looking at the dollars and cents of it all rather than how this would benefit both parties. That was the kind of corporate thinking bankers and venture capitalist employed—to the detriment of the entrepreneurial process, by his way of thinking.

A woman's voice called his name with urgency, and Bandit moved toward the barn door. Yup, that was Lexi. And by the sound of things, none too happy.

He sighed. Time to face the music.

He propped the broom against the metal wall and headed out into the bright sunshine of a late-fall day, Bandit leading the way. The air was crisp and cool, the breeze steady but gentle, and the woman flushed and agitated as she finished tying the horse's reins to the corral fence, then walked toward

him, swinging her arms like they were the source of propulsion.

“Hey, Lexi. Nice to see you this morning.” Though not as nice as being with her last night, seeing how she interacted with little Parker. With him. Then, she’d been smiles and laughs. Now, she looked fussed.

But, in both situations, she was an attractive woman. And the quickening of his pulse as he watched her was a sure sign he was in trouble... more for failing to control his attraction than trying to buy her family’s ranch, because even being friends was likely out of the question now.

Bandit danced around her, and she bent to ruffle his fur, which was all it took to mollify Bandit. Lexi wouldn’t be so easy.

“Well, I can’t say the same.” She planted her hands on her hips, her stance wide. Neither were a good sign.

Bandit sat down beside her.

“Why’s that?” He knew, but best to play it out.

“You!” She poked a finger in his direction. “Want to buy my parents land. You want them to hold the mortgage. You have offered a sum below market price—”

“Now wait a minute.” He held up a hand. “Your parents asked me if I was interested. I merely told them the terms under which I am interested. Just as they *asked* me to do. They’re free to take it or leave it.”

She sighed. “You know they could do better.”

“And I told them as much. Especially if they sold to a developer or a larger outfit.” He moved closer until he was right in front of her, the space between them less than an arm’s length. So close he could see the flecks of fire in her eyes, the tightness of her jaw, the red knuckles of her clenched fists. “I’m not the bad guy here. I did what your parents wanted.”

She contorted her pretty face into a grimace. “That may be, but taking advantage—”

“Hold on there.” He raised his hand again. “I am *not* taking advantage. Do I want their ranch? Yes. Is now the right time for me to go after it? For me, right now, no. But since they asked and I want it, I made an offer. I even told them it wasn’t the best they could get. Maybe if you had paid attention to your parents and their circumstances, this could have been avoided.”

Like a tire that rolled over a nail, the air seemed to leak out of her and her rigid stance relaxed. She bit her lip.

“You may be right,” she said after a moment. “But I’m here now. And I’m going over that contract in detail.”

“I resent the implication that I’m trying to cheat them or something.”

“You’re taking advantage of their situation, whether you mean to or not. I’m going to get the ranch assessed and look for other offers. And I’m sending my concerns about the contract to the lawyer.” She cocked her head. “And I’ll tell you right now, I’m not a fan of them holding the mortgage.”

That surely would complicate his plans. “Did your father tell you he’s not interested in selling to developers? That he wants it to remain a working ranch?”

“He hasn’t seen how much they’ll offer yet.” She turned on her heel and headed back toward her horse. “So don’t count those acres as yours just yet. Or Misty as one of your horses.”

Well, that hadn’t gone well.

He watched as she untied the reins and then swung up in the saddle in one graceful, fluid motion. Watched as she clicked the reins and Misty moved out in an easy lope across the hard-packed earth.

He’d have thought their heated argument would have dampened his attraction, but if the feeling zipping through him

was any indication, it had sparked something deeper inside of him.

No, that hadn't gone well at all.

* * *

Lexi spent the rest of the weekend going through the contract line-by-line. It was well written, but she still emailed her parents' lawyer a list of suggested clarifications and her concerns about the mortgage terms. Now that she'd seen the whole contract, she was determined to get them a better offer—one that didn't include them holding the mortgage.

Late on Sunday evening, she left a message for her boss, saying she wouldn't be in until Wednesday. She needed more time to save her parents from a terrible mistake. And to figure out what to do with Misty.

She had nothing on her calendar that couldn't be rescheduled, and she had a ton of unused vacation time.

So, Monday morning, as she came back from her shower and saw her boss' name scroll across the screen of her ringing cell phone, she assumed he was calling about her decision to stay in Wyoming a few days longer. She plopped down onto the bed and mentally prepared herself for his admonishment—despite the fact that she had never skipped out on a day of work in her almost five years of working at the firm.

Fifteen minutes later, her stomach was twisted in knots—she now knew the real reason for the call.

She sank against the old twin bed's wooden headboard, trying to grasp what had just happened. *Five* years. Five years of sacrifice and putting the job first. Time she could not get back. Time she'd stolen from her family, her friends. Time that had cost the relationship with Philip and, now, maybe her

family ranch since she hadn't been around to see what was happening.

And for what? A few years of a nice salary—a large part of which had had to be spent on rent and necessities in a notoriously expensive city?

A tear tracked down her cheek. Her deal, her boyfriend, her family's ranch. How had she let so many things slip away from her?

And now the biggest piece of her identity—her work—had crumbled into a sawdust pile of disappointment. *Downsized*, her boss had said.

Fired was the reality.

Her job had represented the security that money provided, and security was the reason she'd gone after such a lucrative career. She never wanted to be at the mercy of bankers like her father had been. She never wanted the fear of an empty bank account like her father had faced that fateful year, the year that had changed the trajectory of her life.

And now?

She had some money saved—but not enough. Her boss had mentioned a few weeks of severance, which would certainly help, but not enough. She'd have to find a job soon in an uncertain economy, start over, climb the ladder once again. A ladder she'd been able to see the top of just a few short weeks ago.

Ironic that the one thing she'd tried to avoid all these years by choosing the career she had had become a reality. How had this happened?

“Lexi.” Her mother's voice rang from somewhere in the kitchen. “Are you coming out for breakfast?”

A glance at the clock confirmed it was already nine o'clock, which, on a ranch, was practically lunch time.

“In a minute.”

Her mind raced through her options. Everyone in banking knew that no one hired in December. Budgets for the new year came through in January, and there were too many people out of the office for new deals to arise. No, December was all about closing deals, not initiating new ones. All about layoffs, not hiring.

She twisted the towel in her hand.

Losing her job meant that she wouldn't have the money to help her parents. All the more reason that her parents needed to get top dollar for their ranch, now that selling would be the only alternative. If she could find a bona fide buyer who would pay substantially more, it shouldn't matter if the land was going to be developed instead of ranched.

If she'd learned nothing else in her five years at the investment bank, it was that money talked. In getting more money for her parents—something she was uniquely qualified to do—it would ease her guilt for neglecting them. As bad as things were, maybe it was fate that she would now have the time and knowhow to help her parents find that better buyer. Nothing and no one needed her back in San Francisco—she didn't even own a plant that needed watering.

She picked up the phone and dialed.

Simone was shocked but sympathetic, promising to text her a list of potential investment outfits, including venture capitalists, which would be “eager” to have someone of Lexi's caliber. She also promised to box up the things in Lexi's office and keep them until Lexi returned. Things like the trendy artwork she'd purchased to spruce things up, framed pictures of her parents and Parker, books she'd bought to look up tax codes and relevant laws.

Talking to Simone, she worked out a plan. She'd contact headhunters, but stay in Wyoming another week or so to find a buyer, and be ready to interview for new jobs when the job

market opened up in January. To find a job quickly, she'd have to broaden it to a nationwide search.

Despite the anxiety, she wouldn't allow herself to wallow in self-pity. Rather than moping around her tiny San Francisco apartment, waiting for a headhunter to call, she could be doing stuff to help her parents. If the ranch had to be sold, she'd ensure that her parents got the best deal out there. If her father needed help around the place, she was his girl. She'd keep busy and, with a little luck, accomplish something positive.

Dressed in jeans and a sweater, she emerged from her room in need of a strong cup of coffee.

"You look like your best friend just died. Is everything all right, dear?" her mother asked after Lexi stepped into the kitchen and poured the fragrant brown liquid into a large cup. The scent of roasted coffee beans was one of her favorites.

"My boss called." Lexi slumped into a chair at the wooden table. No sense avoiding the discussion, though it was the last thing she felt like talking about.

"He wants you back? That's fine. Dad and I are perfectly capable of figuring out what's best for us." Her mother withdrew a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon from the warmer and set it in front of Lexi.

"No, he doesn't want me back." Painful to admit but the truth.

Her mother frowned as she slid into a chair beside Lexi's. "What do you mean?"

Lexi picked up her fork, ready to dive in. Some people, when they got bad news, lost their appetite. For Lexi, it was just the opposite. "I was laid off this morning. That's what the call was about." Starved, she shoveled the first forkful of eggs into her mouth.

Her mom leaned forward. "What do you mean you were laid off? After all the sacrifices you've made? After all the

money you've brought into that bank? After all the deals you've closed?"

If Lexi wasn't so deflated, she might have laughed at the indignation in her mother's voice. Unfortunately, that was how businesses—especially banks—worked. She'd witnessed this happening to others, employees who'd had one or two deals that went wrong. And now, *she* was among the body count.

"My last deal didn't close and... well, it was my fault. I wasn't paying attention to the details." At least, not the *right* details. She'd been all about the business and had been blindsided when the relationship went south. "It's more about what you've done lately, not your track record."

And it took this happening for her to realize it.

"One deal that didn't close? What about all the ones that did? The one you were working on over the summer so you couldn't come for your regular visit when the rodeo was in town? You said you closed that one and got a big bonus."

Lexi shrugged, not wanting to acknowledge how much it added to her anger. "Easy come, easy go, I guess."

Her mother wrapped her arms around Lexi like she had when Lexi had arrived. "I'm so sorry, honey. First Philip, then the ranch, and now this." She squeezed Lexi tight.

Tears popped into Lexi's eyes. If she allowed for feeling sorry for herself, she'd be a bawling idiot. And while part of her felt angry and worried about her future, part of her felt oddly relieved. Like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. For once, she wouldn't have to choose between work and family, at least not for the short term.

"I'm all right. You always say when one door closes, another opens if we look for it."

Her mom leaned back and stared at Lexi. "I do say that."

"Maybe this happened for a reason. Maybe I need to stay here a little longer. See if I can help fix things."

Her mom sighed. “Lexi, we’ve been trying to tell you. We *want* to sell the ranch. It’s getting too much for us. The beef industry isn’t what it used to be. It’s harder and harder to make it. You need scale, and your father can’t take on anything more. Cort can, and he’ll do right by the ranch. So, even if you find some places where we could save money or make more money, I don’t think your father is up for it.”

That fact pulled on her heart like a crane toppling a building. She brushed the wetness on her cheek. “I ignored you and Dad and what was going on here. If I’d had been listening when I came home in the spring—even last winter when Dad mentioned how he wasn’t getting any younger—I might have been able to do something to help and it wouldn’t have come to this. So let me at least see if I can get you a better deal.”

Her mom hugged Lexi again. “You have your own life to live and it isn’t on this ranch. That just isn’t you anymore, Lexi. We’ve come to peace with the fact that it isn’t for any one of our children. But you have to let us make the decision that is best for us.”

Lexi patted her mother’s hands. “But it should be an informed decision. I’m determined to find you at least one better offer for you to consider. It’s the least I can do.” The very least.

Mom pulled back, a frown on her face. Not an angry frown—a concerned one. “Don’t you need to start looking for a job?”

“I’ll contact some headhunters and get the ball rolling, but no one hires between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day. So, at least I can keep busy helping you and Dad. I was told I’ll get a few weeks of severance.” Lexi hoped Wallis was telling her the truth about that. “I’ve got a little money saved.” In light of her news it seemed very little. “I’ll be okay, Mom.”

Jewel kissed Lexi's forehead. "You will be, honey. I know it."

Later that morning, she found her father in the equipment barn, changing the spark plugs on a tractor that looked like it had seen better days. As she looked around the old barn—*really* looked around—she realized that most everything had seen better days. There were cracks in the cement floor, paint-chipped windows, rusted saws hanging off old nails. A contrast to the neat and shiny interior of Cort's barn.

"Hey, Dad," she said by way of greeting.

Her father cocked an eyebrow but kept on with his task. "How are you doing?"

Not usually a leading question, but today was definitely different. "I've been better. I just received news that I've been laid off. I no longer work at the bank."

With that, he straightened and whirled around. "Laid off? Are they going out of business?"

"No. They just don't need me in their business anymore." The more she said it, the more she'd convince herself that this wasn't just a bad dream.

He rested his hands on his hips, one hand still clutching a wrench. "After all you've done for them?"

"Apparently, I haven't done enough lately." Admitting failure wasn't easy for anyone, and Lexi was no exception.

Her dad wrapped his arms around her, wrench and all. The familiar scent of hay swept off him, one she'd always associate with her father. She could have stayed in that hug longer, but he leaned back to get a clear shot of her face. "You'll be okay, Lexi. You've got brains and credentials."

"Thanks, Dad. One good thing—at least, I hope you'll see it as a good thing—is I can stay here a few more days. I can contact headhunters from here as well as San Fran." She'd go crazy cooped up in her small apartment with nothing to do.

“Stay as long as you like. You know that.”

“Sorry I didn’t realize sooner what you were struggling with. I feel I’ve let you and Mom down.” But she *would* make up for it.

He shook his head and turned back to his task. “You didn’t let us down. We’d have loved to see you more, but we managed through. And selling the ranch was always in the cards since none of you wanted to take over. I admit the decision came a little sooner than I would have wanted but... Well, the good Lord has sent me a sign, and I best heed it.”

“How are you feeling now?”

“Pretty good, ’cept my arthritis doesn’t like this cold. Never has. Calving season was rougher than usual this past year. I’m hoping to have things settled by the time the next wave of calves is due.”

So that was the time frame. She’d have to work quickly if she was to do her best for them before March. “I hate to see the ranch go.”

He stepped back and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Me, too, Lex. Me, too.”

“Can I do anything to help? I mean on the ranch, now that I’m here for a few more days.”

He held out the wrench. “You hold the nut while I try to loosen the screw.”

And that was how she spent her first day of unemployment—helping her father. She should have been preparing her résumé. But, for the first time in a long time, she lost herself in physical work, cleaning stalls, distributing hay, and preparing for the sure-to-be-cold winter ahead.

By dinnertime, she was spent and her limbs had stiffened up. She was young, but how did her father do it at his age and with his arthritis? And why was this the first time she’d wondered about that?

As she sat at the kitchen table, too tired to help her mother get dinner on the table, she made a vow. She would make it up to them by getting her parents what they were due.

Chapter 7

A few days later, Steve Bretton of Bretton Brothers Land Developers, LLC sat across from Lexi at a Gillette restaurant, studying copies of the geological reports she'd brought with her. A stout man with a full head of dark hair and a protruding midsection under his brown suit jacket, he looked like a person who enjoyed the finer things in life.

He'd been recommended by a colleague, one of the network of people she'd contacted over the Thanksgiving weekend. She'd researched Bretton Brothers before contacting Steve. Twenty years in the business, known for quality housing but considered a little aggressive—not a negative in her line of work.

Steve looked up from the paper and pushed his dark-rimmed glasses back on his nose. “So why is your family selling after holding it for several generations?”

“Age and no one to take over.”

He cocked his head, his gaze trained on her. “You're not interested in ranching?”

A few beats of her heart pounded before she finally answered, “No.”

Even though generations of Russells had fought and sacrificed to call the ranch home, she wouldn't be the one to save it. The feeling of defeat dogging her since she'd lost the Blanchard deal, a feeling that had grown stronger and more overwhelming as Philip, the job, and now the ranch piled up like baled hay on harvest day, wouldn't change the inevitable.

“Too much work?”

She'd never run from hard work. "Not the right kind of work."

"Gotcha. No one wants to do physical labor anymore. They all want college degrees so they can sit in offices. Like everyone else in the business, we have problems rounding up enough construction workers."

Was she more of an office, paper, and pencil kind of person? Ten years ago, she would have said no. But the uncertainty, lack of control, and lack of security of ranching had sent her in another direction to prove herself. But now that she'd lost her job, it appeared her chosen profession lacked those things as well.

He returned his gaze to the report. "No oil or gas? Guess you wouldn't be selling if there were."

"Correct."

"But I see you have an aquifer and stream running through the land. That makes it very attractive these days."

Wyoming was a priority water state, which meant that, if your family were homesteaders and made use of the water, they had first priority to that water even if the stream flowed over someone else's land. "My ancestors settled this land." Which made it all the more difficult to discuss selling it. But she had to be practical, not romantic. And practical meant getting the best price for the property.

"We'd have to assure that the state would grant us use of the water for homes, but..." His slow smile was a cocky one. "We've been successful with that."

By greasing palms? She'd seen that happen before. And she'd ignored it when it'd helped her clients. But, this time, something prickled in her stomach like she'd eaten a rotten tomato.

For the first time since she'd sat down, she was having doubts. About Bretton, but also about what she was doing.

Forcing a choice upon her parents when her father had been adamant that he'd already made his choice.

Still, an informed choice was the best choice, wasn't it? And if Bretton was interested, her father could always say no.

"So, are you interested?"

"I might be. I'd have to see about the water. These days, that's almost as precious as oil."

She reached for the documents. "Understood. If you're not sure..."

He rested his warm, clammy hand on hers, halting her motion. "I said that I'd have to see about the water. That, to me, is the only sticking point and would be the same problem any other developer you seek out would have. Give me two weeks and I'll get back to you." He removed his hand.

Feeling like she needed to run her fingers under the faucet with some good soap, she pulled the documents into her lap. "I'd like to know sooner if you can. An offer is on the table, and my parents are considering it."

"If you have another developer, why see me?"

"It's not another developer."

He chuckled. "You know our offer will likely best a rancher's offer, particularly one of them gentleman ranchers from California who have been buying up property... unless he's a billionaire or some musical artist looking for a trophy ranch."

She merely smiled. No sense tipping her hand until she saw his offer.

"I'll see what I can do to speed things up. I've a few friends in the state's engineering office."

She'd bet he did.

"I'd like to take a look at the place. See the terrain, get a feel for what type of geological constraints we'd be up

against.”

That could be a problem. She didn't want her father to find out until there was a good offer, one that would justify her soliciting the bid. “Contact me, and I'll see if I can arrange it.”

With nine thousand acres, it shouldn't be difficult to show him around without her father knowing about it.

He reached his hand across the table. Lexi shook it, holding back a grimace from how hard he gripped hers. Why some men had to show off during a handshake was beyond her, but she'd encountered it enough times before.

“I'll be in touch. And thanks for coming to us with this.”

She hoped she wouldn't regret it.

* * *

Things never went as planned. Nothing made this truer than seeing her father's ATV come over the hill as she stood next to Steve Bennett, checking out the boundary marker between the McClane and Russell ranches.

“Your dad?” Bennett shouted over the din of the motor.

Lexi nodded as her stomach bunched. “He doesn't know about you yet.”

“No time like the present.” Bennett beamed a smile as the ATV pulled to an abrupt stop about three yards from where they stood beside Bennett's pickup with the developer's logo prominently displayed.

Her father shut off the engine and hobbled off the vehicle. He strode over to them with an uneven gait, hands on hips, a frown on his face. “Lexi?”

“Dad, this is Steve Bennett of Bennett Brothers.”

“I can see that from his truck.” He nodded toward the man.

Steve reached out his hand, and Lexi held her breath, unsure if her father would shake it or not.

But western courtesy won out, and her father grasped the man's hand for a split second before removing his. "Why are you here, Mr. Bennett?"

"I've had the pleasure of talking with your daughter..."

If looks could kill, the look her father gave her would have brought her down like a sniper's bullet.

"And she said you were interested in selling the ranch."

Her father's hands, now dangling at his side, fisted. "No offense, Mr. Bennett, but not to you."

"She's told me of your reluctance to see your ranch developed, but you haven't seen my offer, Mr. Russell. It would set you up for a good life—and not only for you, but for your children and grandchildren. We're talking millions—*many* millions—if things check out."

"I'm not interested. And Lexi knows that. Sorry she wasted your time." He spared her another look that could have singed hide.

Despite the cold, beads of perspiration formed on the back of her neck.

"Based on what I know, I'm prepared to do quite a lot to get you interested. If you'll hear me out—"

"I'm asking you to go, Mr. Bennett. No hard feelings, but my mind is not going to change."

"There aren't many tracks of land as nice and flat as yours with the natural water supply you enjoy. It's a mistake for you to shut out potential buyers who could make you and yours rich, Mr. Russell. Think of Lexi and your other children. I'm sure that's the reason Lexi contacted me. She's thinking of her future. Don't you want to do what is best for your children?"

“My children haven’t done what is best for me. Now leave, Mr. Bennett. You’re trespassing, and in Wyoming, that’s an offense. Don’t make me any madder than I already am.”

My children haven’t done what is best for me.

It couldn’t have stung more if he’d slapped her. Because that was what she was trying to do, her best for her parents. If it was about an inheritance, she would have fought *not* to sell the ranch.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bennett, but it seems my father’s mind is made up before he even knows the facts. We’d better leave.”

Bennett looked at her like she had two heads and then looked back at her father, whose face held something Lexi could only describe as disgust.

“Okay. But I’m still going to send in an offer. Maybe if you see it, you’ll change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

Bennett turned toward the truck, and Lexi was left to face her father. Only... she couldn’t. She saw disappointment along with anger. It would be better if he had space to calm down and her mother was there to intervene.

“I’ll ride back with Mr. Bennett, Dad. I was just exploring possibilities.”

“Sounds like you were doing a whole lot more than just exploring.”

She took a deep breath and turned toward the truck, bunching her hands in her pocket. She’d never understand why he didn’t want to get the most he could for the place. It just didn’t make sense.

As she climbed into Bennett’s truck, she heard the roar of the ATV moving out. A strange kind of tenseness overtook her. One that sent pins and needles through her. She’d disappointed her father. They all had, apparently.

My children haven't done what is best for me.

She would never forget what he'd said. Or the feeling of guilt that rushed through with the force of a gully washer.

“Well, you'll have to work on your father. He's stubborn, but I've run up against his kind before. Some romantic notion they have about legacy and land. But once the reality of what he's up against and what he's turning down combine, they usually change their tune. Or risk losing more than just money.”

“What do you mean by losing more than just money?”

He started the engine. “Just, you can't stop progress. If he doesn't sell to a developer, I bet the rancher who takes it over will and then that rancher will be the one rolling in money. Mark my words.”

Bennett could be right. But how to convince her dad of that?

* * *

“Your father is madder than I've ever seen him, Lexi. And he said it's because of you.” Her mother sat at the kitchen table in front of the laptop that held everything anyone wanted to know about the business of the Russell ranch.

Lexi sank into a kitchen chair across from her. She'd screwed up. She should have waited until she had an offer in hand. But Bennett wouldn't have put in an offer without first seeing the land.

Bad timing seemed to be the order of the month.

“I just wanted you guys to see another offer.”

Her mom frowned. “From a developer? What were you thinking?”

“That they would pay top dollar for this land. That you and Dad would be set. That you’d be free from financial worries.”

“And we will be if Cort buys the land. Which will be in keeping with your father’s wishes. Money is not everything, but, apparently, you haven’t learned that yet.”

“Apparently, we live in different worlds. Help me understand what’s more valuable than money these days.”

“Maybe in your world that’s true. But, in our life, it’s assuring that the legacy of your father’s ancestors, the men and women who lived, worked, and died for this land, is kept intact. It’s been preying on his mind since he’s had to face the fact that his own children don’t value the land and the life he’s worked so hard for as long as he has. You need to accept his decision. He accepted your choices, even though it broke his heart. Maybe even literally.”

“Are you saying that we’re the cause of Dad’s health issues?”

“Not directly, of course, but he’s been so stressed, worrying about what was going to happen to the ranch, to the business he’s built, now that he has these health concerns, that I’m sure it has affected his well-being.”

Her mother had plunged in the knife of guilt and twisted it, causing an invisible wound in the vicinity of her heart.

“And then Cort appeared on the scene. From the time your father realized that Cort was serious about ranching, he saw an alternative that would keep the ranch intact. You have no idea how happy your father was when Cort said he’d put in an offer. Dad knew it wasn’t the best time for Cort to be investing in anything but his own ranch. My goodness, he’s only taken over for six months. But, like an angel, he has stepped up to help your dad preserve his ranch as a ranch.”

Her mother words sharpened the blade.

“I didn’t realize—”

“You didn’t take the time to realize, Lexi.” Her mom’s tone was pointed. “Since the moment you found out about selling the ranch, you’ve been on a mission to prove that you know best—and that money is the only measure that matters. I don’t know where we went wrong for you to think that.”

Lexi rested her chin on her hands. “I don’t think it’s the *only* measure.”

Her mother crossed her arms over her chest. “Could have fooled us. What other things do you use as a yardstick, then?” Her mother cocked her head, as if she didn’t believe Lexi had an answer.

“There’s nothing wrong with valuing money. Do you remember the time you and Dad almost lost the ranch? When the bank threatened foreclosure?”

“Course I do. You don’t forget that. But we made it through.” Her mom typed something into the computer as if she wished to ignore that memory.

“Well, I haven’t forgotten that, either. I never ever want you guys or me or anyone I love to be in that position.” She straightened up and focused her gaze on her mother. “It feels like we are back in that situation again, having a fire sale. I only wanted to give you and Dad an alternative. The choice will always be yours and Dad’s.”

Her mother swiveled in her chair to fully face Lexi. “So it’s done? You won’t complain if we sign the contract with Cort like your father wants? Like I want?”

Her father had made it crystal clear that, if she wanted to help, the only help he’d accept was with ranching.

“I’m waving the white flag. And please let Dad know. I don’t want him mad at me.”

The one thing she couldn’t lose was the anchor her parents had always provided.

Her mom patted Lexi's arm as a smile graced her face. "He'll settle down. I'll let him know you've seen our point and are supportive of our decision. Right?"

Lexi nodded. She'd tried. She'd failed again. She needed to accept it and move on. Focus on her career.

"I guess there's nothing more for me to do, so I'll book a flight and come back for Christmas." Though the idea of going back to San Francisco soured her stomach. Besides sitting around waiting for the phone to ring, she'd have to face all her friends who were part of the industry. Listening to their expressions of sympathy would only make her feel more of a loser.

"Now that you've accepted things, why not stay here until after Christmas? You said that you have nothing pulling you back. That way you won't have to spring for another plane ticket."

It was as if someone had opened a cage door and she was now liberated from the oppression of her out-of-work status. "I could help Dad around the place—if he forgives me, that is." She could answer her cell from Wyoming as easily as San Francisco.

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled for the help. It's getting to be a lot for him."

"Maybe I could organize the barn so Dad at least knows what he has and what he's selling." And, of course, ride Misty. The thought that these times would be some of the last she'd be able to ride her horse was sending her down misery lane. "If you think I could borrow the SUV now and again, I could turn in my rental car. The daily rental charge is adding up."

Her mom wrapped her arms around Lexi. "Absolutely."

At least her mother still wanted her to stay.

* * *

Lexi looked at Cort as she climbed into the passenger seat of his truck. Sunglasses and a cowboy hat covered most of his face, but they didn't hide his broad smile. Which she found uncomfortably attractive.

She'd dropped off her leased automobile at the car rental office in Gillette, hoping her mom would be able to pick her up.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you, Cort. Mom never said she had a Woman's Club meeting. And in Casper no less. I didn't know until I was ready to go." Only then, when it was too late, had her mother told her that she'd arranged for Cort to pick Lexi up at the rental agency.

Cort shrugged as he shifted the truck into gear. "No matter. It ain't snowing, sky is clear, so, no problem."

She doubted it would be a problem for him even if the weather wasn't perfect. That's how Cort was, she guessed. He might have been born in New Jersey, but he had adapted easily to the western way of being neighborly. You just had to ask... and, well, her mom had asked.

"So, what are you going to do for a car now?"

His head swiveled to check out oncoming traffic and she got a good look at his strong profile. The man certainly had a nice-looking face with a firm chin, high cheekbones, and, as she remembered all too well, very kissable lips.

"Mom said it shouldn't be a problem borrowing one of theirs, despite no car being available today. I'm not staying much beyond Christmas." And hopefully by then, she'd have a job interview lined up.

"You know, if you need wheels, I have both an SUV and the truck here, so if none of my hands are using them, feel free to ride over on Misty and avail yourself."

“That’s very generous of you. Thank you.” She mentally sighed. Why did he have to be so nice about everything?

She wanted to stay angry with him for offering to buy the ranch at such a low price, but he was doing what her parents asked him to do, and probably at some considerable financial sacrifice since the timing couldn’t be ideal for him.

“You’re welcome.” He turned onto the highway. “I’m sorry about you losing your job, Lexi.”

Awkward.

“So am I.” Although... was she? These past few days, she’d done a lot of thinking. “Not being as valued as I thought I was is humbling, but I’d rather find that out now when it’s easier to start over, than in ten years when I’d invested even more time in the bank. One thing this has taught me is to be cautious about the kind of company I sign on with.” And, hopefully, she’d have the luxury of being picky this time.

“Like tech, banking seems a dog-eat-dog kind of environment.”

“Is that why you left tech? I mean, it must have been hard to walk away.” She needed to get the conversation off her and her sorry situation.

He chuckled, and a cute little dimple showed on his right cheek. That dimple was hard to resist.

“Not really. After being in that cutthroat culture, I was ready to try something different, and the buyout gave me the financial means to do that. And to do it before the lifeblood got sucked out of me.”

Was her lifeblood being sucked out of her? On some days, it had felt that way. But, even so, she wasn’t in a buyout situation to provide the soft landing he’d had. A few weeks of severance pay did not a cushion make. Besides, if she were to walk away, what would she do? Open a consulting business?

And where would she get the clients? Become a venture capitalist? Where would she get the seed money?

“I always had you pegged as a ranch gal,” he continued. “Someone who would stay on the ranch, breed and train horses, keep her roots planted in Wyoming. I swear that’s what you told me you were going to do that summer.”

That had been her teenage dream. “Plans change.”

“What changed yours?”

“A few things.” That summer had been life-altering in many ways. “You, for one.”

He glanced in her direction, and though she couldn’t see his eyes behind those sunglasses, the arched eyebrows were clearly visible.

“Me? How?”

“Up until you came on the scene, I never knew anyone who actually wanted to work in corporate America. No one in my town talked about making big money and gearing your college education to do just that. You showed me there were more options than raising cattle and battling the elements.”

“But what caused you to choose banking?”

He asked and she’d answer. “The fact that my father almost lost the ranch that year. To the bank.” She’d never known such anxiety, such fear, as that fall when the bottom had dropped out of the cattle market. “Cattle prices were below ninety dollars. And our herd had a breakout of scours. The bank wasn’t willing to extend the loan. My parents were looking at foreclosure and talking about having to sell to avoid it.” Remembering had her temple thumping.

“I had no idea things were so bad.”

“Neither did I until that October, when I realized how few steers were being loaded and then I heard my parents talking about leaving the ranch.”

“How did the ranch survive?”

“Somehow Dad convinced Curtis to give us one more year and got the loan extended. I think he put up the whole herd as additional collateral. As ranchers, Dad took out a loan every spring to get us through until he could sell the cattle in October. He’d always been able to pay it back until that year. Luckily, the following year, prices picked up with the economy, the birth rate was good, and he managed to pay back enough of the loan to satisfy the bank so they continued lending. But I know it took a few years until my parents felt secure again.” She looked at him. “I swore then that I would never be put in that situation. I want to be the one making those banking decisions, not the person on the receiving end. I had to start with community college because of the cost, but I enrolled in finance courses, made my way to the state university, went on to get a master’s degree, and never looked back.”

“And snagged one of the best-paying positions there is for a newly minted MBA.”

She nodded. That had been her plan, and she’d executed it. “I help clients get the best value for their company or investment and am well compensated for it. Or, at least, I was.”

“So you traded wide-open spaces for security.”

Framing it that way sounded like she’d given in to fear, but, in her mind, she’d simply found a path that was more financially rewarding. She shrugged. “I didn’t want to deal with that type of uncertainty ever again.”

“Except you lost your job even after putting in long hours and closing big deals.”

“Way to rub it in, McClane.” She picked at the fabric of her pants, removing a little piece of lint, trying to distract herself from the truth. “Guess there isn’t any certainty in any profession.”

She'd thought that if you followed the rules and worked hard, you would be rewarded. And, until now, that seemed to be the way it worked. Except... a good many people had exited the firm before she'd been laid off; she just hadn't noticed at the time.

He shifted the truck into another gear as they sped along the sparsely populated highway. "At least with ranching, you have the land to fall back on. Land you can always sell."

What did she have to show after five years of hard work? She didn't own her apartment, she didn't own a car, and her savings and investment accounts would be depleted soon enough if she didn't find another job. Not something she wanted to think about.

"What made you leave it all for the ranching life? I mean, you initially hated the ranch when you arrived all those years ago."

When she'd first met Cort, he'd complained about the isolation, about the hard work, about the lack of anything fun to do.

"You."

Now it was her turn for arched eyebrows. "Me?"

"I'd never met someone who, at your age, was so happy with life. Every time I saw you, you were brimming with excitement on what you were going to do that day. You loved moving cattle. You loved riding. You loved the ranch. You weren't worried if you were popular or about how much money you'd make. You seemed content with life."

That had been her. "Ironic, isn't it? Now you're ranching, and I'm working in corporate America." She glanced at Cort from the corner of her eye.

He shook his head. "When I got back home that summer and my carefully crafted future seemed in shambles, I started to question if there wasn't more to life than climbing the

ladder and working crazy hours to make more and more money like my parents were doing.”

His jaw bunched as if he was gritting his teeth. “I was on that track, and I couldn’t jump off without a plan, so I stayed the course. But when this buyout came along and my uncle passed, I figured the universe was telling me now was the time to take the leap. So I did. Seems we’re both happy with our choices, right?”

She nodded, but something nibbled at the edges of her mind, asking if it was still true. After all that had happened—was happening—was she still happy with her choice? Or had she settled and traded happiness for security?

He put on the turn signal. “I know you’re upset about selling, Lexi, but without you or one of your siblings taking over—”

“I’ve made peace with my parents’ decision to sell.” Because... what choice did she have if she wasn’t going to be the one to work the ranch? She’d once thought she would run the operation, hoping Rusty wouldn’t assert oldest-child rights. Now, she was wishing he would, thereby keeping the ranch in the family until Parker could take over.

“Really? So you’re okay with my offer?”

“No. But it’s not my decision.”

The truck took a sharp left, and Lexi’s body leaned so that her arm brushed against his strong bicep. He’d had biceps back in the day, but now his build was larger, harder, more of a man’s body. A strong man whose muscles came from honest work.

She righted herself.

She had a career to get back to, and thinking about keeping the ranch was nothing more than a distraction. She’d been climbing that corporate ladder before this setback. She was confident—well, fairly confident—she’d be climbing that

ladder again soon, just somewhere else. She liked climbing ladders. She liked making a good salary. Liked getting big bonuses. Money in the bank gave her peace of mind. But it seemed the more money she made, the more money she needed. And there was always someone else doing better. Like Philip or Simone. Someone making her feel she had to match them.

“You’re a finance person, so you know that, as a rancher, my ROI would be a lot less than a developer who turns the land into a housing project.” As they stopped at a light, he turned and looked at her, the sun glinting off his glasses like sparks from a blow torch. “I can’t compete on price.”

She held up her hand. “It’s my parents’ decision.”

“Let’s bury the hatchet, at least for the moment. It’s getting close to dinnertime, and since your dad was nice enough to keep Bandit at your house while I took you to the rental car company, do you want to catch a bite to eat at Smokey’s?”

The bar and restaurant sat on the county road in a dingy-looking building that belied the cleanliness and cozy atmosphere inside. It had been a local hangout since she could remember, plus a place where she’d once waitressed in order to earn spending money for college.

“I haven’t been there for years.” There’d never seemed enough time to stop in during her brief visits. “I imagine it hasn’t changed much.”

“Still looks like it did when my aunt and uncle used to take me there for Friday night dinners. Menu hasn’t changed much, either.”

“That’s a plus. They have the best burgers anywhere.” She could almost taste the savory charcoal flavor of their hamburgers.

“Maybe because their beef is fresher.” He chuckled, a deep, rippling kind of sound, and there was that dimple again.

“Those San Francisco burger joints can’t hold a candle to Smokey’s.”

She took a deep breath. She’d probably run into former classmates here because Smokey’s was the only decent place for a meal for miles in ranch country. She wasn’t sure she was up for that, but, then again, if the ranch was sold, she wouldn’t have a reason to come back this way anytime soon.

“Sure. I’ll text Mom and let her know.” Why miss out on an opportunity to taste the best burgers this side of the Rockies just because she didn’t trust herself to spend more time with Cort and his dimple without succumbing to temptation?

“See if they want to join us. Doubt she’ll feel like cooking once she gets back from that trip. Bandit won’t mind staying by himself for a while.”

Considerate of him. And she should have thought of it.

“Good idea.” She texted. No immediate reply. Maybe Mom was driving.

Cort certainly had a way of ingratiating himself. She’d have to work doubly hard not to let her guard down.

Chapter 8

The eyes of everyone in Smokey's seemed fixed on Lexi Russell as Cort slid into the booth across from her. Maybe he was imagining it, but he wasn't imagining the volume of conversation that slid up a few notches as they looked at their menus.

Lexi held the menu upright as if she was hiding from something or someone.

“How long has it been since you've been in here?”

Smokey's was his go-to place when he wasn't eating at the Russells' and couldn't face his own sorry cooking. It had taken a few weeks for the stares of the old-timers to abate, he being something of novelty. The volume of the buzzing back then in those first few weeks had been about the same as it was now, locals being rightly curious about the city-boy grandnephew of Gil McClane, who thought he could become a rancher. It'd taken a few months, but once Ian Russell had accepted him, the other ranchers in the area followed suit, and now he was part of the community, albeit as the new kid. However, the single women of the area—and there were quite few—hadn't taken more than a few minutes to welcome him, all friendly and nice.

If he hadn't had so much on his plate in those first few months getting the ranch up to speed, there'd been a few of those friendly invitations he might have taken up. But, now, with Lexi sitting across from him, he was glad he hadn't. If he'd been dating someone, he wouldn't have asked Lexi to dinner.

Once he had a year under his belt, he'd concentrate on finding someone to settle down with. Ian and Jewel would be leaving and taking more with them than their friendship and advice. They had welcomed him into their lives like he was family, and, for the first time since his parents' divorce, he belonged somewhere. Starting a family of his own seemed the best way to keep that feeling, not to mention the benefits of having a loving partner in his life.

"Since I've been here? Way too long." Her voice was low and a little muffled behind that menu. "But the place looks the same. Same paneled walls, same navy faux leather covering the booth benches, same elk head over the wood bar."

"You know what you want?" he asked, catching sight of Charlene coming toward the booth. The middle-aged waitress had been a fixture at Smokey's at least since he'd come here with his aunt and uncle.

Lexi set down her menu and shrugged. "A burger. What else?"

He smiled. "The specialty."

She smiled back. She had an intriguing smile. At once welcoming and seductive, as if she was sharing a secret.

"Well, I do declare, if it ain't Lexi Russell," Charlene said in her raspy smoker's voice. "Heard you were in town." Charlene pulled the pencil from behind her ear and positioned the pad for their orders. "Been awhile, darling. We'd thought you'd forgotten us."

Red suffused Lexi's face, but she stared straight at Charlene and answered without missing a beat. "How could I forget my first paying job and the best burgers anywhere? I'll have a rodeo burger deluxe and a beer."

The rodeo burger, topped with cheddar cheese, bacon, onion rings, and barbeque sauce, was a favorite of his. Nice to see the woman had an appetite, despite her slim figure, as well as good taste in burgers.

“Cort? You having your usual? A rodeo burger, too?”

He nodded. “But I’ll have a Dancing Fool to go with it.”

“Dancing Fool?” Lexi asked, her face revealing a cute little frown.

“New microbrewery.” Charlene rolled her eyes. “Glad someone is still drinking regular old beer, Lexi.” Charlene plopped the pencil behind her ear and turned toward the next table.

Lexi’s chuckle was musical and tinkling, the kind that made you want to hear more. “I would have tried a Dancing Fool, too, if I’d seen it on the menu.”

Funny how her eyes twinkled when she laughed.

Cort shot a thumb toward the plastic stand holding a printed card listing various beers from local microbrewers. “Even Smokey’s is upping its game to cater to some of the newbies moving in.” He grinned. “Like me.”

“Looks like you’ve settled in quite well if Charlene already knows your usual.”

A jolt deep in his gut cut through him as her smile broadened to stretch from ear to ear—an inviting pearly white grin worthy of a toothpaste commercial.

“As you evidently know, nothing beats a rodeo burger.”

She nodded, and the overhead light glinted in her hazel eyes. Beautiful eyes. Expressive. Eyes that tattled on her because anyone could tell what she was thinking by just looking at her. Right now, she may be talking about burgers, but she was wondering how the hell he could afford to end up as her family’s neighbor. He’d asked that same question a time or two.

“So, what made you think that you could make a living ranching? A lot of people have tried and failed,” she said.

Yup, he could tell what she was thinking just by looking at her.

“One of the benefits of a tech industry buyout.”

She sat back in her seat and shook her head, causing shiny strands of her reddish-brown hair to resettle on her thin shoulders. Sitting in Smokey’s in her pink knit sweater and tight jeans, boots on her feet, she didn’t look like an investment banker. She looked like she worked on a ranch. Only the dangling gold earrings sparkling along her cheek hinted that she could *own* a ranch rather than merely work on one.

“Wow. That good of a buyout, huh? Certainly takes some of the risk out of the venture.” She cocked her head. “Guess I’m in the wrong end of the business.”

“Investment bankers make good money.”

“If they’re employed, which I’m not at the moment.”

“You will be.” Someone with Lexi’s experience and work ethic wouldn’t stay unemployed for long—something he had to keep telling himself. She would be leaving, her parents would be selling, hopefully to him, and their paths would never cross again. All the *what-ifs* that he’d played out since he’d seen her the night she’d come home were just that, *what-ifs*. Not *what-is*.

“Simone thinks I should look at venture capital firms. Get in on a bigger piece of the action.”

“Simone?” Well at least she wasn’t mentioning her boyfriend. Surely, she was talking to the guy about everything going on at the ranch and in her career. Jewel had said he was in the same line of work, just at another bank. Figured.

“My colleague—or, rather, former colleague.”

Charlene plopped two beers down with a bang. Lexi’s was in a frosted mug. Cort’s was still in the bottle. “Orders will be

up in a few.” Then she walked away toward a large table at the other end of the room.

“Frosted mugs. Microbrews. Smokey’s is getting fancy.” Lexi sipped from her mug, and a bit of foam clung to her lips. She licked it away.

He had to reel in his imagination. No sense going in that direction—too bad, because he’d sure like to.

“There’s that new housing development being built along the highway closer to Gillette. I think he’s trying to attract those soccer moms.” Cort took a pull from his bottle, hoping she didn’t do anything else to spark ideas he shouldn’t be having.

“I’m curious.” She leaned forward, her breasts resting on the table. His imagination wasn’t quitting. “If the buyout allowed you to invest in your uncle’s ranch, why would you offer for my parents’ place and take on debt?”

Because they’d asked and he could. *If* they held the mortgage. “Bigger spread, more water. I can turn a better profit.” More like, he could actually turn a profit rather than working several years in the red while trying to improve his own herd’s bloodlines and productivity. “And I’d have enough land and water to start raising ranch horses as well.”

Which had been a dream since he’d first mastered riding a horse under Lexi’s tutelage.

Her eyes widened and positively sparked. “That’s what I wanted to do.” Her words came out in a whoosh. “When I thought I’d stay on the ranch, that is.”

“Well, if Misty is any indication, you sure have a knack for training them.”

Cort was mesmerized by the blissful expression on her face at his compliment. If compliments could make her look like that, he’d compliment her all night long.

He was so caught up in the moment, he was surprised to find a familiar woman standing next to the table when he looked up.

“Why, it’s Lexi Russell as I live and breathe.”

Lexi stared straight into the calculating brown eyes of her high school nemesis. Tamara Blake stood in the living flesh, still looking every bit the rodeo queen: glitzy buttons down her turquoise shirt, sparkly silver hoops in her ears, ultra-tight jeans that revealed her model-worthy legs tucked into a pair of crystal-studded black boots. All she needed was the glittery Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo queen crown atop her long blonde locks and the picture would be complete.

Some people just hadn’t moved on from high school.

“Tamara. It’s been a long time.” But not long enough for Lexi to forget... or forgive.

“Your brother is coming for Christmas, I hope.”

“Maybe.” If Lexi could keep Rusty from seeing Tamara again, she would. Lexi was sure Tamara’s cheating and the couple’s subsequent breakup was at least partially responsible for Rusty signing up for the military as impulsively as he had.

Tamara turned her attention to Cort. “It was so nice of you to trailer Cortez for me the other day. He’s a handful.”

Cort shifted in his seat. “Anytime.”

Tamara beamed her smile in Cort’s direction, and a pang of jealousy reared up inside of Lexi. Which was ridiculous. There was nothing between Cort and her. There couldn’t be anything between them—no matter how many dreams she’d had about him lately. Those dreams had simply been caused by a rebound attraction. Nothing more.

“Well, I’d like to properly say thank you.” Tamara turned her back to Lexi and leaned in toward Cort. “By having you over for dinner. I’ll make you that tender and moist fried chicken you liked so much the last time.” She flicked a strand of hair behind her shoulder. “Or maybe you’d prefer something spicier.” Her voice was low and dripping with innuendo. Subtlety had never been Tamara’s jam.

Tamara glanced Lexi’s way with a most unfriendly expression on her face, bless her heart.

“I’ve got a lot on my plate at the moment. But I’ll keep it in mind down the road.”

“I’ll be waiting.” She lifted her chin in Lexi’s direction. “Too bad you won’t be here for the skjoring competition at the festival. I’ve won every year since we first competed.” She turned to leave. “Have a nice trip back to wherever, Lexi.” Tamara sauntered away, hips swaying, without giving Lexi a chance to respond.

“I take it you and Tamara aren’t exactly buddies.” Cort sipped his beer.

“Perceptive, aren’t you?” Lexi sighed. “Let’s just say that we see the world through different lenses and leave it at that.” Lexi clamped down on her molars, determined not to ask Cort about the circumstances of that fried chicken dinner.

Cort tilted his bottle at Lexi. “What’s a skjoring competition?”

“Are you a skier?”

“Love skiing. Now that I live close to the Rockies, I’m looking forward to doing more of it.”

“Then you’ll love skjoring. The skier gets pulled by a horse over a set course. It’s fun. The festival is a charity event, so they make the event a family-friendly one with different brackets so kids can do it, too. And the track isn’t as

challenging as a sanctioned competition or, at least, it wasn't that first year."

"I actually did some competitive skiing in college. Skijoring might be worth trying. It's an annual thing?"

"Apparently. Tamara and I were in it the first year it was held as part of the holiday festival."

He cocked his head. "Who won?"

Lexi wrinkled her nose. This was a sore spot. "Tamara won our division. But she rigged it. My brother was riding the horse for each of our runs, and, well, he was dating Tamara, so..."

"He made sure she won?"

"Let's just say he made sure I didn't." It was only after he'd enlisted in the military that she forgave him. "Of course, it didn't help that I didn't approve of him dating Tamara."

"Because..."

"If you're trying to trap me into saying something unkind, it isn't going to work." That was Tamara's modus operandi. "Suffice to say that he found out why I disapproved when she broke his heart."

"I see."

She was sure he didn't see, not all of it, but that was in the past and she'd let it go a long time ago.

"If you're staying, are you planning on entering?"

She sat back in the booth. It would certainly be fun. And she might win, if only because Misty was so fast. "I'd need to find a partner who would ride Misty straight and true. And, by the way, you're not the only one who was on a ski team in college."

"Well, that's something we have in common." He winked and that dimple appeared on his cheek.

“You should enter.” Then she’d have two people she’d need to beat.

“If you show me how it’s done.”

“If you ride Misty for my run.” He’d be perfect as her rider, especially since Misty was already comfortable with him.

“Deal.” He tipped his beer bottle in her direction.

Charlene appeared, setting the burgers on the table. She pulled a ketchup bottle from her apron pocket and plunked it down. “Ready yet for refills?”

Cort shook his head.

Lexi raised her three-quarters-filled mug.

“Holler when you are.” Charlene skated away toward another table.

One bite of the rodeo burger and Lexi was in taste bud heaven. Greasy, meaty, salty, tangy.... It was all the things she loved in a burger and hadn’t had in so long. A groan escaped her lips.

“That good, huh?” Cort chuckled.

She nodded, her mouth too full to answer. When she’d finished half the burger, she sat back and took a sip of beer. “I’d forgotten just how good it is.”

“Bet you did.” Cort cocked a half-smile, and warmth suffused through Lexi like a fire through dry brush.

Was he coming on to her or was she reading too much into a simple comment? She took another sip of cold beer. Her intuition had been seriously off the last few months—Philip and the deal that fell through being prime examples. She had no reason to suspect Cort had any interest in her despite her imagination spurring interest in him. Err on the side of caution, she told herself. And attend to the matters at hand.

The cold night air nipped at Cort's skin as he walked to the pickup in stride with Lexi. He had to restrain himself from reaching for her hand, like he might have done if it had been a date. They'd spent considerable hours together, but far from making him ready for alone time, he wanted more of her company.

She was bright, funny, frank, and darn pretty. And she knew about ranching, even if she didn't do it anymore. The perfect partner. But, unfortunately, the ranching part was the stickler. She didn't want it and it was all he wanted.

How things had changed from that long-ago summer when she'd teased him about his city-boy ways and the future he'd laid out where he would be heading up some company, while all she'd wanted was to raise and train horses.

And look where they'd wound up.

As he shifted the truck into gear, he checked on her. Her head was leaning back against the headrest, a smile on her face, and her eyes closed.

"You have a buzz?" he asked. She'd only had two beers, and since he was driving, he'd stuck to one.

She chuckled. "Just feeling relaxed."

He remembered what it'd been like when he'd quit working at his corporate job. It'd been like banging his head against the wall one day then suddenly finding his head resting on a soft pillow the next day. "Guess you haven't been very relaxed in that job you had." Maybe she'd reconsider her plans now that she didn't have a job to immediately go back to.

And maybe he was dreaming.

"Not at all. You know what it's like."

“Yeah, crazy.” He turned onto the main highway and put some pressure on the gas. “That’s why I’m not doing it anymore. When the buyout came and everything sort of stopped for a moment, I realized how bad it had been, how much stress I’d been feeling. Then my uncle got sick, and by the time he passed, well, I didn’t want to go back anymore.”

She turned her head in his direction. “It’s tempting when everything stops. But, you know, ranching isn’t for the faint of heart. It’s risky. There’s a lot of stress and a ton more things you can’t control. Like the weather.”

“Or what my neighbors decide to do.” He glanced again at her. Her face was serene, not a frown line to be seen.

She closed her eyes and smiled. “That too. But I don’t want to talk about that. Let’s just enjoy the moment. I haven’t been able to do that in a long, long time.”

He turned the truck into her driveway. The headlights caught Bandit in the equipment barn doorway running around in circles. Barking filled the air.

“What the heck?” Lexi shot straight up in her seat.

Cort gunned the gas, and the truck bumped down the gravel drive like a runaway roller coaster. Something was wrong.

Lexi couldn’t even remember getting out of the truck. All she remembered was running toward the barn as Bandit’s barking grew more frenetic. Cort was running with her, then surpassed her.

Bandit ran toward Cort as she drew closer, and she saw... her father. Sprawled on the ground. Not moving. His right arm at a weird angle.

She fell to her knees beside him, the cold from the ground seeping into her limbs. “Dad.” The word came out like a wail from deep inside of her. “Are you okay?”

“Shoulder. Ankle. Pain.”

Cort bent over her father’s prone body. Bandit plopped onto the dirt, as if the dog knew he’d done his job and now it was for others to do theirs. “Don’t move, Ian. I’m calling an ambulance.”

An ambulance. Her heart tightened.

“What can I do?” she asked as Cort rattled off the address into his phone. “What happened?”

“Ladder. Fell.” His face was contorted with pain. “Shingle.”

She quickly scanned the area and spotted the ladder lying on the ground. A hammer was several feet away, and some roofing shingles were still in a pile.

Cort shoved his phone back into his jacket pocket. “Don’t move. They won’t be here for at least twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes? That would be an eternity for someone in pain.

Cort reached for her hand and squeezed. “I don’t see any bleeding. I’ll get some ice from the fridge, and we’ll apply it where we can, but they said not to move him.”

Lexi could barely breathe, but she managed to thank him.

He squeezed her hand again as he rose. Lexi looked back at his truck.

Her mom’s car was not in the yard.

Chapter 9

It took a full half hour for the ambulance to arrive. In the meantime, she'd contacted her mother, who, it turned out, had stopped at the grocery store. She would meet them at the emergency room. Cort had offered to drive Lexi, but she'd opted to ride in the ambulance to make sure her father was taken care of.

The EMT had told her that her dad's legs did not appear to be compromised, but, in addition to a likely dislocated shoulder, there was the possibility of a proximal humerus fracture—whatever that was—and a sprained or broken ankle. As his right side had taken the brunt of the fall, the expertise of an orthopedic specialist would be needed to ascertain the full extent of the injuries to the arm, wrist, and ankle. All they could do for the ride to the hospital was immobilize the shoulder and offer oxygen, which her father had refused.

Though he didn't complain, she knew by the grimace on her father's face that he was in pain.

"No pain relievers until the doctor says it's okay," the technician told her.

Her father, true to his nature, would suffer in silence as the ambulance sped along the highway, hell-bent for the medical center, sirens blaring.

Glass shards of fear seemed to be sticking every which way in the vicinity of her heart.

"Dad, I'm so sorry this happened. The doctors will see to it that you're back to normal soon." She hoped she spoke the truth. Her streak of bad luck had now engulfed her father. The

rock of her family. The man who had given her life its stability, its certainty. She took a deep breath. He had to be okay.

“Seems I’m seeing a lot of hospitals lately.” His voice was low and wheezy, as if it was a labor to breathe.

She hadn’t even known he’d been in the hospital that last time. And what would she have done about it if she had known? She would have kept updated via phone and text, and that would have been it.

And that didn’t seem enough... not then, not now.

“The cattle need tending.” Her father ground out the words from his position on the gurney, pulling her back to the moment.

“I’ll take care of it.”

She would stay and help out. Make up for last time. She would get him through this so he could enjoy life after the ranch.

Her father’s eyes closed, and she patted his left side. “Don’t worry, Daddy. I’ll be here.” Then she said a silent prayer for forgiveness and hope.

* * *

Cort dug his hands into the pocket of his jeans as he stood in front of the tractor with Lexi in the driver’s seat.

“You want help or not?”

She was the most confounding female. One minute, she was all vulnerable, and, the next, tough as nails. This was her tough-as-nails-time by the look of her clenched jaw as she studied the various gauges and buttons. He was positive she didn’t know how to operate it, but she hadn’t asked for his help... yet.

He'd seen to the cattle and the horses the previous night while Lexi and her mother stayed at the hospital to see Ian through the procedures. Then he'd promised Ian he'd help Lexi with the ranch while the man recovered from his dislocated shoulder, broken arm, and sprained ankle, and Cort would do his best to keep that promise... if she'd let him. Right now, the odds were fifty-fifty.

She huffed out a breath, causing a puff of steam in the cold Wyoming air. "I didn't drive the tractor back in the day. That was Rusty's job. I did the chores you could do on horseback, like moving cattle." A frown formed on her cute face as she studied the various buttons.

"Let me show you. Move to the training seat and I'll drive."

Her head swiveled in search for something else to sit on in the cramped cab. "Training seat?"

He reached to the left of her and flipped it down. She slid over, and he climbed into the cab. "Let the session begin."

"Thanks for the lesson," Lexi said as she exited the tractor.

She'd done it. She'd learned how to handle the tractor to distribute hay. It wasn't hard, but it wasn't quite as easy as driving a car, especially when picking up fifteen-hundred-pound bales of hay.

"I'm here to help." Cort saluted.

She watched as he climbed down from the tractor, his movement fluid and graceful belying his size and strength. What would she have done without him, considering her father wasn't due home for at least another day and would be laid up for weeks, well past Christmas? Thank God Cort was

available and more than happy to help. Still, she didn't want to take advantage.

“Don't you have your own ranch to tend?”

“I do, but I have a good foreman and crew. Gave them orders for the day, and I expect they can handle it.”

She took a deep breath “I should be able to handle things myself from now on.” Her father, several decades older than her, had handled the ranch chores with a heart condition and arthritis, so she should be more than capable of doing so. “I feel like there are other chores I should be doing, too, but I can't think of them.” She'd been removed from ranch work for too many years and she'd never had the full responsibility of running the place.

Cort shrugged. “Winter is a time for catching up and getting ready for calving season. But I'm sure whatever else needs to be done can wait.”

“Until you take over?”

“Your father hasn't said, and I'm not going to pester him now.”

He stared at her with such focus she could feel warmth seeping through her despite the below-zero wind chill. “I don't think you have to worry. But you'll have to wait for Dad to make it official.”

Her dad was despondent over the accident and still in a lot of pain since there'd been some nerve damage. Rehab would take time, but no one had said how much time.

They walked to the house in stride. Bandit was inside, probably lying by the fireside, which seemed to be his favorite spot when he was at the Russells'.

“Stay for some coffee. Mom made apple strudel. She's at the hospital now, but I know she made it for you.” She could use a distraction from her thoughts and worries and Cort McClane was definitely a distraction.

“Won’t lie. I love her apple strudel.”

After greeting Bandit, Lexi busied herself getting the coffee on and setting out dessert plates. She’d been fortunate that Cort had been there when she’d discovered her father... and that he was willing to buy the Russell ranch because, clearly, her father couldn’t handle it. Not just because his foot had slipped and he’d tumbled off the ladder, but because of all his other conditions: his heart, his arthritis, his age.

A wave of grief swept over her as she thought about all that had changed since she’d finished college and moved away, trying to make a successful life. All while her parents had struggled with the ranch.

A tear leaked from her eye. She brushed it away, but not before Cort noticed, apparently, because he was at her side in a flash, his hands on her shoulders, staring into her eyes.

“It will be okay, Lexi. It’s all going to work out.”

“But so many bad things have happened lately.” It felt like a bomb had exploded, shattering the pillars upon which her life had been built and causing collateral damage in its wake. “Dad doesn’t deserve this. He’s always worked so hard. He’s always been there for all of us. I’ve taken them for granted.” She swept her arm in the air. “Taken all this for granted. And now it’s going to be gone and Dad... he’s hurt and hurting from having to take this step and...”

Within a heartbeat, his arms were around her and she was in his comforting embrace. Feeling the warmth of his body, she snuggled closer and looked up into worried eyes. “Thank you for being there yesterday. Seeing Dad on the ground, I froze.”

“You would have done what had to be done, but I’m glad I was there and could help. Your dad’s tough. He’s going to be okay. This is just a little setback. But he’ll recover and he’ll be riding around in one of those golf carts in one of those senior communities.”

Staring into his eyes, she wanted to lose herself in those blue pools.

“I can’t imagine Dad doing that. He’ll go crazy.”

“I’ll keep him busy by calling with all my questions.” He smiled.

The dimple appeared on his cheek, causing her to smile for the first time that day. Desire punched deep in her belly as he leaned closer.

She leaned closer.

The loud slam of the kitchen door had her jumping back and out of his embrace.

Her mother stood in the doorway and looked from Lexi to Cort and back again.

By the smug look on her mother’s face, Lexi hadn’t jumped back soon enough.

“Glad you’re both here. Doc says your father will probably be coming home day after tomorrow.”

Lexi brushed her suddenly clammy hands down her jeans. “That’s good news.”

“It is. And Dad was so relieved, Lexi, that you’re going to be here and able to help. And that Cort is, too.”

“Of course.” Cort rubbed his thumb across his chin, as if he was thinking.

Mom placed her purse and some papers that looked like forms on the table. “I think he was concerned about putting so much on me, so I’m thankful, as well, for the help.” Still wearing her winter jacket, she bustled over to the coffeemaker, passing between Lexi and Cort. “You have coffee on, great. I could use some.” She reached in the cabinet for a cup. “By the way, it’s started snowing, so there should be some good snow cover by morning.”

Lexi was looking for her voice as she mentally tried to calm the flush that had enveloped her.

Her mother turned around, filled coffee mug in hand. “Now, since you’ll be here, Lexi, will you two be teaming up to enter the skijor competition? I had to stop by the bank, and they had some entry forms—seeing as they are this year’s sponsors—so I picked some up for you. Just in case.” She peeked over the cup as she took a sip. “You two would make a great team.”

* * *

“The easiest way to show you is if I pull you instead of you pulling me.” Lexi gripped Misty’s reins as she stood by the saddled horse, a long rope in the other hand. As her mother had predicted, a good five inches of snow covered the ground, perfect for a little skijoring. She’d found her old skis on a ceiling rack in the barn and a snowboarding helmet on a post on the corral fence. “Glad to see you brought your ski helmet.” According to the forms her mother brought home yesterday, a helmet was now a requirement.

“Are we both competing?” Cort looked dubious as he studied the form.

He was bundled in a heavy jacket, helmet, ski gloves, and boots since the temperature had dropped below freezing. His skis were propped against the fence next to hers.

“You’d have to use one of your horses because a horse is allowed to make only two runs a day, and I’ll need to make one run on Misty to determine the division and another to actually run. But I’ll ride your horse for you.”

Cort’s eyebrows rose as he tucked the form into the back pocket of his jeans. “Let me see how I like it first.”

“If you like skiing, you’ll like this.” Living in Wyoming with the amount of snow that fell, people had to enjoy cold-weather sports or it would be a long winter. Lexi loved them all: skating, snowboarding, skiing, ice hockey, and skijoring. She hadn’t gotten to do any of them since she’d moved to San Francisco.

She looped one end of the rope over the saddle horn, then held out the other end. “I cut this rope to regulation size.”

Cort strode over. He looked just as attractive as a ski bum as he did as a cowboy... unfortunately.

Yesterday, she’d come so close to kissing him. If her mother hadn’t walked in, she would have. And then what? Her mom had likely saved her, though Lexi wasn’t sure she wanted to be saved.

“I see you got fancy and wrapped Misty’s legs. But, pink?” He cocked up one side of his mouth.

She shrugged. “It was all I had, and I need to protect her legs. You’re cowboy enough to go with pink, right?”

“If rodeo guys can do it, guess I can.” He smiled, and that dimple came out, scrambling her thoughts.

That dimple would be the death of her. “Get your skis on, and we’ll give it a go. I’m just taking you down the trail. No gates, rings, or jumps to concern yourself with.”

“Jumps? They have jumps?”

“Only two, usually.”

He rubbed a hand across his face. “Any tips?”

“Don’t let go of the rope. And keep it tight. No slack. You ever water ski in Jersey?”

“Ever hear of the Jersey Shore? Of course I’ve water skied.”

“It’s just like that. You’re going to love it.”

His skis, helmet, and goggles on, Cort grabbed the rope dangling behind the horse.

From atop Misty, Lexi looked down on him like she was the queen and he was her subject.

They'd almost kissed last night. As much as he was fond of Jewel, he wished she'd arrived at least a few minutes later. But Jewel had probably saved him from heartache—because he was falling for Lexi. She was only here for a short while and it would be hard enough when she left. He didn't need a memory of her kiss to remind him what he'd be missing.

He held the rope up. This did look like it would be fun.

“Where did skjoring come from?” he shouted.

“Norway, I think. The word means *ski driving* or something like that.”

Cort crouched into ski position and gripped the rope with his gloved hands.

Lexi moved Misty up ever so slightly so that there wasn't any slack in the rope.

“Let her rip.”

Lexi moved out on Misty at a walk, pulling him along. He adjusted the rope to get a better grip.

“How's it going?” she called.

“Too slow.” He wasn't a kid.

“I'll ramp it up. Hold tight.” Lexi nudged Misty, and the horse began an easy lope.

Wind whipped past his face while snow pelted it. Lexi was right; it was a lot like water skiing, but more fun.

“Want to try a little faster?” she called back.

“Yes.” How could he not? He was sailing across the snow with as much speed as he would have going down a gently sloped mountain, only, the horse was doing most of the work.

Misty plunged into higher gear, pounding down the snow-covered trail. Snow flew at his face, obscuring a clear view. He started to shift like he was going down a mountain, mindful to hold the rope tight as the white fields whirred by in a blur. He could do this forever.

Misty swerved and he lost the rope, sailing across the snow—at high speed.

He widened his legs into a snow plow stance to slow down as a snow drift loomed before him. It wouldn't be enough.

He plowed right into it.

Nothing to do but laugh as wet snow chapped his face. He glanced over his shoulder. Lexi had turned the horse around and was riding toward him. Her laughter, that giggly tinkling sound, drifted to him.

“Sorry. I lost the trail.” She was breathing hard from laughing in the cold. “But what did you think?”

“Besides the fact that I got stuck in a snow bank? I loved it.” He gave her a thumbs-up.

She beamed, as if her student had gotten an A on his paper. “So you'll compete, too?”

“If I can get out of this.” He was hooked.

She gathered up the rope and threw the end to him. He missed it, so she climbed off Misty and handed it to him. “I'll pull you out. Be sure to hold on and I'll do a run back.”

“Then you can show me how it's really done.”

“And we'll see what kind of rider you'll be. I need someone who will go fast and furious to beat Tamara.” She mounted the horse. “Misty is a natural at quick starts.”

“I’m your man.” Watching her sitting atop Misty, her hair flowing from under the cap, her eyes twinkling in the sunlight bouncing off the snow, her smile wide, he wished he was her man. In every way.

* * *

Her father was home and everyone crammed into her parents’ bedroom to witness it. Junie had brought Parker, Cort was there, her mother sat on the bed, and Rusty was conferencing in on the laptop screen.

“Happy to see you looking so good, Dad. And all of you. I’ll be home before you know it. I’m counting the days.”

Rusty was in fatigues, and his hair was shaved close to his head, just as it’d been the last time he’d been home. Too bad, because Rusty had thick, wavy hair when grown out. The girls, like Tamara, had gone crazy for her brother back in the day.

Her dad squinted at the screen propped up on the tray table. “We are, too.”

“Thanks for letting Cal come for Christmas. He’d be alone otherwise.”

“You know I love a full house for the holidays. No one should be alone.” Her mom blew Rusty a kiss.

Cal was a member of Rusty’s company, and he, apparently, had nowhere to go for Christmas. Lexi was sure there was a story there, but she’d have to wait to find it out until the two men came home. Of course, Mom had issued the invitation without hesitation. Some people were known for taking in stray dogs. Her mom had a reputation for taking in stray people. Like Cort.

“I’m signing off. Love to you all and especially you, little buddy.” Rusty pointed a finger ostensibly in Parker’s direction, then the screen went blank.

Ian took a deep breath and let out a sigh. A sigh Lexi was sure everyone felt.

“I’ll be glad when he’s here,” Mom said. “Do you need another pillow for your back?” Her mom plumped up the one supporting Dad, as if to distract herself.

Her father shook his head. “Just happy to be home and surrounded by family.”

Home. It wouldn’t be their home soon.

Lexi looked around the room plastered with family photos that hung on the wall and resided on every square inch of dresser real estate. The only other item was a vase of flowers, which Junie had brought.

There were pictures from Lexi’s childhood, a picture of the barn when it had been repainted, senior year pictures of each child, Parker at three months, pictures of her grandparents, long gone. The house held so many memories. And, soon, it would be inhabited by strangers who cared nothing about the Russells or their family history—which was why a large black hole, a huge void, was what her mind conjured up when she thought about the future.

“I just want to thank you all for looking after things. Junie, for the visits in the hospital and the flowers,” her father said. “What would we have done if Lexi wasn’t here to keep things going and the animals fed? It would have been too much for your mother to handle and still visit me in the hospital. She’d struggled in August, though Cort had been a big help then, just as he has been now. You’ve all done more than anyone has a right to ask. And, of course, Parker, just for being himself.”

With that, Parker lunged toward his grandfather, but, luckily, Mom caught him just in time.

“Grandpa is sore, Parker. He fell down and he needs a little more time to heal.”

Parker squirmed in her arms and reached out for his grandfather until her mother brought him close enough to give Dad a kiss.

“That’s my boy.” Her father’s voice had become gravelly.

“Coffee?” her mother asked as she set Parker on the bed.

“Love some,” Dad said. “Cort said you made apple strudel. Hospital food was the pits. Well, at least compared to your cooking.”

Mom kissed Dad’s cheek.

“I’ll get it, Mom.”

“Thank you, Lexi. Everyone else can have a piece of strudel and their coffee out at the table. Don’t want crumbs everywhere.”

“I promise to put Dad’s on a tray,” Lexi said as she exited the room.

It was so good to see her father home, even if he was in bed and trussed up like a turkey with his arm in a sling and his foot in a boot. The smile on his face was enough to warm her heart.

As she started the coffee, her phone jangled. *Simone*. Lexi turned the pot on and hit the icon. “Hi, Simone.”

“Lexi. How’s your dad doing?”

“He just came home, and now he’s in the bedroom asking for Mom’s apple strudel.”

“Strudel. Sounds delish. I’m glad he’s better.” Simone cleared her throat. “I called to tell you I’ve got some leads for you.”

Lexi looked around for a pen and paper, but couldn’t find any. “Just a second, Simone. I’ll get my tablet.”

She scooted down the hall to her bedroom to get the tablet while the coffee brewed, then sat on her bed and opened the nightstand drawer. As she pulled the tablet out of the drawer, there, underneath the tablet, was something she hadn't seen in years. Ten years, to be exact.

She picked up the necklace by the horse head pendant that hung on it. The necklace was broken—the damage done when she'd ripped it off her neck after learning Cort had returned home without saying goodbye. The silver was tarnished, the lock broken... but the memory of the day he'd given it to her was as fresh as if it'd just happened.

She hadn't told him it was her birthday when she'd given him a riding lesson that day. When they'd finished and were on the other side of the barn, away from prying eyes, he'd kissed her, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a little black case.

“Happy birthday, Lexi. I got you something to remember me by.”

She'd opened it. At the sight of the silver horse head, her heart had seemed to expand until it pressed against the walls of her chest, bursting to get out. He'd bought her something that, as a high school student, he could ill afford. Something personal. If that hadn't been the moment she'd fallen in love with him, it was darn close.

“Lexi, are you there?”

Back to reality. “Sorry, Simone. I've got my tablet.”

“I'll run these by you and then you can tell me which ones you want information on.”

“Glad to know there's more than one.”

“There are three, to be precise.” Simone rattled off two banks—one in LA, one in New York City—and a venture capital firm out of Arizona.

Lexi did a quick search of the venture capital firm. Seemed legit, but venture capital was much riskier than a bank job.

“Send info on the banks. And thanks for thinking of me. You’re a good friend.”

“Well, I also have a favor to ask.”

“Shoot.”

“I don’t have anywhere to go for Christmas.”

“What about your family?” Simone had a mother and two married sisters in New York City.

“They’re doing a destination Christmas to London and going all Charles Dickens. How am I supposed to travel there, spend Christmas with them, and get back to work in time? I have a big deal that I’m trying to close before the end of the year.”

“You want to come here?” Lexi didn’t have to ask her mom to know that Simone—or anyone for that matter—would be welcome.

“If it wouldn’t be an imposition. I know Christmas is family time—”

“My mom loves a full house. I’ll check with her, but I know you’re more than welcome.”

“Thanks. I can definitely get to Wyoming and back in time. London is just out of the question.”

Lexi used to have to make those choices. She was grateful that, this time, when her parents needed her, she didn’t have to. “I have to go, but I’ll send you the flights I take to get out here.”

“And I’ll send you the info on these leads.”

Lexi hung up and looked down at the necklace in her lap. She carefully placed it back in the drawer. Where she could find it.

Later.

Chapter 10

Lexi stared at the back tire on the right side of the tractor and tried to ascertain if it was really going flat. The tire was massive. How did one even go about changing it?

Her mother had taken her father to physical therapy, so there was no one to ask, and, besides, the last thing she wanted to bother him about was a flat tire. She was proud that she'd been able to keep things going on the ranch... with Cort's help, of course. But she couldn't run to Cort for every little thing, and a flat tire should be a little thing.

She scanned the barn for the faded markings of the black-and-silver air compressor she remembered as a kid. Moving among the baler, and ATV, she spotted it crammed between the small tractor her dad used to clear the corrals and the side of the barn.

She dragged it out and positioned it next to the huge tire. Sitting on her haunches, she tried to unscrew the air valve, but it didn't budge. *Nothing's easy*. Maybe she should call Cort.

But he'd done so much already, and she didn't want to appear anymore helpless than she had to. She was coming to rely on Cort way too much.

It took her another five minutes to find a wrench. As she positioned the wrench around the cap of the valve stem, she heard what had become a familiar rumble coming down the driveway. Cort was already here. As if he knew she needed him.

Well, she'd at least try to loosen the stem by herself. Show she could do some simple things like put air in a tire.

The truck door slammed shut just as she gripped the valve stem and heard the patter of Bandit's paws headed her way. One tug, it loosened and then—*bam!*

Red liquid squirted out of the tire stem like a geyser, covering her with the stuff. Bandit was barking, Cort was laughing, and she was wet.

What the heck?

Cort squatted besides her, took the cap, and, with some trouble, screwed it back on the tire stem, effectively shutting off the spurt.

She sat up, thwarting Bandit's attempts to lick her with flailing hands.

“What just happened?” She must look a sight.

Cort rose, laughter still emanating from deep in his chest, and offered her a hand.

She took it, and he pulled her onto her feet.

“That, my sweet Lexi, is beet juice. And you are covered in it.”

“Beet juice? You're kidding, right?” He *must* be kidding.

“Nope. That's a cheap way to add weight to the tires so when you're moving those heavy hay bales, the darn tractor doesn't tip forward. There's special ballast for tires, but, as your father taught me, beet juice is cheaper and easier to find. Believe it or not, they make it just for this purpose.”

The cold sticky liquid on her face was not pleasant. “Now I've heard everything.”

“Go get cleaned up. Then come back out and I'll show you how to fill it with air.” He looked down at the limp tire. “Let's hope it's a slow leak, because replacing one of these is going to run over a thousand easily.”

“Is there no end to trouble?” She was beginning to think she was cursed or something.

“Not on a ranch. And, apparently, not with you around.”

His tone was light and playful, but he’d hit on a sore spot. She was starting to feel snakebit, and now she was bringing bad luck to her father.

A gust of wind swooshed through the open doorway, and a shiver went through her. She had to get out of her wet clothes. “I’ll be right back. Come on, Bandit—you can sit in the house where it’s warm.”

Cort positioned the jack and raised the back of the tractor just a smidge above the floor. Enough to allow him to freely rotate the tire.

He’d found some old rags and mopped up the beet juice. There would be a red stain for a while. Red enough to look like someone had been murdered, in fact. He chuckled at that.

What was he going to do with her? Or, rather, his growing feelings for her. She’d made it clear, and he’d heard her—and heard himself telling her they would just be friends.

He enjoyed being with her. Helping her. Teaching her the things her father had taught him, ironic as that was. And she was game. Not afraid to tackle anything. Smart enough to handle everything. She’d be good partner in this adventure he’d taken on.

Unfortunately, for someone as capable as Lexi, ranching would never be enough. Not in money, not in challenge—though he’d found it plenty challenging in trying to make ranching pencil.

He threw the reddened rags into a pile, leaned against the front of the tractor, and watched the door to the house. When

she wasn't around, it was like the sun had gone behind a gray cloud.

Heck, he was already thinking like a love-sick fool.

Finally, the door opened and she stepped through, bundled up in a different ranch jacket, likely belonging to Jewel. A knit cap covered her head, but she'd let her hair stream over her shoulders. She had on new jeans, but the barn boots were the same, with splotches of red stain on them.

She trudged toward him, her head down, hands in her pockets. She looked like someone who'd just lost a competition. Defeated. Deflated. Disappointed. All those "d" words.

His heart did a little flop. Well, he could at least make the tire better.

She raised her eyes and caught him staring at her. Yeah. He liked to look. To dream.

A shy smile graced her face, as if she was self-conscious. He wasn't. Didn't care if she caught him looking at her. Part of him wanted her to know he was thinking about her. Part of him wanted to hide it and prevent the hurt coming his way, except... it was no longer preventable. He was in too deep.

She glanced away, toward the errant tire. "You already have the tractor jacked up."

"We have to rotate the tire so the valve is in the twelve o'clock position. Otherwise, the tire ballast is going to spew all over, as it just did."

"I thought tires just had air in them. I would never have guessed beet juice."

"You're lucky it was just beet juice. Some of the stuff they put in tires to add weight is pretty corrosive."

She sighed. "I think I've forgotten more than I ever knew. I don't remember ever hearing about tire ballast."

He resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and comfort her. She wouldn't appreciate it. "You're doing great. Your dad is very happy with how you've kept things going. If you weren't here..."

She shrugged. "You would have done all this for him. I know you would have."

He couldn't deny he would have helped out. "I couldn't have been here all the time like you've been. You're doing a great job. Everything's going like clockwork."

"Except for the murder that took place." She pointed at the red stain. "Look at the floor."

"Does look like that. We can see if bleach or something can help. Otherwise, it'll be a pretty funny reminder."

She stuck out her tongue and laughed. "I must have looked a sight."

"Like you committed that murder, in fact."

She grimaced. "So, you move the valve to the twelve o'clock position?" Right back to business.

"And take off the cap. You can do the honors."

"I won't get sprayed again? One jacket is already in the wash."

"Trust me."

She nodded. "I do, actually."

That meant a lot. "Then let's get to it."

Cort helped her connect the air pump, then switched it on. The motor hummed as the machine inflated the tire. As he was checking around the stem to be sure no air was escaping, his phone rang out a tune. He glanced at the name scrolling across the screen. Jeez.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Lexi asked as it reached its fifth jangle.

“Guess I have to.” If he could have ignored it, he would have. He tapped the button. “What’s up, Mom?”

Lexi made two trips to set four steaming cups of coffee down on the wood table where sugar and milk were on standby. Next, came a plate with Moester’s famous crumb cake, which she set right in front of him with a shy smile, as if she wanted to be sure he got a piece. He wasn’t going to skip cake despite the fact that his phone call should have suppressed his appetite.

“So, your mother is coming a few days before Christmas but not staying for the holiday? How long has it been since you’ve seen her?” Lexi scooted into a chair next to him. Jewel sat across from them, and Ian sat, as always, at the head of the table, but with his arm in a cast and his ankle wrapped in a soft boot.

“In person?” There had been a few video chats, like when his uncle passed. But very few.

“Yes, in person.”

She had come to his college graduation, but had stayed only two days before heading out. “Around five years.” Give or take a year or two.

“You’d think she’d stay for Christmas at least.” Jewel wrinkled her nose before taking a bite of the crumb-topped cake.

Thank goodness she wasn’t. “She’s traveling to see her sister in San Diego and staying with her for Christmas.” She’d asked him to go along. He’d declined. “She’s stopping here on her way out to the West Coast.”

“We’ll have to have her over one night for dinner when she’s here. We’d love to meet her,” Jewel said, ever the welcoming hostess.

“She’s only going to be here a day or two.” Hopefully, that was all.

It might be good to have some people around to run interference. He was having a hard time wrapping his head around the fact that she’d be staying with him overnight. What in the world would they talk about? “How about her first night here? She’s coming in the Tuesday before Christmas.”

“That’ll be fine. With Ian laid up, it’s not like we’re going anywhere. I’ll make a nice ham.”

“Rib roast,” Ian said. “This is a cattle ranch, not a hog farm.”

Jewel touched her husband’s arm. “I’m having a rib roast for Christmas.”

Lexi set down her coffee mug. “Shouldn’t you have your foot elevated, Dad?”

Ian shrugged.

“I’ll get a hassock from the living room.” Lexi slid out of her chair and headed for the great room.

“Just happy to be out of that place. Food was as awful as last time. Got no sleep.”

“Are you tired now?” Jewel asked, her focus on her husband.

Ian shrugged again. “A little. I’ll go in after I finish the cake.” He trained his gaze on Cort. “How’re things going? Cattle okay?”

“Lexi’s doing a fine job. Cattle are getting fed.”

Ian’s eyebrows arched just as Lexi dropped the hassock on the side of her father’s chair and slid it under the table.

“Put your foot on it, Dad. It will keep the swelling down.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ian’s lips flatlined. “Tired of being ordered around, too.”

“He’s just grumpy from no sleep. His shoulder bothered him last night.” Jewel stroked the man’s cheek.

Must be nice to be loved like Jewel loved Ian.

He glanced over at Lexi, who stood by her father’s chair as if to make sure he did indeed put his foot on the hassock.

“Not too grumpy to thank my daughter for stepping up. I’m grateful, Lexi. I don’t know what we would have done without you here holding down the fort. Terrible thing to be laid up like this.”

Lexi kissed his forehead. Her eyes looked wet when she straightened. “I’m happy I could be here.” She scooted back to her chair beside Cort.

“I know ranching ain’t your thing.”

“I’ve kind of enjoyed it. It’s nice working with animals again. They don’t talk back.” She grinned. “And I’ve been able to ride Misty. I also learned how to work the tractor.”

“You don’t say. I’d have thought you’d need Cort to run that thing.”

“He trained me.” She put air quotes around *trained*. “I kind of like driving it. You get a nice bumpy ride.” She cocked her head at him and tossed her hair over her shoulder, and he almost forgot the phone call he’d just received. “But I also tried to put air in that tractor’s tire and, well, my jacket is soaking right now. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get the beet juice out.”

Ian let out a hearty laugh. “You don’t say. I’d have liked to see that.”

“Are you okay?” Jewel shifted her attention to her daughter.

“Fine. Just a bruised ego. Cort can tell you how it looked. I was too busy being knocked on my butt.”

Cort took up the mantle and told the story to more than a few guffaws. This was the family life he'd missed until he'd found Jewel and Ian. But now, if things worked out, those two would be moving away. He might see them on an occasional visit when they came to look over the old homestead. But it wouldn't be the same as having them as neighbors. Neighbors he'd visited regularly. People who had taken him under their wing, taught him how much he didn't know about ranching. And treated him like one of their family.

So different from his own mother.

“And you still say you're enjoying it?” Ian directed his question to Lexi.

She nodded. “More than I thought.”

“That's my girl. I knew there was some rancher still left in you.”

Lexi shifted in her chair. “So we'll get to meet your mom next Tuesday,” she said, changing the subject.

He nodded, more grateful for the invitation than they knew. Now, if he could just find something to do with his mom for the rest of the time she'd be there. He had less than two weeks to figure it out.

“Faster,” Lexi called as she skied over the snow hill and landed, clinging to the rope, assuring it was tight. Misty's hooves pounded in front of her, kicking up snow that pelted her face in the crisp air as she heard Cort urging the horse on. Through her goggles, she could see the finish line, marked by red flags on either side of the worn track. Her heart thumping

against her chest, she whizzed past the red flags, let go of the rope, and threw up her arms. Adrenaline rushed through her like a roller coaster on a downward trek. She glanced back at the ranch hand on the sidelines, holding a pocket watch. That *had* to be faster than the last time.

Cort had built an approximation of a skijor track on a vacant field of his, and they'd practiced every day that week with Marco and Misty, switching up who was the rider and who was the skier. But it hadn't snowed in a few days, and the snow was wearing thin. This might be the last practice they could squeeze in before the weekend event. Fortunately, snow was in the forecast for Friday, and the festival was on Sunday.

With the cold slapping her face, making it burn, she skied over to where the ranch hand, Mel, stood. "How'd I do?"

Mel was medium height, lanky, and had a scruffy, appealing look about him. "Thirty-two and two tenths."

That was three-tenths better than her best time.

"You think that'll be enough?" She raised her goggles to check out the stopwatch herself.

Mel shrugged as he flashed the watch in her direction. "I ain't ever been to a skijoring event, but it looked pretty fast to me."

"But you're competing, too?" Cort had said as much.

"Me and one of the locals are going to try. But I'm the rider, not a skier. Cort's been letting us use this track for practice. It's fun, I'll give you that."

By then, Cort, riding Misty, had circled back and caught up to them.

She announced her time.

"That's better than last time."

"But is it good enough to win?"

Cort slid off the horse, his boots plopping on the packed snow. “Aren’t you having fun? Isn’t that what’s important?”

“I am having fun, but I want to beat Tamara.”

Mel looked at Cort and shrugged.

“What?” she asked, wondering what message Mel was trying to communicate with that look, which was along the lines of *Don’t make me say it*.

Cort grimaced. “I should tell you that Tamara is the skier Mel will be pulling.”

Was he kidding? “And they’ve been practicing on this track?”

Cort pushed up the brim of his cowboy hat, as if he needed to get a good look at her. “It’s all in good fun, Lexi.”

Maybe for him, but she had a wrong to correct. She had something to prove, if only to herself.

Suddenly, the air seemed colder, more biting.

“Only, now, she’ll know my time.” She fisted her hands on her hips and addressed Mel. “What’s her time?”

Cort raised his chin in Mel’s direction. “Tell her.”

“Thirty seconds, even. But I’m not sure ’cause I have to hold the stopwatch while on the horse.”

Still clutching Misty’s reins, Cort’s hands were on her arms. Good move because she could have punched something considering the pressure rising in her like steam ready to blow off a pot lid.

“We’re doing this for charity. And to have some fun.” He turned to Mel. “Thanks for your help. I’d consider it a personal favor if you didn’t tell Tamara our times. I’m in enough trouble for letting you use the track.” He cocked his head in Lexi’s direction.

“Mum’s the word, though she’s going to be at me until I tell her something.”

“Give her one of the old times,” Cort suggested. “Hopefully, she’ll feel overconfident.”

Mel gave Cort the stopwatch, put his finger to his hat in a salute, then headed off, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“You’re allowing Tamara to practice here?” Each word was a prong of a fork stabbing her chest. Looking into his eyes that were filled with amusement, she knew he didn’t understand how much this reminded her of Rusty all over again.

“I’m just being neighborly.” Cort removed his hands and straightened. “She does make a good fried chicken.” He grinned as he swiped a finger across her nose. “Remember, it’s for charity. Whatever happened years ago was a blip that doesn’t matter a hill of beans now, does it?”

“So you think I’m being petty?” Maybe she was, because it was true that, if Tamara beat her, it wouldn’t change one thing in her life. There was some prize money involved from the entrance fees and sponsors, which was to be split fifty-fifty between the winning contestants and the local animal rescue foundation, but that wasn’t her reason for wanting to win.

“I think you’re losing sight of the real objective.”

She sighed. “Knowing it’s for a good cause won’t make me feel any better if I lose to Tamara.”

He dug his hands into his jean pockets. “Maybe burgers at Smokey’s will make you feel better, or am I in the doghouse?”

“You’re in the doghouse.” She playfully swiped his chest with her hand. “But I’m not going to pass up a rodeo burger. Especially if you’re buying.”

“I’m buying. Got to keep the talent well fed.”

“Well, your time was better than mine today. You’re a good skier.”

“You can thank my college ski coach.”

They walked together, leading Misty back to the horse trailer, Bandit following. Though it was only a short hop down the road, Lexi hadn't wanted to ride Misty over to Cort's place and risk a misstep in the snow. Misty was, after all, faster than Cort's horse, Marco, at least when Lexi was the rider.

“Guess this will be the last run we'll get in before the big event. Hopefully, the snow tomorrow will be enough to fill in the track.” She'd seen the town's track, had even walked over it. Newly packed snow would make it even better, slicker.

“I'll help you trailer Misty, then clean up and swing by in a half an hour to pick you up.”

“It's a date.” As soon as she said it, her cheeks warmed.

He swiped her nose again. “Alrighty, then.”

* * *

Sitting across from Cort, Lexi took a draw from her bottle of Dancing Fool. She was still feeling burned from the revelation that Tamara had been using Cort's track to practice for the competition.

It smacked of the same type of betrayal her brother had done, aiding Tamara at Lexi's expense. The rational part of her argued that Cort was being a good neighbor to both of them. The emotional part countered that their friendship was more special than simply being neighbors, and he should have looked out for her interest.

And that was just ridiculous.

“So, is your boyfriend coming for Christmas?”

It was as if someone had snuck up behind her and surprised her, causing her thoughts to scatter. “No,” she said when she found her voice. “I don't have a boyfriend.”

He sat back and stared at her, the frown lines on his face deepening. “Your mother said you did.”

“That must have been before Thanksgiving. We broke up.” Simple. To the point. And moving on.

Cort’s phone jangled, and he just about jumped out of his seat. He hadn’t mentioned his mother’s impending visit all week, but since he’d received her call, he’d seemed unsettled every time his phone rang.

He glanced at the ID and then laid the cell on the table without answering. “Spam call.”

She nodded. “I thought maybe it was your mother sending her regrets or something. Haven’t you been expecting that?”

“No such luck. Last text I had from her, she’d sent me a copy of her itinerary. She gets into Gillette from Denver before lunch this coming Tuesday.”

“And when does she leave?”

“Flies out Thursday morning.”

“Not much time here.”

His eyebrows arched. “Really? Because I’m racking my brain trying to think what to do with her on Wednesday. Got any ideas?”

Talk? But, of course, that would not be what he wanted to hear. “Show her around the ranch. That could take up the whole day.”

“I was thinking about that, but then we’d have to be in the same vehicle together.”

Definitely didn’t want to talk. “Has she ever been on a horse? Giving her a riding lesson would mean you wouldn’t have to talk about anything important.” Like her leaving him all those years ago.

He stroked his chin. “She’s adventurous enough. She might go for it.”

“I was being sarcastic. At some point, don’t you think you should tell her how you feel?”

“I don’t know how I feel.”

“Start there, then.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “You have a terrific family, one that has given you a great foundation of love and support. You don’t have a clue what it feels like to have your world crumble and the two people who are supposed to love you make you feel like you’re a burden. Like they can’t wait for you to go to college so they are free of you.” He picked up the beer bottle.

She knew she was fortunate to have her family in her corner. “That might not be at all what your mother was feeling.”

He waved the beer bottle in her direction. “Look, I’m a grown man. Successful. And I’ve finally found a place where I feel I belong.” He tipped the bottle to his lips, and his Adam’s apple moved as he swallowed. Finished, he plunked the bottle on the table. “Your parents have been very supportive. So much so, it makes me realize more than ever what I’ve been missing. Buying your family ranch is bittersweet because I’ll be losing the only people in the last ten years who made me feel part of a family. I’m hoping you all will come visit... and frequently.”

Lexi’s heart tightened. How would it be a visitor to a place that had been not only her home, but the home of several generations? The reality of *visiting* her ranch was starting to hit.

“I’ve got an inkling of how you’re feeling.”

She slid her hand across the table and touched his. His skin was warm and rough.

He raised his gaze to look her in the eyes.

All she saw was hurt.

“Parents, mothers especially, are supposed to love you. Unconditionally. Not see you as someone who’s holding them back, weighing them down. Heck, how much of a burden was I as a teenager? I didn’t get into much trouble, got decent grades, brought her flowers every week out of the money I earned as a caddy. I never forgot her birthday. I was going to college in another year. But she couldn’t wait to be rid of me.” He fiddled with the beer bottle.

“Her marriage was unraveling.” And, from her experience, when corporations asked an employee to move, the employee moved because there was no guarantee they’d come asking again.

“For a long time, I blamed myself for that. But, looking back, I realized it wasn’t about me. It was about both of them. Lots of people get divorced. Few mothers leave their children for a career in Paris.”

“Maybe now would be the time to talk to her about the reasons for her decision.”

Charlene approached and Lexi pulled her hands into her lap. The community that patronized Smokey’s was a small one, and she didn’t need rumors starting.

Charlene set their burger orders in front of them and plopped down a ketchup bottle. “Let me know when you’re ready for a refill.” She motioned to the beer bottles, then scooted away to her next customer.

“That would be like talking to your old boss, the one who fired you, about the reasons for his decision.”

A shudder went through her. “I’m just saying.” Though he’d made his point.

He held up a hand. “The last thing I want to talk about is my mother and how her leaving made me feel. I’m starved. I want to enjoy my burger.” He took a bite, and Lexi followed suit.

He tipped his beer bottle toward her. “Thanks, though, for the idea about teaching her to ride... or at least getting her on a horse. It’ll give me something to do without having to delve into how I feel about things. I’d love it if you could stop by and help me.”

“You mean run interference?” She wasn’t sure how she’d feel spending time around the person who had disappointed him. “I’ll think about it. What are you going to get her for Christmas?”

He took in a deep breath. “Hadn’t thought about it. Haven’t bought her a gift in years. Wouldn’t know what to get her. Any ideas?”

What would she get someone she hadn’t seen in a while?

“How about a cowgirl hat? She might appreciate it as a keepsake, and she’ll have it for the next time she visits.”

“This can’t be a recurring event. She lives in Paris.”

She patted his hand again. “You never know what can happen.”

“No, you don’t,” said an unfamiliar voice.

Lexi turned toward the voice only to see Tamara standing at their table. The woman seemed to have a habit of materializing out of thin air. Like a witch.

She had on tight jeans that showed her panty line, a red sweater that accentuated the positive, and a large belt buckle anchoring it all. Bright-red lipstick, blush applied with a heavy hand, and black eyeliner contrasted with her pale skin and blonde hair.

Lexi straightened, grabbed her beer, and pasted on a smile. “Tamara, good to see you.”

“Really?” She cocked her head. “Hope your father is doing better, though. Nice of you to help out.”

“Glad I can be of help.”

Tamara looked down her pert nose. “I saw you’re on the roster of contestants for the skijoring event.”

Lexi nodded. “Understand we’ve both been practicing for it.”

Tamara glanced at Cort. Thank goodness Cort had told Lexi before Tamara surprised her with the news.

“So you know about that. It’s a nice practice track, and I’m grateful Cort is letting us use it.”

Cort put down his burger. “No problem. Right, Lexi?”

“None at all,” she said breezily, hoping she sounded as if she didn’t care. “After all, it’s for charity.”

Tamara shifted her weight. “Is your brother going to be home in time for the race?”

Rusty was the last subject Lexi wanted to talk about with Tamara. “Doubt it. He said not to expect him much before Christmas.”

“How long is he going to be home?”

She hoped Tamara wasn’t planning to start something up with her brother after all this time. “Not long, I expect.”

“Tell him I said hi, will you? And that I’d love to see him.”

Lexi wasn’t about to commit to that when it went against her better judgment. “See you at the race, Tamara.”

Tamara hesitated before responding. “Looking forward to another win. See you there.”

As Lexi watched her walk to a stool at the bar, she mentally repeated what Cort had said. *It’s for charity.*

Chapter 11

Lexi could feel the adrenaline pumping with each beat of her pulse as Cort drove the pickup and two-horse trailer into the parking area and pulled up alongside another trailer. Race day saw the sun shining and the newly fallen snow sparkling like thousands of crystals had been scattered all over the ground. The weather app had marked it as a six-inch snowfall. Not great, but enough to make some improvement in the track conditions.

“Looks like it will be a perfect day.” She tugged her gloves on.

“I’m ready. Looking forward to seeing how I compare.”

Cort was definitely a better skier than Lexi, but Misty was faster than Marco, so his times hadn’t gotten out of the low thirties. She’d done some research, and the big competitors in the sport turned in times of twenty seconds or better. Those likely wouldn’t show up for this family-focused, non-sanctioned event, however.

“I hope Tamara and I end up in the same division?”

She shouldn’t care how Tamara did. That this was for fun, for charity. If she repeated it enough, she might just believe it.

“The rules said the three divisions will be divided based on everyone’s initial run.”

What if her initial run was a bad one?

Cort opened the truck door. “Let’s get the horses unloaded and corralled, then check things out.”

The place was bustling as they walked around the festival grounds toward the check-in booth near the skijor track. There was a section with light displays for the evening festivities, stands selling everything and anything from goods to foods, ice skating on the small pond across from the skijor track, and a competition in ice sculptures going on in the open field. But the big event of the day was the skijor race, and crowds were already lining up on the sides of the track.

“Are you hungry?” Cort asked as they passed a hamburger stand.

“Not in the least. Too nervous.”

“There’s a stand selling beer.”

“Not a chance. I want to win, remember?”

“There’s one selling hot chocolate and coffee.”

“Maybe after the race. I think I’ve had enough caffeine this morning to energize a tank.”

He grabbed her hand—and she let him. They walked together, stride for stride. Excitement bubbled inside her at being at her hometown festival that brought everyone out for some good old-fashioned fun.

She nodded at the people who nodded at her... or perhaps they were nodding at Cort. He fit right in after just a few months. She no longer did.

They found the booth, registered, and Cort got their number placards to pin on their backs. She was nineteen, and he was twenty. As they turned away from the booth, Lexi saw Tamara in the distance, talking to another competitor, if the number on the person’s back was an indication.

“We’ve got half an hour. Your folks coming?” Cort asked.

“Yup. Mom didn’t want Dad standing too long with his ankle and all, so they’ll be here right before it starts. But Junie should be here with Parker and Todd.” She stopped, whipped

out her phone, and tapped out a message. Almost instantaneously, the answer appeared. “Junie and family are over at the hotdog stand.”

“Great. I’ll have just enough time to wolf some down. I don’t have a mom making me lunch.”

“Neither do I. She’s busy with Dad. I fixed lunch for all of us.”

“And that was?”

“Heated up chicken soup my mom made the other day.” She chuckled as he swiped a gloved finger across her nose.

“I can cook,” she said in her defense.

“You haven’t cooked for me yet.”

“I will.” And it would be something better than fried chicken.

“I’ll hold you to it.”

The more time she spent with Cort, the more time she wanted to spend with him. And she wasn’t so sure that was a good thing, considering. But she put that thought aside. Today her focus was on the race.

The first team had already thundered down the track, the skier picking off three of the rings and making his gates with a respectable time of thirty-seven seconds. While the riders were both men and women, Lexi was surprised to see that the skiers were mostly men, except for her and Tamara.

Cort held Misty’s reins as they waited for the teams to run the track. Tamara was riding sixth, so she and Mel moved up closer to the gate when the next team took off. As the skier approached the first mound, his skis flew out from under him

and he landed in a heap at the top of the hill. The announcer said he'd get five seconds added to his time on a retry.

As she watched the skier right himself, it felt like a fly had gotten trapped in her belly. Good thing she hadn't had any hotdogs earlier. Cort had eaten three of them. "I hope that doesn't happen to me." The mounds for the jump were only three feet, but a spill could easily happen nonetheless.

"It never has in practice. Maybe you shouldn't watch this if it makes you nervous."

"I'm not nervous just... okay, I'm nervous." Her breath puffed in the cold air.

Cort turned to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "It's supposed to be fun. So have fun, and whatever your time is, all these people will still enjoy the day. And you will, too."

That fly was buzzing in her stomach like she was an apple pie. "You're right. Maybe Tamara and I won't even be in the same division. She's probably way better than I am."

"Now you're just psyching yourself out. She's not way better. And you can't trust what Mel told you, anyway. He said it under duress since I'm his boss—he's got it bad for Tamara."

"Does she have it bad for him?" As Lexi knew, Tamara was a master at manipulating someone to get what she wanted at the time, but she was not someone in it for the long stretch.

Cort shrugged. "Only Tamara can answer that, and, as far as I know, she isn't talking."

"You know, she broke my brother's heart. I still think he went into the Air Force because she dumped him and he didn't want to be in the same town watching her with another guy."

"Guess he had it bad."

"Rusty is a big guy with a big heart, and she just stomped on it. It really did a number on him. Though he denied it at the

time, I think he'd bought her a ring and was ready to propose when he caught her cheating."

She guessed hearing it from the person who was doing the cheating was a teeny bit better than walking in on them.

"You sound pretty bitter about it. Is that what happened to you—you caught your boyfriend cheating?"

"Now is not the time to be talking about my sorry love life." Or ever. "I need to focus." Philip was the last—the *very* last—person she wanted to be thinking about at that moment. Or any moment.

Lexi scanned the crowd for her family, and midway up the track, she spotted Parker on Todd's shoulders. Junie was beside him, her mom and dad near them.

She pointed. "I see them. Right where they said they'd be." She waved; Cort waved; they waved back.

Her cheering section had arrived. She looked around for Tamara's parents, but didn't see them in the crowd, though she saw Charlene. Well, Tamara was a hometown gal, so she'd have lots of support, regardless. Lexi could no longer claim that title.

"Tamara's up next at sixth place." Cort pointed to the fifth-place team as they began their drive to a lot of whoops and hollers. Clearly a fan favorite. Thirty-one-and-five-tenths seconds later, they finished.

"That was fast."

"That's the fastest so far, but there're a lot more contestants to go, including this next one." He angled his chin toward Tamara and Mel.

Tamara had on a red-hot ski suit, glare-reflective goggles, and a red-hot helmet to match. Mel had on a red ski jacket, and the horse had on a red blanket, with its lower legs also wrapped in red.

Lexi looked down at her brown ski outfit and Misty's pink wraps. She hadn't thought this was a fashion show.

"They're off!" Cort shouted.

Tamara looked like a professional weaving through the gates, gliding up the first mound, capturing the first ring, then the second, whirring down the track, up the second mound, grabbing the last ring, and sliding over the finish line. The crowd was solidly behind her, yelling encouragement the whole way.

Thirty seconds and eight-tenths blared out of the loudspeaker. The best so far. Figured.

So that was the time to beat or match. Unfortunately, Lexi had yet to achieve it, and if she didn't come close, Tamara would be in a different division.

"You've got to give Misty her head, Cort. She needs to know she can go all out." Though this wasn't on Misty; it was on her. She had to ski smart and close to the flags to pick up time.

"That's my intention."

They watched the other teams in silence, inching up closer to the starting line as each team went. Finally, it was their turn.

Cort mounted Misty. Lexi pulled down her goggles and wrapped the rope around her gloved hand. The announcer yelled start, and she was off.

Misty ran full out, snow flying everywhere, blinding Lexi to everything but the track. She passed the first flag, spotted the ring ahead and swerved to reach it. It slid on her arm. The jump was ahead. She crouched, feeling the pull on the rope, and braced for the jump. She landed with a thud but she was upright, though barely. She steadied her legs though she could do nothing for her nerves, and zeroed in on the second ring. She hooked it, then swerved around the next flag. Too wide her brain told her. On to the last ring. Holding her arm out it

slid on and the three rings thumped against her body. Almost to the finish. She could hear the roar from the sidelines, could see the flags waving as she crossed. The speaker blared out a time of thirty-two-and-four-tenths seconds. She let go of the rope and raised her arms to the whoops of someone who sounded a lot like her dad. She had three rings on her arm.

“You did great, babe!” Cort’s voice rang out over the crowd as he turned the horse in her direction.

“Not my best time. I took that one flag wide,” she said when he came alongside. “Tamara and I will be in different divisions.

“Maybe not. It all depends on what everyone does.”

“We’ve got to get in place for you.” She’d tried. And failed. That seemed to be her story lately. “Only five slots to go.”

Her hopes were pinned on Cort, now.

Lexi had ridden Marco flat-out, and, as a result, Cort’s time came in at thirty and nine-tenths. She was happy for him, but, as the scores piled up, it was clear she wouldn’t be in the top division. When the announcements were made, she was in division two, and Tamara and Cort were in division one.

She made a decision. “I’m going to ride Misty for your run. You can ride Marco for my run.”

“I thought you wanted to win.”

“I do. But it’s more important that *you* win, and Misty’s faster. Especially with my weight rather than yours.”

“It’s that important to you to have someone beat Tamara?”

“I know you think it’s petty, but I won’t be back here next year—”

“You could visit Junie when the festival’s going on. I’d make the run with you again.”

Her heart hitched a beat. He might be married to someone else by then.

“In my line of work, taking time off is rarely an option. This is the most free time I’ve had in five years.” Of course, feeding livestock, repairing tractors, organizing barns, and clearing snow wasn’t really “free time” but being her own boss and doing things on her timeline provided an unfamiliar sense of liberty. “I insist. I’ll ride Misty for your run, and you ride Marco for mine.”

He looked like he was going to object.

“Please.” She wasn’t above begging.

He chuckled. “It’s not a sacrifice on my part, so, if this is what you want, I’m game. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ll have more fun this way.”

“I may not win.”

“You posted that time with me riding Marco. With me riding Misty, your time will be that much better.”

“And your time will be that much worse.”

“I’m fine with that. You keep telling me it’s not about winning.”

“It’s about beating Tamara?”

“Exactly.”

Lexi came in second in her division. Cort was right, with Marco pulling her, she’d dropped three-tenths of a second. Division one contestants were running next. Each competitor had drawn lots for their positions, and Cort was after Tamara, who’d had the best first round time.

Tamara was up. Mel was again riding Tamara’s horse, Cortez. The horse pranced at the starting line, as if eager to get

it over with. Tamara lowered her goggles.

The flag man counted down and dropped the flag. They were off, Tamara's horse pounding the track, Tamara weaving.

She crested onto the first mound. The horse reared, evidently startled by something in the crowd. Tamara let go of the rope and went flying, landing in a heap on the track. She moved to get up, and, while Lexi couldn't hear Tamara's words, her tone made it clear she was not pleased. Or hurt.

By the time Mel circled back, Tamara was upright. He threw the rope at her, she grabbed it, and the team was off again. But the outcome wasn't going to be good. Not only would her time suffer, but she'd incur that five-second penalty as well.

While Lexi hadn't caused the crash, she might as well have with the negative vibes she'd been sending Tamara's way, and the unpleasant feeling in her gut let her know that.

An earlier contestant had had a time of thirty seconds and nine-tenths, exactly the same as Cort's qualifying time. Cort had a chance, but, as she watched Tamara ski back, her head down, her eyes looking at her knees, it didn't feel important anymore. This was exactly what Cort had been telling her all along.

Cort leaned in. "Mount up. We're next."

She put her foot in the stirrup and hoisted herself onto Misty's saddle, then dangled the rope for Cort to grab. He flashed a smile as he pulled his goggles down, his dimple visible right below the rim.

She moved Misty into position, twisted around to make sure Cort was ready, then nodded at the flagman.

She heard him count down. The flag dropped, and Misty thundered off.

Wind whipped Lexi's face as she urged Misty into a full gallop. The horse sailed down the track, hooves seeming to

barely touch the ground. She let Misty have her head. Lexi's heart pounded against her chest, keeping time.

The shouts and yells coalesced into a roar. Faces blurred as she whizzed by. She kept her focus on the red flags delineating the finish line just ahead.

Misty crossed the finish line, and Lexi glanced behind her as the horse slowed. Cort had let go of the rope and was giving her a thumbs-up. It seemed fast, but it wasn't until she heard the time of thirty seconds and seven-tenths that Lexi realized Cort had taken the lead—*ahead* of the fastest guy. With two more contestants to go, he had a shot.

Cort wasn't quite sure how to break the news to Lexi. After all, half of the prize money was hers. They'd earned it as a team. If she objected, he'd reimburse her out of his own pocket.

As he rounded the bend into the parking area, he spotted Marco and Misty in the makeshift corral along with the other horses. Lexi was leaning against the trailer, arms crossed, waiting for him.

"Hey," he said, sidling up, his boots kicking up snow as he walked.

"So how much was the prize money?"

"Just short of a thousand dollars."

"Really?" She practically squealed. "I didn't realize it would be so much. That's like rodeo-type winnings." She laughed, that tinkling sweet laugh of hers he'd love to bottle so he could listen to it when she was gone. It just made the whole world seem better.

She held out her hand.

“I don’t have it, though.”

She did a double take. “You couldn’t have spent it between the booth and here.”

“Nope. I gave it away.”

“Almost a thousand dollars.” She straightened and pushed off the side of the trailer. “Well, I’m sure the animal rescue will be doubly pleased.”

This would be the hard part. “I didn’t give it to the animal shelter.”

“Then to who? What?”

He slid next to her and leaned against the pickup. “How much do you know about Tamara these days?”

She shrugged. “Not much. Nothing. But why are you asking?”

“Did you see her parents out here today?”

“No. I thought that was odd, but—” she shrugged again —“not all that unusual.”

“Did you know her mom is battling lung cancer?”

Lexi visibly shivered. “My parents never mentioned it.”

“Well, she is. And Tamara has been supporting her parents through this. Emotionally and monetarily. I had let Tamara use the track because I knew she needed the prize money. Her family needed the prize money. Cancer treatments aren’t cheap, especially when you don’t have great insurance.”

She stared at him a minute, looking like she’d just lost the race. Then a tear slipped down her face. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For acting so mean. For caring so much about beating Tamara that I lost sight of what I should be caring about. You know she asked about my dad, and I never once asked about her parents.”

He remembered. “You got carried away by the moment.”

“I forgot what’s important. I’ve been doing that a lot these last five years.” She turned her face toward him. “Thanks for doing that for Tamara. I had no idea.”

“So I’m not in the doghouse this time?”

She sighed. “You never were.” She turned toward him, leaning her shoulder against the pickup. “You really are a nice guy.”

He smirked. “Taken you long enough.”

She leaned closer.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. And nothing had ever tasted so good.

Chapter 12

Cort stood in the cordoned-off space of Gillette's small regional airport, waiting for his mother to come down the long walkway leading to the planes. He dug his hands into his pockets, the collar of his jacket still turned up against the cold despite being inside, and surveyed the people coming and going. Would he recognize her? She might have dyed her hair a different color, gotten plastic surgery to hide her age, gained weight.

She might not recognize him. After all, he'd been just twenty-two the last time he'd seen her in the flesh. Since then, he'd had a career in tech, made a few million dollars, and had become a rancher, cowboy hat, boots, and all. What the heck would he say to her?

Where were you when I needed you?

Why did you leave?

Why are you here?

He knew he'd ask none of those questions. Instead, they'd make polite conversation. How was the flight? What's the weather going to be like? But that would only take them so far.

And then there was Lexi, whom he'd be seeing that night. With his mother. They'd had one long kiss, and it felt like he'd come home. To where he belonged. And, for a moment, he'd thought she'd felt the same. Then she'd pushed away and had gone to load up the horses.

It'd been a reminder. Lexi had a career, just like his mother, and pursuing a relationship was not in the cards. But... if she

was receptive to something more—

People can change.

Some people.

His mother materialized out of the crowd. Same nicely styled short, dark hair. Same high cheekbones. Same moderately roundish frame. She wore black boots with heels and what looked like a white fur jacket with black swirls through it. She was pulling a suitcase on wheels. If she didn't have on the fur-like coat and the high-heeled boots, she might even look motherly.

He knew his mother had spotted him when her eyes widened. A smile graced her lips. She walked slowly toward him, as if afraid he'd bolt if she came in too fast.

"Look at you," she said when she was closer. She cocked her head and took him in from hat to boots. "You're really a cowboy, aren't you?"

He grimaced. "I own a ranch."

"And that's exactly what you look like." She shook her head. "I wouldn't have imagined this in a million years. Not knowing how much you hated us for sending you out here that summer."

What he'd hated was coming home to the news that his parents were divorcing. "Things change."

"Yes, they do."

She held out her arms, leaving her suitcase standing.

He grabbed for the suitcase. "Let me take this for you. The SUV is just outside."

He headed for the door. The clip-clop of her heels told him she was following.

"What, no pickup? I expected you'd have one by now." She'd caught up to him.

His ears warmed as he cleared the double-door entrance. “I do. Just thought you’d be more comfortable in the SUV.”

“It wouldn’t matter to me.” She waved her hands as she stepped out into the chilled air. “Just as long as you’re here.”

“Of course I’m here.” He kept on walking.

She kept on following.

In the parking lot, he clicked the key fob in his pocket, and the SUV, two spots away, flashed its lights.

“I wasn’t so sure. You didn’t seem all that enthusiastic about my coming.”

He hadn’t been. But she was here, and he was going to make the best of it for the forty-some hours she’d be with him.

He secured the suitcase in the back as she got in on the passenger side. As he slipped into the driver’s seat and closed the car door, he took a deep breath. He hadn’t been alone with his mom since... he couldn’t remember when. At his graduation, his dad had been with them. She’d squeezed the ceremony into her busy work schedule, and then, in a flash, she’d been gone.

“How was your flight?” He started the engine and shifted into reverse. He was determined to stay in safe conversation territory.

“Fine into Denver, but flying in here, it was pretty bumpy. Due to wind, the pilot said. But at least it isn’t snowing. I was afraid we’d get one of those blizzards and this wouldn’t happen.”

“No snow in the forecast for the next few days. Shame, because we need more. It’s been too dry around these parts for the last two years.” Weather was a safe topic.

“I heard.”

“All the way in Paris?”

“Anything to do with climate change, the French press is all over it. It’s a big concern in Europe.”

He turned onto the highway, and the hum of the engine filled the silence. “How do they like your fur coat?”

She laughed. “It’s faux fur. Real fur wouldn’t go over well at all.” She shifted in her seat so that she was looking more directly at him. “How do you like the winter out here?”

“It’s cold. Colder than California, but not that much different from some of our Jersey winters. Just longer. At least, that’s the case so far. This will be my first winter.”

“I just never thought you’d be a rancher. Do you know anything about ranching?”

“I lucked out and found a great teacher, the owner of the neighboring ranch. He’s taken me on and taught me a lot. We’re eating at their place tonight.”

“Does he have a wife?”

“Yes, and his daughter’s visiting. She’s the one who taught me to ride when I came here that summer.” He glanced at his mom.

Her eyebrows arched. “Ah. Is she pretty? Single?”

He didn’t want to talk about Lexi, but at least it would keep the conversation off other subjects. “Yes to both. But she’s an investment banker by trade and in between jobs at the moment, so she’s helping her parents out.”

“An investment banker in between jobs? That won’t last long in this job market.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. She’s getting into the swing of ranching. I think she may like it more than she thought.”

“Really?” She patted his arm, and he had to hold steady not to jump at her touch. “Well, stranger things have happened. Such as your liking ranching more than being a tech wizard.”

“Never a tech wizard. That would have been my bosses. Just one of many who knew how to make it happen.”

“Which I am in awe of. Technology is a big, big concern for our company, and half the time, I haven’t a clue what they’re talking about. Thankfully, at this level I just have to ask the questions—I’m not expected to know the answers.”

“That’s what your tech people are for.”

“Yes, but how do I know if they’re the right answers? If you ever need a job, I could use a technology interpreter.”

Working for his mother? He’d rather clean out stalls all day. “Don’t think I’ll be moving to Paris anytime soon.”

“You wouldn’t have to. I’m relocating. To New York City.”

As if a linebacker had just tackled him to the ground, her statement had knocked the wind right out of him. This was the reason she was in the States. Not her family. Things made sense now.

“You have a new job? Same company?” he asked when he could breathe again.

“Same company. But, starting the first of the year, you’re looking at the president of L’Origine Cosmetics worldwide. I just signed a lease for an apartment on the Upper West Side. There’s a spare room, so you can come visit.” The last sentence seemed to catch in her throat.

His mother, stateside. Only took her ten years.

Ten years too late.

He took a minute, fighting the urge to tell her he wouldn’t be visiting. He won the fight. “Congratulations. That’s a big job.”

“It’s what I’ve worked for. It’s what I’ve hoped for.” She sat straighter. “It’s one of the reasons I went to the Paris office in the first place.”

Yup.

“But it wasn’t the only reason.”

What other reason was there? To get away from him? To shirk her responsibilities as a parent so she could devote all her time to her career?

This was exactly what he’d feared would happen, and here it was happening in the first fifteen minutes. And there was nowhere to hide. No place to get away from hearing that his mother cared more about a career, prestige, and money than him.

He turned on the car radio. Country music blared out of the speakers.

She huffed, loud enough to be heard over the music. “Don’t you want to know the other reasons?”

“Not particularly.” Truth.

She hit the button to turn the radio off. “I left for Paris because my marriage was falling apart, and leaving was a way of not dealing with... with the hurt. My son would be going off to college in another year. He’d made it quite clear that he didn’t need his mom—”

“When did I do that?”

“You were never home. Once you got your driving permit, you were out with your friends, chasing after that pushy girl... Madison, wasn’t it? Or doing homework.”

“A teenage boy doesn’t usually spend a lot of time with his parents.” But it didn’t mean he didn’t need them.

“Well, running away—because that was what I was doing—to a place that needed and wanted me seemed the perfect solution. At least, at the time.”

Nice rationalization. “And now you’ve got the job you always wanted.”

“Yes. But... well, when one gets to a certain age, one starts to look back at things. And wonders if it was worth the price.”

“What price? You got what you wanted.” He looked at the speedometer. He was going way over the speed limit. He lessened the pressure on the gas pedal.

“I got something I wanted. But in order to do that, I sacrificed something very precious—more precious than I’d realized at the time.”

He wasn’t going to ask what. He knew what was coming. But ten years was a long time to come to that realization.

“You. Our relationship.” She said it anyway.

He was trying to keep it in. Trying not to give in to the temptation to lay it all out there. He’d told himself on the ride up that he was not going to go over old wounds. He was going to act like everything was perfectly normal. That it was normal and, therefore, okay for a mother to leave her teenage son and go off to Paris—run away, as she’d said—and forget about him. Because that was certainly how it’d felt—that she’d forgotten about him beyond birthday cards, which usually contained cash, and an occasional phone call or, more likely, text.

But he couldn’t hold it in. “What relationship? We didn’t have a relationship.”

Her mouth dropped open. She batted something off her cheek. “Who was that woman who put Band-Aids on your cuts, cooked your meals, read you bedtime stories?” She crossed her hands over her chest.

“That person left long before she went to Paris.”

She trained her gaze on the road. “I deserve that, I guess.”

Cort punched on the radio. The sound of Blake Shelton filled the car. How the heck was he going to get through this?

Lexi wasn't sure what she'd expected when she met Kate McClane, Cort's mother, that night at dinner, but it wasn't the motherly-type woman who sat across the table in her black pants and cream sweater. She had flawless skin, made up with a light hand so that the blushed cheeks, rosy lips, and lovely eyes were accentuated without looking painted on. But she didn't look like a powerful corporate executive who'd spent years climbing the ladder of success.

As she sat at the table, her chair pushed back as if she was observing, she didn't seem quite part of the scene. And whenever Cort spoke, as he was now, talking to Ian about the need for more snow, Kate didn't take her eyes off her son. It was as if she was memorizing every moment of being with him... but as an outsider, looking in.

"So, Kate, Cort tells us you work in Paris for L'Origine Cosmetics. Paris must be so interesting." Her mother had shifted the conversation, undoubtedly trying to draw Kate in.

"It is. It has everything you'd want in a city. Lovely architecture, good food, wonderful cultural venues in a relatively safe environment, and, of course, the history. But I won't be living there come the first of the year."

"Really?" Lexi said. After hearing Cort's reaction to his mother's short visit, Lexi was sure Kate wouldn't be moving to Gillette.

"I've been transferred to corporate headquarters in New York City."

"I always thought L'Origine was French."

"No, it's an American company with a French name. I think the founders wanted to give it a bit of *je ne sais quoi*."

Her parents stared at Kate.

"A special quality. You know, to sound more upscale," Kate explained.

“You’re looking at the new president of the whole company.” Cort didn’t sound all that pleased.

Her mother brought her hands to her cheeks. “Oh my. I feel like we have a celebrity at dinner.”

The pink blush on Kate’s cheeks deepened.

“Well, welcome back,” Lexi said.

Kate glanced at Cort. “I’ve been away too long. I’m happy to be back. And I have a spare room in my new flat. So, if you’re interested in visiting the city, you’re welcome to stay with me. That includes everyone.” Kate glanced around the table. “But maybe not all at once. I only have one extra bedroom, though there’s always the couch.”

“That’s very sweet of you,” Mom said. “But we’re looking to go more south than east. Maybe New Mexico. Maybe Arizona. Maybe even Florida.” She shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Cities don’t hold much appeal to me,” her father offered as he struggled to eat using the fork with his left hand. “I like to breathe fresh air, see a mountain in the distance.”

“We’re looking for warmth. The cold winters aren’t good for Ian’s arthritis.”

“Feeling it in my bones these days.” Dad held out his injured arm. Then grimaced. “Probably even more after this.”

“Cort told me of your accident. I’m so sorry. But I’m glad you’re on the mend. Does that mean you’re selling?”

Ian glanced at Cort, whose eyes were trained on his meal of ham, mashed potatoes, and green beans. “Yup.”

“I’m sure you’ll get a good price. I was reading up on Gillette on the plane ride here, and the area is enjoying good economic growth, but there didn’t seem to be all that many new developments going up.”

Cort cleared his throat. “Ian wants to keep it a ranch.”

Kate frowned. “But can’t you get more money from a developer?”

A woman after Lexi’s own heart.

Her father snorted. “It’s a long story, but the short version is that this land has been in our family for several generations as a ranch.” He waved a fork in Kate’s direction. “And money isn’t the only thing that’s important.”

Kate looked around the table as if trying to gauge the mood of the room. “Got it.”

“Who wants dessert?” Mom asked.

Mom was settling Dad on the sofa, Cort had insisted on feeding Misty, no doubt to escape his mother, and Lexi was left alone with Kate after dessert of pumpkin pie.

“I know it’s cold out, but it’s still above freezing, according to my weather app. I saw some lovely rockers on your porch,” Kate said as she put her dessert plate in the sink.

She’d much prefer to help Cort feed Misty. After that kiss, her body was thrumming to explore more. But that was undoubtedly a bad idea and Lexi was curious about the woman who had left her son for Paris. “Sure. Grab your coat off the peg, and we’ll step out.”

She glanced back at her mom, who nodded.

Out on the porch, sitting on two of the four rockers and wrapped in their jackets under the porch light, it really wasn’t too chilly now that the wind had died down.

“So, your family knows Cort from when he came out to the ranch that summer?” Kate began a rhythmic rocking of her chair.

“Yes. In fact, I taught him how to ride.” She wasn’t going to say what Cort had taught her. Her memory of his kiss in the parking lot was still vivid. A kiss full of promise. And risk.

“And started him on this journey apparently.” Though her tone was matter of fact, Kate had narrowed her gaze, as if ready to interrogate. “But I understand you didn’t stay on the ranch. Cort tells me you’re an investment banker.”

“Was. Am. I’m between jobs right now.”

“He told me that, as well.”

Seems he’d spent a lot of time chatting about her. That sent a warm tingle through her. Maybe he hadn’t been as unaffected by that kiss as he’d appeared to be. She been so flustered she’d headed out to the corral to gather the horses. He’d set about readying the trailer as if nothing had happened. Only it had happened and she couldn’t forget it.

“When you land somewhere, even if it’s not in the New York area, give me a ring.” Kate dug into her jacket pocket and pulled out a business card. “I have an acquisition I’m interested in but can’t talk about yet. When it’s time, I’ll need an investment banker. We may be able to do business. I’m always interested in helping smart young women in their careers.”

Lexi slid the card into her jeans pocket. “I will. Thank you.”

Lexi searched for something else to say, when Kate broke the silence. “So, I suppose you know that my son hates me?”

If she could have managed it, Lexi would have slid right out of her chair and under the porch. “I know nothing of the sort.”

“Well, resents me, then. Feels that I left him when he needed me.” Kate coughed after she said those words as if something was caught in her throat. She had stopped rocking, as if to better hear Lexi’s response.

Lexi waited several seconds before responding, hoping to choose the right words. “I think the divorce was unexpected. He wasn’t prepared for it.”

Kate nodded. “I’ve tried to explain to him that I was running away from a bad marriage, not him. I felt responsible, guilty about the divorce. I was sure Cort was angry with me. And I... I might have tried to avoid him when I shouldn’t have. I was ashamed.”

Lexi was out of her depth here, but, clearly, Kate needed to tell someone how she was feeling, and Lexi had been chosen. “How do you think that made him feel?” *Ask questions. Don’t make statements.* She’d learned that technique when dealing with clients. It came in handy now.

Kate didn’t answer right away, but tapped her finger on the arm of the rocker, as if she was thinking. Several seconds ticked by before she spoke. “Abandoned, I guess. I thought...” Her voice trailed off, and her brow furrowed. “I thought he didn’t need me anymore. He was a teenage boy who barely spoke to me when I was home. He was always off doing something with his friends. I thought he’d be better off with his dad rather than deal with the disruption of moving to France for his senior year. But, really, I figured he was going to college in a year and I’d be left alone soon anyway. My company was offering me an exciting position in Paris. They wanted me; no one else seemed to. So I went.”

“So, you left before either Cort or his father could leave you?”

Kate turned her head in Lexi’s direction. “I guess you could say that. In any event, now that I’m back, I intend to work hard to earn his trust again. I know it’ll take time. But I want to try to make it up to him.”

“I hope you succeed.”

Kate went back to rocking. “I’m glad to hear you say so. Because I don’t want to see him hurt again. I don’t know how

he would take it if another woman left him, particularly to pursue her career.”

“Cort and me?” They weren’t even dating.

“A man doesn’t talk constantly about a woman unless he has feelings for her.”

“Cort’s talking about me?” A pleasant tingle zipped through her.

“Pretty much nonstop. I’m sure some of it is to fill in the silent gaps so we don’t talk about our mother-son relationship, or lack thereof. But I know quite a bit about you. Including that you want to train horses... or used to. I overheard him on the phone talking about buying a horse that needs some training. That couldn’t be connected to you, could it?” Kate stopped rocking again.

“I’m sure it’s not.” Lexi had no idea why Cort was buying a horse that needed training. “Cort and I are friends. Good friends.” Of course, that kiss had been more-than-a-friend kind of kiss. “He knows I’m looking for a job in investment banking.”

“If that’s all it is.” She didn’t sound convinced. “Just please don’t hurt him. I fear that if another woman leaves him for her career, it will permanently close the door on any hopes for resolving our relationship.”

How could she hurt someone she wasn’t even dating? “I’ve no intention of hurting him, Kate.”

“I hadn’t meant to hurt him either.”

Chapter 13

His mom came running toward him, phone in hand, as he stood in the corral and held the horse's bridle. She'd had to take the call, she said. Of course she did. She was the new president of the company, and the company always came first.

Not that he minded. Any time eaten up by something other than him was welcome. In his free hand, he held the hat he'd gotten her on Lexi's advice. Now seemed as good a time as any to give it to her, though he couldn't remember the last present he'd given her. Probably the flowers he'd bought at the airport that fateful day he'd returned home.

"Sorry." His mother wheezed as she entered the corral and carefully closed the gate behind her. "Something I had to arrange."

Bandit came up to greet her. She pasted on a smile and Cort wondered how she really felt about a riding lesson. She hadn't exactly jumped at the chance. Probably felt like he did—it was something they could do without having to say much.

"No problem. Gave me time to get Clover saddled."

She tucked her phone into her jacket pocket. "I put my foot in here?" Kate pointed to the stirrup dangling from the saddle on the horse's back—the calmest horse in the stable. She apparently knew more than he had his first time out.

"That's right. And grab hold of the saddle horn. Use the leverage to pull yourself up." He hoped she'd make it into the saddle on her own propulsion.

Bandit, his tail wagging, cocked his head, as if trying to get a better view of the scene about to unfold.

She did as instructed and, on the second attempt, made it up and swung her leg over. She had on her fluffy fake fur jacket, thin-heeled boots and a pair of jeans. Not exactly cowgirl material, but, sitting on top of Clover, she looked proud of her accomplishment.

The day was cloudy, the wind raw, but she'd been game nonetheless. Thank goodness, because Lexi's suggestion was likely to save him from boredom, or worse, conversation.

"I've got something for you." He held out the cowgirl hat.

"For me?" Her expression was just like the one she'd had when he'd handed her those flowers at the airport all those years ago: happy, pleased, and maybe even grateful.

She took it from his hand and examined it before plopping it onto her head, then rested her hand over her heart, as if ready to testify. "That's so thoughtful of you."

"Merry Christmas."

"It's perfect, Cort. I could hug you."

That was the reason he'd given it to her while she was on the horse.

A car rumble filled the air, growing louder with each second. Maybe it was Lexi coming to the rescue.

"How do I look?"

Like a woman pretending to be a cowgirl. "Good."

His mom gazed toward the driveway, and he turned to look. The Russells' SUV was pulling to a stop.

"Looks like your girlfriend is coming to help."

"She's not my girlfriend." Much as he'd like her to be.

"She's a girl and a friend, so I think she qualifies."

He'd forgotten how annoying mothers could be, poking in their sons' business. Holding the horse, he watched as Lexi strode over, her long legs gracefully covering ground. Her hair

was pulled back in a ponytail, and she looked just like she had ten years ago; pretty, young, energetic, ready to tackle the world.

“Hey, Kate. How’s the lesson going?” Lexie called.

Cort quelled the urge to reach for her. “We just started.”

His mother pulled her phone out of her pocket. She tapped on the screen and held it out to him. “Take a picture.”

He took the phone, handed the reins to Lexi, and stepped back to get a shot.

His mother smiled for the camera.

“Lexi, you came just in time. Can you get one of me with Cort standing next to the horse?”

He likened posing for pictures to keeping his mouth open for the dentist: uncomfortable and unnatural. But he handed the phone to Lexi and took his place next to Clover. He’d prefer people just snap a picture without his knowing it.

“Smile,” Lexi prompted and then proceeded to snap several pictures.

When she stepped to hand the phone to his mother, Cort came face-to-face with Lexi. As close as they’d been at the trailer in the park.

Thanks, he mouthed.

Lexi smirked and stepped back, still holding Clover’s reins.

“Cort, I’ll send you a copy,” his mother said.

No need to bother. “Sure.”

“Now what?” Kate asked as she pushed the phone into her pocket.

“I’ll walk you around a bit.”

Cort reached for the reins, and his hand brushed Lexi’s in the process. Neither was wearing gloves, and, despite the chill

in the air, a rush of warmth charged through him. *Shake it off, McClane.* He handed the reins to his mother.

“Are you giving me a pony ride?” His mother sounded affronted, except there was a smile on her face.

“Pretty much. You need to know some basics, like how to stop Clover.”

“Pull on the reins, I imagine. But won’t that hurt his mouth?”

“If you pull too hard. With Clover, you don’t need to. He’s used to a snaffle bit and a light touch. Pull and release.”

His mom was smiling down on him like she had when he’d made a base hit in high school, only, this time, she was wearing a cowgirl hat, not a baseball cap.

“Ready?”

She nodded.

“You want to walk with us, Lexi?” He could use someone to run interference.

“Sure.” She took up her position next to him, picked the lead rope off the ground, and handed it to him, the smirk still on her face.

He ignored her look, and, with a tug, Clover began to walk, Bandit alongside. “Now we’re going to turn left. You can let Clover know this by taking your outside rein and bringing it over his neck in the direction you want to go. Try it.”

Kate did as he said, Clover turned, and he followed, holding the lead line.

“Well done.”

“That was easy.”

“Nothing to riding a horse if you’ve got a good horse. Right, Lexi?”

She had a bemused expression on her face. “You should know.”

“Why should he know?” Kate asked.

Cort shook his head at Lexi, hoping she wouldn’t answer.

But, of course, that thought was useless.

“Because your son tried to ride the roughest horse in his uncle’s stable—on his *first* attempt at riding. It didn’t go well.”

He pushed up his hat so Lexi could see the scowl on his face. “And she just happened to be there to witness it.”

“I figured I’d better step in, or, otherwise, he was going to take a trip to the hospital.” She actually chuckled.

“Really?” Kate looked from one to the other. “So what did you do?”

“She convinced me to try their horse, Sheba, for my first lesson.”

“And things went much better after that. Right, Cort?” Lexi chuckled, fully aware of his embarrassing moment.

If she was going to bring it up, he’d do it first. “Sheba ran away with me, though.” Didn’t stop his face from flushing.

“Because you leaned forward and kept pressing your knees harder and harder, and she thought you wanted her to run.”

“I was trying to hang on.”

“And how’d that go?” Lexi chucked him in the arm.

He raised his eyebrows. She knew how that’d gone, but he’d learned a lot that summer. About horses. About Lexi. “But I kept at it.”

“How long did it take you to learn?” His mother held the reins as she frowned on him.

“Not long.” He winked at Lexi. “We may have drawn it out longer than necessary.”

He swore Lexi blushed.

His mom sighed. “Well, I only have this afternoon.”

Right; he needed to get on with the lesson. “So, now turn the other way, again using your outside rein.”

Clover turned, and they walked a few steps, Bandit keeping pace. “To stop, pull gently back on the reins and release.”

Clover stopped.

“Think you’re able to take him around the corral? Just on a walk this first round.”

“I’d like to try.”

“Just don’t grip too tightly with your legs and hold the reins up, and you’ll be fine.”

This time, Lexi winked at him and a bolt of warmth shot through him. He mentally shook it off and unclipped the lead line.

He needed to keep his mind on the matter at hand. “Lean forward and give a slight—very slight—nudge with your knees. Bandit, stay.” He didn’t want Bandit accidentally interfering.

Kate followed directions, and Clover walked toward the end of the corral. With any luck, this would take some time.

Cort sought out the fence, ushering Lexi to it. They both leaned back against the rails to watch. Bandit settled by his side.

Watching his mom on a horse—*his* horse—wearing a cowgirl hat and on *his* ranch felt... surreal.

“How’s it going with your mom?”

“It’s... going. This was a great suggestion, by the way. As was the hat. I actually think she likes it. “

“She looks good in it. Although, who doesn’t look good in a western hat?”

He pushed up the rim of his to get a better look at Lexi in her hat. “True. Thanks for coming by.”

If they’d been alone, he would have leaned in to kiss her.

“You seem to have it in hand. I don’t think you need anyone’s help.”

She was so close he could smell a hint of lavender. “How’d I do on the lesson part?”

His mother was almost to the back of the corral. With her back to them. Maybe he could sneak a kiss.

“Pretty darn good. I’m impressed.”

His mother reined Clover to the right. She glanced quickly in their direction.

He gave thumbs-up. Too late to think about stealing a kiss now. “I had a good teacher.”

“And how did I do the other day, *Teacher?*”

He could feel the heat climbing up his neck as he realized what she was asking. She kissed like an angel. Sweet. Gentle. Unnerving. Just as he remembered. And he wanted more, despite the warning alarms going off in his head.

“Definitely impressed. Maybe we can do that again so I can get a better idea, though.”

“Maybe.” She pointed to the end of the corral. “Right now, though, we should be watching your mom and making sure she doesn’t have any trouble.”

His mother reined Clover to the right again. She was heading back now, looking straight at them.

He had to hand it to her. She was having a lot less trouble than he’d had during his first lesson. His mom was a force to be reckoned with.

Just like Lexi. And Lexi was a career woman, just like his mom.

The problem was that Lexi's career and his career were not compatible.

As a rancher, he couldn't up and leave for long weekends. Even with men to do the work, which he was fortunate to have, he still needed to be here to oversee the operations. Weather was unpredictable, there were always issues with the herd, and he'd apparently be lucky to get sleep during calving season, let alone travel. Winter months were the only downtime a rancher got, and, even then, a lot of repair work needed tending to.

Lexi's job was just as demanding. He'd been on the other side of a buyout deal. It took an enormous amount of time and energy to pull one off. She hadn't even been able to come see her father the first time Ian had landed in the hospital. How would she find time to see him?

Not to mention that, with the purchase of the Russell ranch, he'd be taking on a lot more work and many more problems. Just the nature of ranching.

So what would be the point of starting something neither of them could finish?

"What now?" His mother had completed her first circle around the corral and stopped before them with no problem.

"What do you think, Lexi? Should she try a trot?"

"It'll be bouncy, but it's slower than a gallop and faster than a walk, so it's a nice in-between gait," Lexi said.

Kate looked from one to the other. "Can Clover handle me bouncing on him? Because I'm sure I will."

Nice of her to consider the horse. "He can for a trip once around the corral."

She straightened in the saddle. "Then I'm ready."

One thing about his mother, she had gumption.

Lexi explained how to press her knees to get Clover trotting. “Start out walking, then, when you feel comfortable, press. Try to lift a little off the seat in rhythm.”

“I’ll try it.”

Cort had to admire her willingness. “It’s not an easy gait to master, so if you don’t like it or it’s too bouncy, just stop.”

Kate moved out with Clover in an easy walk. Halfway up the corral, Clover started trotting, and his mother started bouncing, sliding in the saddle.

Lexi touched his arm. “Her feet are too far forward.”

He cupped his hands around his mouth. “Pull and release.” She needed to stop before she bounced right off the saddle. She’d need an Epsom salt bath tonight if it went on any longer.

Cort stepped out from the fence just as his mom pulled on the reins. A mite too hard perhaps, as Clover raised his head. But the horse stopped. Cort strode over, lead rope in hand. “You okay?”

She patted the horse. “A little flustered.”

He remembered that feeling. “You want to stop?”

She shook her head. “I’d like to go around again. At a walk though. I can’t seem to keep my seat with a trot.”

Lexi joined them. “You and half the population.”

“It’s saying something that you tried it.” He was proud of her for at least giving it a go.

She beamed. “Take two,” she said as Clover went into a walk.

He checked his watch. Almost dinnertime.

“Do you want to come to Smokey’s with us? I figured I’d give her a taste of the West.” He held his breath, hoping she

would agree. Anything to keep his mother occupied.

She patted him on the arm. “I think your mom would appreciate spending that time with you. You’re on your own, cowboy.”

“Gee, thanks. Can I stop by and see you tomorrow then, when I get back from the airport?”

She nodded. “I’ll be doing chores as always.”

Something to look forward to.

Smokey’s wasn’t crowded when they entered. His mother had ordered a salad (so much for a taste of the West) and was picking around the edges. She still had her hat on.

“I’m sore, you know,” she said.

“Happens in riding. You’re using different muscles.” He’d been sore for days when Lexi had been teaching him. “But you did good out there for your first time.”

She pointed her fork at him. “Except for the trotting. Thanks for giving me an easy horse. When I visit again, I hope you’ll save Clover for me.”

Visit again? Hopefully not too soon. “Sure.”

“I really love my hat.” Her smile broadened. “Your gift is coming. They said they’d call you about delivery.”

“You got me furniture?” True, his house was a little Spartan, but he really didn’t need anything.

“You’ll see. You can return it if you don’t like it. I made sure of that.”

Intriguing.

“Tell me about you and Lexi.” She picked up her glass of club soda with a splash of lemon.

“Nothing to tell.” At least, there hadn’t been anything until that kiss.

“Really? I got the impression you two like each other, and as more than friends. Were you close that summer you spent here?”

Leave it to his mom to zero in on the crux of the matter.

“Kid stuff. I told you, she taught me how to ride.”

“And now she’s going back to her career, I take it.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“So there isn’t a future for you with her?”

“Nope.” He’d like to argue that point, but there was no argument to make.

“And their ranch is going to be sold. Do they have a buyer yet?”

“They do.” No sense in pretending; she’d find out soon enough. Plus, her opinion didn’t matter anyway. “I’m buying it.”

Her eyes widened.

“Scaling up will help the ranch pencil out. Uncle Gil was barely breaking even.”

“You must have made a lot from that buyout if you can buy a ranch in Wyoming. Are you sure this is what you want to invest it in, though? I hear it’s hard to make a profit in cattle ranching, and more and more family ranches are getting gobbled up by large corporations.”

He’d heard these arguments before from others outside of the ranching community—and a few in the ranching community. “Actually, raising beef cattle is one of the easiest

ways to make a profit in ranching. And, for me, it's more than an enterprise, it's a lifestyle. One I've come to love."

She sat back in her seat. "As long as you're happy. And can handle the cold."

He dug into his rodeo burger, hoping this was the end of the discussion—about ranching and Lexi.

"I'm sure you'll find someone. Like maybe this young lady headed our way?"

He turned to look over his shoulder. Tamara was heading toward them. She had on a white embroidered shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots that clanked on the wood floorboards as she walked. She looked the part of a ranch girl. Of a ranch wife. But not his type. Lexi was his type, for all the good it would do him.

"Well howdy, Cort." She rested a hand on his shoulder. "And who's this cowgirl you've got with you?" She sounded cheery.

"Tamara Blake, this is my mother, Kate McClane."

Tamara stuck out her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Same here." His mother shook it. "Do you like the hat my son bought me for Christmas?"

"I do. I take it you aren't from around here then, Mrs. McClane?"

"The name is Kate—no missus, please. And, no, I'm not."

"Well, welcome. Staying for Christmas, are you?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Oh, too bad." Tamara looked from Cort to his mother, confusion in her eyes. Yup, definitely a confusing situation. And this visit hadn't done anything to clear that confusion.

"Yes, too bad." Resignation tinged his mother's tone.

Tamara turned toward Cort. “I just wanted to thank you again for your generosity. I wouldn’t have taken it except—”

“No more needs to be said about it.” Cort threw down his napkin. “If Cortez hadn’t spooked, you’d have won.”

She leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek.

He caught the floral scent of her perfume. Tamara met all the criteria, except one. His heart.

“Well, thanks. It means a lot,” she said. “And any favor you need, any favor at all, you just ask.” She patted his shoulder for emphasis. “Nice to meet you, Kate.”

She sidled away, hips swaying.

“She seems nice. And appreciative.”

“I just helped her family out a little bit.”

Kate sat back. “If I haven’t said it yet, I’m proud of you, son. You’ve done well in the world. Without me.”

Cort wondered if his hearing was right. That was the first time she’d said she was proud of him—and acknowledged the lack of her role in his life. “Thanks. That means something.”

“And I hope... I hope you can forgive me. But, if you can’t, maybe we can forge a new relationship of some sort.”

Her lip trembled. Something shifted inside Cort, like the plates in his chest were opening.

“Maybe.”

The next morning, bright and early, Cort arrived with his mother at the airport with time to spare.

“No need to come in, Cort. It’s such a little airport that I can find my way.” His mom opened the door of the pickup,

ready to step out. The hat he'd given her covered the crown of her head.

"No problem. I'll help you with the luggage."

It was breezy as always, but at least the sun was shining. He unloaded her bag from the passenger side and closed the door.

His mother waved a hand. "It's only one bag."

"It's okay. I'll go in. Make sure your plane is flying."

She walked toward the terminal door, and he followed, rolling the suitcase.

The common area was bustling with people coming and going. It was only a few days until Christmas and the small airport was crowded.

Once inside, Kate turned to him. "I'll wait here until they call for departure. There aren't many seats in the boarding area."

He'd gotten through her visit. They'd gotten through it. It hadn't been so bad. "It was good seeing you." It'd been a long time since he'd said those words. Longer still since he'd meant them.

"Was it?" She looked hopeful. "I'm sorry, Cort. I screwed up. I'm not proud of it. But I do love you, and I care about you and your happiness."

"I feel that, Mom."

"You do?" She took a step closer.

It was a reflex, his arms opening. "Hug?"

In an instant, she was hugging him. A warm, mamma bear-type of hug.

"Thank you for that." She swiped her eyes. "And thank you for allowing me to visit. I really had a great time."

He smiled. "You know? It wasn't half-bad."

She stepped in and kissed his cheek. “You’ll find the right girl... or maybe the right girl will realize that you’re the right guy.”

Chapter 14

Lexi strung the last of the lights across the porch railing as she hummed, “Winter Wonderland.” Earlier, she’d put out the bales for the herd, fed the horses, and checked that the water was flowing in the pastures. The wind was blowing, as always, making it feel colder than the thirty-seven degrees stated on the weather app. She plugged in the lights despite the brightness of the day, making sure every bulb lit up. And then she skipped down the porch steps and took a gander at her work, shielding her eyes from the sun sparkling in the bright blue sky.

The lights were washed out by the sunlight, but she could imagine the cozy effect they would have when darkness fell. It made her smile.

Instead of feeling debilitated from her physical labors, the wind, and the cold weather, she felt invigorated. Like someone had zapped her with a jolt of electricity and given her superhuman power. That was the force of the Christmas spirit.

The only thing dampening her good mood was the knowledge that, in a few weeks, the majestic land her ancestors had worked and cultivated would no longer be part of her. That Misty would no longer be her horse. That there was only a finite amount of time to savor what she had taken for granted for so long.

She hugged her mother’s down jacket against her body and checked her watch. Kate McClane should be on a plane to Denver by now, and Cort should be on his way back. She plopped onto the wooden steps.

Please don't hurt him, his mother had said.

She had no intention of hurting him. Except, after that kiss, her feelings for him were running deeper than some temporary hookup.

Problem was, what could she do about it?

She'd loved being an investment banker—when a deal closed. She didn't love the long hours, the time it took away from her personal life, or losing a deal. Of course, no one did. But coming home, working the ranch again, had her wondering if working herself to death for someone else's benefit was all there was to life.

She wanted what most people wanted: someone to love and be loved by. A home. A family to bake cookies for, sing carols with, buy toys.

She'd been spoiled during her childhood. Both her parents had always been there for her and her siblings. Work had been part of home. Sometimes, she supposed that could be a bad thing—no chance to put work aside. But she couldn't put investment banking aside either. When she was working a deal, she was on call twenty-four/seven. How many dinners, weekends, movies, and concerts had been interrupted by the ring of her phone with yet another emergency?

And there were many good things about having her parents work at home. When she needed her parents, she knew where to find them. She'd never had to wonder what they did all day. She'd always had someone at home when she'd step off the bus. She'd never felt abandoned or lonely. And if she wanted to be alone, there'd always been a horse to ride out into the fields so she could get lost in her thoughts.

Of course, being a family enterprise, there was also lots of work. Family was the unpaid labor that allowed the ranch to make money when there were five mouths to feed. But the chores had just been a part of daily living. Feeding the horses, checking fences, moving cattle, branding day, seeing to sick

calves, and checking on pregnant heifers. It hadn't been overwhelming. Between the three siblings, they could cover for each other if one wanted a day or evening away.

She hadn't realized how much she'd missed the ranch, the work, the animals, until she'd had to help once again.

And now she'd missed her opportunity to explore ranching as an option. Maybe that was for the best. Her father needed to stop ranching, and he wouldn't have if he thought one of them wanted to take it over. And, if one of the kids was to take it over, her parents wouldn't have the funds to move to a warmer climate; she certainly didn't have the money to buy it from them.

She stared at the horizon. The family land surrounded her for as far as the eye could see.

Selling to Cort was for the best. She was sure Cort would let her visit from time to time, see how things were getting on... even if she wasn't a part of it anymore. But would she? *Would* she find the time? Would she *want* to find the time?

Those thoughts weighed on her heart like an anvil.

The air filled with the rumble of Cort's pickup coming down the gravel road. She popped up and walked toward the drive, her gaze bouncing off buildings, fences, land.

She wasn't sure how Cort was going to feel after his mom's visit, but she had just the remedy to take both of their minds off the issues of the day and focus them on the holiday that could always cheer her up.

"What are you doing out in the cold?" Cort asked as he slammed the truck door shut after Bandit scooted out. He flipped up the collar of his jacket, dug his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and walked toward her.

"Working. And waiting for you."

He was freshly shaved, dressed in his rancher outfit, his cowboy hat on his head. He'd have been the perfect match

before she'd upped and gotten a career.

"That's nice to hear."

Lexi bent down and ruffled Bandit's fur. Such a good dog. "Did your mom get off okay?" she asked, straightening up. She was trying to read his expression. Was he happy his mom was gone? Relieved? Frustrated?

He seemed cheerful enough but not celebratory. He wasn't acting like someone who had just been freed from something painful.

"She did."

"You survived."

He shrugged. "I did. But I feel... weird. Unsettled." He raised his chin toward the porch, where the lights faintly glowed. "And certainly not in the Christmas spirit despite it being days away."

He reached for her. She stepped into his arms. He bent his head and his lips found hers.

In that moment, she was transported to a place of sweet sensations as he pressed against her, as if he couldn't get enough.

When he broke the kiss, he stared down at her with eyes filled with need. "Now that was just what the doctor ordered." He rubbed his hands up her arms. "Who needs the Christmas spirit?"

Catching her breath, she knew she needed to break the spell of his kiss or she'd be in trouble. "You do." She took a step back. "I've got to run an errand and I need your help."

Cort stopped the truck in the gravel lot brimming with pickups, and stared at the forest of evergreens before him. The hand-painted sign declared it to be Stanley's Christmas Tree Farm.

"You took me to a tree farm?" He hadn't picked out a tree in years. No need.

"Yup. Dad's in no shape to cut down our Christmas tree, so I, as a vote of one, elected you." Her hand rested on his shoulder. "You don't mind, do you? I thought it would take your mind off things."

He closed his eyes and opened them again. Lexi's heart was in the right place. How could she know how he felt about Christmas?

"You could get one for yourself. They have all sizes," she added.

"I don't put up a tree. Never have since living on my own."

Her mouth dropped open. "Never? Where do you put your presents?"

"What presents? After the divorce, both parents just sent me cash." They couldn't be bothered to actually think of a gift for him.

Lexi cocked her head and patted his shoulder like he was a lost dog.

With that, Bandit stuck his head between them, as if he wanted in on the action.

"Well, this year, you'll be getting gifts." Lexi rubbed Bandit's head. "From me, and I know Mom and Dad are getting you one. Probably Junie, too. And didn't your mother give you something?"

"Nope." And he hadn't expected one. Not really. "She said she's sending something. Probably her assistant didn't have time to do it beforehand, though I don't know why she just

didn't give me cash, like always. Regardless, I'm not getting a tree. Besides, I don't have decorations for it."

She sighed. "Well, you can decorate ours at least. Mom has everyone over, and, this year, it'll be a full house. My friend from work, Simone, is coming, and Rusty is bringing a friend. Mom will be heartbroken if you don't come."

He held on to the door handle. "She already told me about it. Said it was mandatory. As is Christmas." Like a jail sentence. He looked away from her, toward the horizon, hoping his face wouldn't give away his real thoughts. It was clear Christmas was important to Lexi and he didn't want to dampen her enthusiasm because of his own sorry issues. "I'm going to miss your parents."

She dipped her head and checked out her hands. "They're going to miss you." Her voice was quiet, soft, like falling snow.

But she hadn't said *she* would miss him.

She opened the door and hesitated. "So, if you're coming over to decorate the tree, we need to look for one. It's got to be at least ten feet." Her voice was louder, but not stronger, not surer.

"I don't have an ax." Maybe there was still time to get out of this.

"They'll lend you one. First, we find a tree, then we get the ax, and then you'll do the heavy chopping."

"That's why you brought me along—for the muscle?"

"Exactly." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. It was a sweet gesture, and before he could follow up, she had scooted out of the cab.

Cort let Bandit out and waited for Lexi to lead the way. The scent of evergreen filled the air, reminding him of Christmases before his parents had separated. Ones where

he'd been a happy kid, feeling loved and secure in his family. But that was a long time ago.

The smaller trees were in the front, so they had some walking to do. Cort would have preferred to walk in silence, but Lexi had other ideas.

She wrapped her arm through Cort's as they crunched over the path strewn with dry needles and breathed in the evergreen perfume.

Too many Christmases he'd spent alone, forgotten, or as an addendum to someone else's family, like the Russell's. Besides the religious aspects of the holiday, Christmas meant family gatherings and good times. But not for him.

Lexi patted his shoulder. "I had a chance to talk with your mom, you know."

Knock him out now.

"She pretty much said she'd gotten everything wrong. I think she'd like to make amends."

"Amends?" He glanced at her, and she was staring up at him, as if waiting for a reaction. "What exactly would that look like?" Because he hadn't a clue.

"I don't know. Spend more time with you? It wasn't so bad, was it?"

Bandit had taken the lead, his tail wagging as he padded ahead.

"Not as bad as I thought, but, hopefully, I have a while before she visits again." He needed to do some thinking about what kind of relationship he wanted with his mom. But the fact that he was contemplating any type of a relationship was a step forward, he guessed.

She tugged on his sleeve, stopped, and pointed. "This one." Her smile turned up and her face glowed.

Saved by the tree. “You love Christmas, don’t you?” He called Bandit back.

“I do.”

She strode over to the tree in question. Nothing to do but follow.

“I love setting up the tree,” she continued. “I love shopping for presents. I love decorating. I love being with my family. Although, truthfully, these last five years, the holiday has been a blur because I only came in the day before and left the day after. This year, I intend to relish every minute of it.”

He wished he could share in her enthusiasm, but Christmas just made him feel more alone, more adrift, more vulnerable. Not feelings he enjoyed. Maybe when he built his own family those feelings would change. But that entailed finding the right partner. Being a rancher, isolated by nature, didn’t bode well for success in that arena any time soon.

He looked at Lexi’s beaming face. If only...

Lexi circled the tree, checking it out from all angles. She ran her fingers over the needles and then crouched down to check out the trunk.

“All in order?” He’d never chopped down a tree before. If he and Lexi ever got together, this would be a yearly task, one he’d look forward to, unlike now. Too bad it wasn’t a possibility.

She straightened. “Yup. And see that little one, two rows up?” She waved her hand in that direction. “You can cut that one down, too.”

“Where are you going to put it?” In his opinion, the Russell homestead, while comfortable, did not have a living area big enough for two trees.

“I’ve got the perfect spot for it.”

Cort raised his eyebrows. He just couldn't see it, but his was not to question why.

"I'll go find an ax, then we can check out my chopping skills."

* * *

Lexi, casserole dish in hand and a bag of side dishes on her arm, looked down at the little tree she'd carted up to Cort's porch. It was small, a little spindly, but, if she did say so herself, festively decorated. Her mother had instantly warmed to the idea of providing a decorated tree for Cort. Together, they had retrieved a spare tree stand and the vast collection of balls and tree decorations from the attic, a collection that had grown from combining the decorations from two sets of grandparents with the family's own. There would have been enough balls and baubles to decorate three huge trees.

It had taken no time to deck out the small tree and then Lexi had set about preparing a dinner to take over with it. After all, she'd promised him she'd cook for him. The dish of beef bourguignon, with its savory meat and sauce, had to be better than Tamara's greasy fried chicken. She'd originally planned to invite him to her family home for dinner, but when the idea of getting him a tree had popped into her head, she'd thought a visit was a better choice.

Her hand poised to rap, she hesitated, then took a deep breath of the chilly winter air. Hopefully, this would prove to be a good idea. Hopefully, she wasn't overstepping, but he'd seemed so forlorn talking about how he didn't have any presents to put under a tree, that she needed to do something. And, if she was honest, it was a good excuse to spend some alone time with him.

If only he felt the same.

She knocked and her heart thumped.

She heard Bandit's bark, but it took a moment before she heard the sound of footsteps on the floorboards. Her stomach fluttered with each step.

The door swung open, and there he was, his hair tousled, his feet clad in just socks; he looked like she'd awakened him from a nap. His eyes widened as he took in the casserole dish and bag, then the tree, and, finally her. "What are you doing here?"

Not exactly a welcoming greeting. She squared her shoulders. "I brought you something, or things."

"I see that." He hadn't opened the door any wider. Bandit panted at her side. "I'm just surprised to see you."

"Am I bothering you?" Beads of perspiration dampened the back of her neck.

"No, I was just in the back doing some book work."

"Can I come in?" She lifted up the casserole. "I brought dinner. I promised I'd cook for you, remember?"

He stepped back and opened the door so she could pass. "I see you also bought something else. The tree didn't fit?"

She stepped into the heat of the home. "I thought it would fit better here." She looked around as he grabbed the tree from the porch. At least he didn't slam the door on it.

The McClanes' furniture, if she remembered correctly, had been oak and plaid with a nod toward colonial. Cort's style was more modern lodge: comfy rectangular couches, a coffee table made from a tree trunk, a Navajo-inspired rug, and lots of soft beige colors with a pop of red here and there. No pictures hung on the wall, no photographs graced the stone fireplace's mantel. The lights on the black side tables had simple black bases and white shades. It looked like it was staged, waiting for someone to move in.

The tree would definitely warm it up a bit.

She heard the sound of the door closing. “It would look great right there, on the side of the fireplace, don’t you think?” She pointed. Since the TV was over the fireplace, he’d be able to see it from the sofa.

“I suppose.” He held the tree at arm’s length as he moved it, as if he wasn’t sure what to do with it. “Where did you get all these decorations?” He set it down at the spot she’d indicated then looked at her. The frown on his face did not bode well for her gift.

“Our house. We have so many, having combined all our grandparents with our own over the years, and Mom just can’t part with any of them. She was so happy to know someone would be using them.” Lexi set down the casserole on the coffee table and placed the bag to the side, then walked to the tree. She found the plug and shoved it into the outlet on the wall. Colorful lights danced around the tree.

“These angels are from Grandma Riley.” She pointed at the little blonde angels in silky white dresses that dotted some of the tree. “The little red Santa Clauses are from Grandma Russell’s collection. The rest are just extras we haven’t used in the past few Christmases. Mom can’t resist buying Christmas decorations, so we have a ton.” Already the place looked warmer, homier.

“Nothing’s antique, is it?” He looked worried. “Bandit’s a bit clumsy and so is his big buddy.”

“Nothing’s valuable if that’s what you’re asking.” She turned from the tree. “Now, show me your oven so I can warm up dinner.”

“Lexi, you didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

“I know I didn’t have to; I *wanted* to. I just had to hope tonight is a good time.”

She walked closer to him and looked up into questioning eyes. Her hands felt clammy and she rubbed them on her jeans. She'd been waiting since the skijor competition for an opportunity like this. She hoped he was equally inclined.

He rested his warm hands on her shoulders, heat seeping in like a hot towel. "Anytime with you is a good time."

She pulled a little branch of mistletoe out of her breast pocket and went up on her tippy toes. "I'm glad to hear you say that." She wrapped her hand behind his warm neck and held the mistletoe up with her other hand.

"Are you?" he leaned down. "Show me."

His lips met hers and she showed him in no uncertain terms.

Cort had the fireplace blazing and the tree lights were dancing as they sat down to the meal. She waited as he dove into his food, watching his expression, trying to read if he liked it or not. They sat in the dining area at the sleek rectangular black table under a low chandelier, the lights dim, romantic.

He kept eating, so she picked up her fork. If only he'd say something. She didn't want to appear needy and ask him, but she was anxious to know if he liked it better than Tamara's offering. The woman had already beaten her at skijoring; she wanted to win at something.

She shoved a forkful in her mouth. The flavor of savory beef with a robust wine undercurrent tasted good to her. And the noodles were buttery and not too soft. Her mother had made the bread, so she knew that was good.

Cort's plate was clean before he lifted his head and stared at her.

She set her fork down and waited.

“Lexi Russell,” he said, leaning against the back of the slats of the wooden chair. “That was amazing.”

Why did it seem that the world had suddenly brightened, as if someone had turned up the lights? “I’m glad you liked it.” She tried not to sound too pleased, but she wasn’t sure she succeeded.

“That was gourmet quality. Who taught you to cook like that?”

Lexi was pleasantly surprised at the cozy, comforting feeling that settled in her belly, right under her heart, at his compliment. “The one and only Jewel Russell. You know she’s a good cook.”

“Your mom is a *great* cook, but she makes basic stuff. Comfort food. This was something special.” He was positively beaming.

She had taken a course in San Francisco a few years ago, but her mother had taught her the essentials of preparing food, and those lessons had served as a solid foundation. Living in the city and working crazy hours, she hadn’t gotten a chance to indulge in cooking special meals. In fact, she mostly did take-out, consigning her to eating other people’s cooking. She’d forgotten how fulfilling it was to cook for someone who was appreciative.

She rose and began to clean off the table.

He grabbed her hand. “I’ll do that. You sit.”

She sat and watched as he scooted between the table and the kitchen’s counter, clearing the plates. The kitchen was serviceable but could have used some updating except for one major feature: a big, five-burner stove. Easy to imagine cooking on it.

Too easy.

He’d crossed the threshold where she’d taped the mistletoe and she had to quell the urge to take advantage of the moment

and kiss him under it. She only had one regret now about the evening. “I didn’t have time to make dessert.”

He placed the last plate into the dishwasher, then came over to where she sat. He reached out his hand. She grabbed it. He pulled her up so they were inches from each other.

There was a sparkle in his eyes, one that certainly hadn’t been there when he’d answered the door. His mouth curved in a sexy smile creating the dimple in his cheek. “I’ve got some ideas about that.”

He pulled her to the threshold, under the mistletoe. When his lips touched hers, she melted into his arms, enjoying the feel of his hard body against hers.

She knew indulging in kissing him was asking for more complications, but, at the moment, neither her mind nor her body cared. Against her better judgment, she was falling for him. Falling for his considerate ways, his gentle touch, his sexy smile, and that dimple.

“I don’t know what to think about you,” he said, breaking the kiss.

“What do you mean?”

“A career woman who can cook and ride like the wind. One who slogs through all kinds of weather to feed the livestock and attempts changing a tractor tire. You are a series of contradictions, Lexi Russell.

She felt like a series of contradictions. Ones that were confusing her present and complicating her future.

“Maybe just enjoy the moment, then.” Because she didn’t want to stop what they were doing.

Bandit chose that instant to nuzzle his snout between them.

Cort looked down at the intruder. “Not great timing, buddy. You need to go out?”

He led her toward the couch. “I hear this is a really comfortable sofa.” He smiled. “I’ll be right back and we can test it out.”

She should leave now while she could. Say she had to get back home. Rusty was supposed to be coming tomorrow with his friend. She could use that as an excuse. But as she watched him shrug into his jacket and leave through the front door, Bandit at his side, she didn’t move.

She eyed the tree glistening by the fireplace. The room could accommodate a much bigger tree. Maybe next year?

When she wouldn’t be there to see it.

Would it be so terrible if they became more than friends for the rest of the time she was here? Maybe it could grow into something more. Something that would give her a reason to come back and visit.

That was the romantic side of her talking.

The practical side countered that if she secured a new job, she wouldn’t be able to break away and visit.

The romantic side of her imagined living with him on the ranch and training horses. The practical side reminded her of the risks of ranching, of turning her back on a lucrative career, of falling for him and having him break her heart.

The front door creaked open and she was happy for the interruption to thoughts that had gone too far afield.

He stopped in the kitchen before leading Bandit to a room down the hall, probably a bedroom. She heard the door close and then he reappeared.

“Gave him some of the leftovers.” He deposited his jacket on a dining chair. “Hope you don’t mind, but it will keep him quiet for a while.”

She didn’t mind in the least.

He sat down on the sofa and she sidled closer to him. He wrapped his arms around her and she burrowed against his warm body, soaking in the heat. Who needed mistletoe?

“Teach me how you like to be touched.”

Tingles shot through her.

“Do you like to be touched here?” He nuzzled her neck.

She sighed her answer.

His tongue traced the indentation at her neck and a shiver of pleasure danced through her.

“Here?”

She nodded.

He kissed his way to her breasts. His rough fingers pulled back the fabric of her bra and he kissed the flesh of each one. “Here?”

Her positive response sounded garbled.

He ran his hand under her V-neck sweater and caressed her belly. “Here?”

She barely got a sound out.

His hand stroked under the waistband of her jeans to the moist area between her thighs. “Here?” His voice had gone gravely.

“Definitely.”

His finger stroked her most sensitive parts and her mind scrambled, but she was able to force the next words out of her mouth. “And you have to teach me where you like to be touched.” Her hand swept over the bulge in the denim fabric of his jeans.

“First things first.” His fingers swirled over her and then she lost her mind.

Chapter 15

“Rusty, my boy.”

As a strange SUV came charging down the gravel drive, Lexie’s mother scurried off the porch where Lexi and her father had gathered to await the arrival of her older brother. All three members of the greeting party were bundled in some version of a ranch coat, in differing colors of blue, brown, and gray, looking like a Carhartt clothing advertisement.

At the vehicle’s appearance, Lexi pushed thoughts about the wonderful night she’d spent in Cort’s arms to the back of her mind. The man knew what he was doing and had slipped her over the edge more than once. Her body was still thrumming from it.

As for her feelings, she’d deal with them later. Cort knew her stay was temporary. That she had to find a new job. If only she could keep her feelings in check. After last night, that was going to take even more vigilance.

Gratefully, her mother hadn’t said a word about how late Lexi had gotten in. Not one word. The last thing she needed was pressure from her mother about a relationship that couldn’t go anywhere. She had enough pressure from her own feelings to contend with.

A cold breeze whipped against her face. Under her jacket, she’d layered a hoodie and a duck vest over her sweater and wrapped a silk wild rag around her neck to protect against the wind, all courtesy of her mother’s “old but good enough” closet. Perfect for standing on the porch in a cast-off pair of

insulated boots for a good fifteen minutes with a wind chill of fourteen degrees.

It had been a year since Rusty had been home. It would probably be another year before they'd see him again. Though he hadn't said how long he'd stay, Lexi knew it wouldn't be long enough.

The SUV pulled to a full stop just as her mother reached the car door. Lexi watched Mom rise up on her toes then down onto her heels in an impatient rhythm as she waited for Rusty to emerge. Her father stood stock still on the porch, evidently willing to wait with Lexi until the fuss was over.

Rusty emerged and was immediately entangled in a tight if bulky hug from their mother.

"I'm good, Mom. You guys okay?" He looked over her head straight to where his father was standing with his trussed-up arm.

"We're doing okay. Better now that you're home."

A tall man in a flight jacket emerged from the passenger side, his head covered by a wool cap, his hands ungloved. Handsome, with dark features, he surveyed the scene with a taut expression, as if waiting to see how he'd be greeted.

Mom did not disappoint. After she got in enough of a hug from her son, she strode over and flung her arms around him before Rusty could even finish the introduction. "This is my buddy, Cal Evans."

"Welcome, Cal. It's so nice you'll be joining us for Christmas."

"Hope I'm not imposing. Family time and all, and you haven't seen Rusty in a while." Cal looked at her mom, and then scanned to the porch where Lexi and her father were standing.

"Not at all. We're happy to have you. One of Lexi's friends will be joining us, too. The more the merrier."

He seemed to let out a breath at that news.

Rusty motioned for Cal to follow, and the two men, Mom between them, sauntered toward the porch, Cal putting up the collar of his jacket as they walked.

When they reach the porch, Rusty went in for a hug from his father.

“Watch the arm.” Her father’s grin was warm and welcoming—a grin that had been missing in action of late, what with all that had happened.

Lexi went to hug Cal, but his slight motion back made her switch to a handshake instead. His grip, even through her gloves, was strong, in keeping with his stocky frame.

“Welcome, Cal. I’m Lexi, Rusty’s sister. So glad you could join us. It will be nice to have a full house.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.” His voice was deep, like he was talking from inside a barrel.

Finally, it was Lexi’s turn for a hug from her brother, and she grabbed on to his neck and held tight. He might have teased her mercilessly when they were young, but the bond they shared was one that, no matter how far away he was, would never be broken. If anything happened to him... That thought made her give him one last tight squeeze. He was home, and she wasn’t going to let anxious thoughts spoil the moment.

Cal shook her father’s free hand, and the greetings were over. The group headed inside.

“Sit, boys. You’ve had quite a trip from New York to Denver and then to here.” Mom motioned to the table—the table where all things Russell were discussed.

“We stayed over in Denver since we got in too late to catch the flight out.” Rusty pulled out a chair to the left of where her father always sat.

Where Cort had been sitting of late.

“Well, you’re here now. Relax and have some coffee. I’ve got a pot of soup on the stove for lunch.”

Cal took a seat next to Rusty.

“Cal,” Rusty said, “you haven’t lived until you’ve tasted my mom’s cooking.”

“Oh, get on. You just like to eat.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“The military is keeping you fit at least,” Lexi said as her brother shrugged out of his jacket and placed it on the back of his chair. He was a big man, her brother. Both he and Cal were tall men with stocky builds who looked like they belonged on a wrestling tag team.

Lexi helped her father out of his jacket before hanging up hers. Her father was all smiles as he took his place at the head of the table. He’d had so little to smile about lately.

“Where’s June Bug?” Rusty asked as Lexi scooped the stew into a large bowl to be set on the table.

“She’s working.” Her mother poured coffee into a cream-colored mug. “Running her floral business. This is a busy time of year for her. She’ll be here for Christmas. Parker’s grown so much, Rusty, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“I’ve seen the pictures. Nice to have a little one running around the house, isn’t it, Mom?”

“It certainly is. And I’ll be looking for *all* my children to contribute to the clan.” Mom gave Lexi a pointed look as she poured another cup. “When the time is right, of course.”

Lexi ignored her mother’s hint. “He’s such a little person now. Junie let me give him a ride on Misty, and he loved it. I think we may have a cowboy in the making.”

“I miss riding. Not ranching, but riding.” Everyone in the family knew Rusty’s feelings about ranching. Too isolated, too

settled, not for him. It was a shame because, if he had wanted to continue the legacy, it would have assured the ranch would continue in Russell hands. But the same could be said of her.

“Misty and Sheba are in the barn.” Lexi had been thinking a lot about what to do with Misty. Riding her these past few weeks had been the source of so much pleasure during this time when everything seemed to have gone wrong. Losing the horse she loved was one more bad thing to be added to a growing list.

Her parents had mentioned giving Misty to Cort. That was probably best for the horse, but Misty was a high-caliber equine and could command some serious money at auction. But money, Lexi was learning, might not be the best yardstick for decision-making, especially for those decisions that involved the heart.

She set out the plates and utensils for the meal as her mother set the coffee cups and milk and sugar on the table.

Rusty started fixing his coffee, as if he couldn't wait another minute. “Have you decided what to do about the ranch?” He addressed his question to his father.

“Haven't signed the contract yet. Want to let it settle over the holidays. Hoping maybe one of you will change your minds.” His father looked at Rusty with a sideways glance, but the grin was still on his face.

“Not me, Dad. I know it's a disappointment, but if the Air Force has taught me anything, it's that I need to be part of something bigger. Ranching is just not for me.”

Her father sighed. “Understood.”

“Who is this guy who's buying it? McClane's nephew?”

“Grandnephew,” Lexi said. “He stayed with them the summer after you enlisted.”

Her mom set the steaming pot on the trivet at the table, grabbed a large spoon, then slid into her chair. “He's been so

helpful, even now when Dad can't work. He's been a real blessing." She ladled a large portion of soup into Cal's bowl and then proceeded to fill everyone else's.

"Along with Lexi," Dad said.

"Of course along with Lexi. It's been great having your sister home for more than a day or two." Mom patted Lexi's hand.

"So, sis, you're out of a job?"

Guess her mother must have texted him.

"Temporarily." She hoped the look she gave him would keep him from asking any more questions about her work since she didn't have answers. No headhunters had called with prospects. They'd all said she probably wouldn't hear until the first of the year, but her patience was wearing thin and her anxiety was ramping up. And now, if she was honest with herself, last night meant she'd have to contend with her feelings for Cort if there was a decision to be made.

She'd complicated things for sure, but she couldn't say she was sorry for what had happened.

"Mom says you've been riding a lot. How is it been being back in the saddle, literally?"

"You know I've always liked the ranching life. Just more and more is out of the rancher's control."

"Unlike working for someone else, like a bank?"

Rusty always had a way of stabbing the truth. "Touché." And his question pretty much summed up her conflict. Do something you love despite all its risks or look for something that pays well for all the risks you take?

Cal was looking down at his plate as he spooned his soup, as if hoping to be invisible. But that wouldn't work with the Russell family.

“So, Cal, where are you from?” Lexi asked, happy to change the subject to anything but her.

“California. Oakland.”

“Really? I was working in San Francisco before... before I lost my job.”

Cal didn't respond.

Getting this one to talk might take more than a hot cup of coffee and some tasty soup. “And you and Rusty are in the same unit?”

“Yup.”

“We're part of the same team,” Rusty interjected.

Lexi wanted to know why he wasn't spending Christmas in Oakland, but she sensed now was not the time.

Mom leaned toward Rusty. “How long are you staying this time?”

“Well, that's the thing, Mom and Dad. I know the timing sucks, but... I'm staying for as long as you'll have me.”

Her mother's gasped reverberated in the room. “What? Did you get assigned to Gillette?”

There were no military bases around Gillette. Closest was the Air Force base all the way by Cheyenne.

“Nope. I've decided not to reenlist.”

Mom's mouth opened, as if a hinge had come loose.

“I thought you loved the military, son,” Dad said.

“I do. But ten years of running around the world putting out fires is enough. I want to settle down, set down roots.”

“But not ranching roots.” Dad's tone was solemn.

“Not ranching.”

“What then?”

“I’m thinking about joining the police force here in Gillette. I’ll be enrolled in community college starting mid-January, majoring in criminal justice. I’ve been taking online classes during this last tour. My plan is to take a few more courses here and then enroll full time at UW in the fall. As an honorably discharged vet who saw combat, Wyoming offers free tuition. Can’t beat that price.”

Mom sniffled and a tear dribbled down her cheek. “These are good tears, I assure you. It’s just that you’ve been away so long, and now we’re moving and you’re coming back.”

Rusty reached across the table and patted her hand. “I’ll be much closer to wherever you go, and didn’t you say you’d be back in the area when the good weather comes?”

“I know, but if we didn’t sell, you could stay here.”

“Not when I’m going to Laramie in the fall. But, until then, I thought I could ask a favor of June Bug.”

Lexi chuckled. “If you want Junie to do you a favor, I wouldn’t call her June Bug. She’s an adult and a mom now. June Bug just doesn’t fit, Rusty.”

He saluted. “I’ll remember that.”

“I’m happy for you, Rusty,” she added. “Sounds like a solid plan.”

“Thanks, Lex. Glad one of us has one.”

Chapter 16

Cort walked down South Gillette Avenue and stopped in front of the jewelry store. What the heck was he going to buy Lexi?

His eyes scanned over the engagement rings in the window. There was an oval-shaped one that was on the larger side and set with smaller diamonds studding the band. If he ever was so lucky as to be looking for an engagement ring for Lexi, he'd get one like that. Big enough to let everyone know she was taken.

And why was he thinking about such an impossibility when she was set on leaving for a new job when one came along?

He thought about the previous night as he stared at the jewelry arranged in neat rows in the window like flowers for picking. He hadn't intended to take things that far. Keeping some distance had been a promise he'd made to himself to protect his own heart, but when he'd seen her at his door, meal in hand and looking like a dream, all promises had flown into the wind. And he wasn't sorry they had. At least, not yet. Because hope sprung eternal.

No doubt some people were deliberate in their choice to fall in love with the person who met some preset criteria. Apparently, he wasn't one of them. Lexi had said more than once that ranching was no longer for her. Not to mention, she'd been ready to hand her family ranch to some developer because she was all about the money.

But, over these last few weeks, he'd seen another Lexi. A Lexi who seemed at home in Wyoming, whether it was

working with the livestock, running a skijor race, or picking out Christmas trees. She worked hard, yet took the time to enjoy a trail ride and a trip to a tree farm. And she'd shown how much she cared about her parents, whether it was jumping in to help them in their time of need or giving up on the developer deal.

And that, coupled with what they'd shared last night, gave him hope that a miracle could happen and she'd be content to stay on at the ranch and make it work. With him.

He scanned the front of the window, and then he saw it. The perfect gift. It glittered in the sunlight as if it was saying *look at me*.

He wondered if she still had the five-and-dime one he'd given her on her birthday that summer. She'd worn it every day after that until he'd left. That was how he'd known she'd liked him.

And yet, when his world had come crashing down, he'd cast her out of his life without another word.

He hadn't been ready to take any more risks with a relationship of any kind.

And now?

He opened the door to the shop and stepped in.

Lexi sighed as she walked the mall beside her mother.

"You need to help me find a present for your brother." Mom slung her pocketbook over her shoulder like she was ready to hike. "I wanted to wait until I saw him so I'd have a better idea of his size. I couldn't be more thrilled that he's going to be in Wyoming for good now... But we aren't." Mom took a hard swallow and crossed her arms over her stomach. "I

worry we might have pulled the trigger too soon by selling the ranch, but then I look at your father in a sling and still hobbling around on that sprained ankle, and I think we should have done it sooner.”

Lexi placed an arm around her mother’s shoulder. “Your plan is to rent here in the summers so you’ll be back. Rusty’s going to be in school the rest of the time, but you’ll still see him a lot more now than you’ve seen him these last ten years.”

“And you? When will we see you?”

Lexi dropped her hands to her sides. “It all depends on where I land.” The thought of leaving was getting more unsettling the longer she stayed. Especially after last night. But what other choice did she have?

“Which could be far from us. It’s been so nice having you home.” She stopped walking and faced Lexi. People swerved around them. “It’s like old times.”

Lexi forced a smile she didn’t feel. “It’s never going to be quite like it was in the past—your children are grown.”

Her mom sighed and turned toward the shop window. It was filled with children’s clothes. “I know.” Her voice was low, and Lexi had to bend to hear her. “Doesn’t make it easier. You’ll understand when you have kids.”

An ache formed near Lexi’s heart as she stared at the display of cute little dresses, little red sweaters, boys’ suits, and little red vests. Her future seemed bleaker now that she didn’t have a job, didn’t have a boyfriend. Now that she’d come home and found her old life and Cort—neither of which she could have.

“I want to buy Parker a red vest like Dad always wears.” At least she had Parker to spoil. “For Christmas.”

“Junie bought him a little suit. Cutest thing.” Her mother glanced in Lexi’s direction, then grabbed her hand and squeezed. “But, yes, he’d look adorable in a red vest.”

Following her mother's advice on the size, Lexi completed her purchase, then she and her mom continued on, passing shop windows gaily decorated for the season. Lexi had to make a conscious choice to slow down because she kept walking faster than her mother. When had that happened?

She eyed the coffee bar sign and slowed her pace again so her mother could catch up. "Want to grab a cup of coffee, Mom?"

"Great idea."

They settled into a booth in the sparsely populated shop, coffee cups in hand. Her mother raised the cup as if she were about to give a toast.

"This will perk me up." She rested her elbows on the table. "I'll be glad when everything is settled and we know where we'll be living so that your father won't have to go through another calving season."

"I'm sorry I wasn't paying closer attention to what you were going through. In my mind, neither of you have aged." Lexi reached across the table and gave her mother's free hand a pat. "You're doing the right thing. Unfortunately, it's your children who aren't. I don't know why none of us are interested, especially Rusty."

"Rusty liked to cowboy. But if he hadn't gone in the Air Force, he'd be rodeoing rather than ranching. It's more social and would have filled his need for adventure. Speaking of which, what do you think of Cal?"

"He's a bit reserved but seems nice enough."

"Funny that such a quiet guy and Rusty are friends, isn't it? But I guess when you've been through all they've been through together, it creates a bond. I just feel so bad that Cal's not going home to his family."

"Do you know why?"

“Just that he’s divorced and there are bad feelings between him and his only brother. He doesn’t have children, and Rusty said both parents have passed. Apparently, that was some of what pushed him to enlist in the first place, but I take it the divorce happened sometime while he was serving.”

“Is he leaving the Air Force, too?”

“Rusty said he’s got another six months or so before he needs to make up his mind.”

“Simone’s going to be here in another day. She’ll think I’m setting her up since Cal’s from Oakland.”

“Speaking of matchmaking, there’s someone right in front of your nose that would be perfect for you.”

Lexi looked down at her coffee cup. Here it came, the pressure. “If you mean Cort, how would that even work? He isn’t leaving Wyoming.”

“And why do you have to?”

Her mom darn well knew why. “I don’t know of any investment-banker opportunities in Gillette.”

“More people are working remotely these days.”

“Not likely in my field, for a while at least. Financial institutions are traditional. They don’t change quickly or easily.”

“You could always become a ranch wife like me.”

“You are more than a ranch wife. You and Dad are partners. Everyone knows you’re the business brains and he’s the cattle brains and, together, you’ve made it through even the toughest times.”

“And from what I see, you and Cort each have both types of brains, so, together, you could be even more successful. Tell me you don’t have feelings for him.”

She had feelings for him. That was the problem. “I like Cort.” Keep it simple.

“He’s a good-looking guy. And he’s got a good heart. He’d be a great father.”

“Father?” Lexi shifted in her seat. “You’ve passed some pretty important steps.” Like falling in love, though Lexi couldn’t say for sure the step had been bypassed. Not after last night.

“You act like a couple. Have you kissed yet?”

Heat suffused Lexi’s face. They’d done a lot more than kiss. “We both know that, whatever this is, it’s just temporary.” One night together did not make a relationship. Things were too new to be thinking in that direction.

“Can’t fool me, Alexandra. I see the way you look at each other. There’s a spark there, for sure. And, be warned, as your mother I’m going to do all I can to fan those flames.”

“I know you think highly of him—”

“In a short time, he’s become family. Listen to your mother, Lexi. You won’t find a better marriage partner than him, and did I mention he’s good-looking?” Her mother chuckled, and her eyes sparkled like they used to when she had baked a sweet treat for her children.

“It’s complicated. I’m returning to San Francisco at the end of the month.”

“When did you decide to stop taking risks, Lexie?”

“What do you mean? My job is all about risks.”

“For your clients. But not personally.”

“I just got dumped, remember? I’m not ready to risk another rejection, which is likely considering the obstacles.” It wasn’t like Cort had signaled he wanted a relationship. In fact, he hadn’t said much more than he was glad they had gotten together. Hardly a declaration of undying love. “I have to make a living. That’s a pretty big complication.”

Her mother shook her head. “Does that mean you won’t even contemplate a relationship with Cort? I know this Lexi: if *you* want it to happen, you’ll work it out, complications and all. That’s what you’ve always done. Worked it out.”

She wished she felt as assured as her mother, but she couldn’t fathom how anything with Cort could work out even if he was interested. At some point, people in a long-distance relationship had to live together if they were going to have children, and that meant someone had to compromise.

Her mother sighed. “Well, have you thought about a gift for Cort?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

“I’ve got an idea that might solve a few problems for you.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Why not gift Misty to Cort? I don’t think he’s in a position to pay for her what with buying our ranch, but I know he’d appreciate her and you know he’d take good care of her. And then you could visit her and ride her, I’m sure.”

“You mean I’d have a reason to visit Cort.” Despite her annoyance at her mother’s obvious plotting, she didn’t hate the idea of giving Misty to Cort. She just hated the idea of giving up her horse. Misty had been a good friend all these years, one she’d turned to when she was lonesome, stressed, feeling down. A ride together could put a smile on her face and in her heart. They had a bond, she and Misty, and she’d be breaking it.

“That, too.” Her mother smiled behind her coffee cup.

“You’ve mentioned this before.”

“You know you’d be doing what’s best for Misty, and I doubt you’ll miss the money you might get for her once you get another job. I know he’d appreciate it.”

Lexi didn't want to think about giving Misty away, but if she was set on returning to the banking world, there would be no place in it for Misty. The tug on her heart was real.

Back on the ranch, she'd finished feeding the livestock with Rusty's welcomed help and they walked back toward the porch where Cal was talking on the phone.

"Mom's really happy you're staying put."

"Shame it's when they decided to sell. Believe me, I feel guilty as hell about it." He shook his head. "I'm no rancher, Lex. I wouldn't be good at it. It wouldn't be good for me, either."

"I hear you. I feel guilty, too. I mean, I actually *like* doing this stuff and *I'm* not willing to take it on."

"Too much hard work?"

"Too much uncertainty. The cattle business has gotten worse over the last ten years, at least for smaller ranchers."

"Cort seems to think it's a good investment."

"Cort's got money from a buyout to hedge with; I don't. Besides, if Mom and Dad didn't sell, they wouldn't have money to relocate, and Dad needs to get out of this cold. He shouldn't go through another cold, wet, calving season. They've already started to look online at homes in New Mexico."

"Seems this Cort guy is the answer. I can't wait to meet him."

Lexi's phone jangled in her pocket. Digging it out she watched as Cort's name scrolled across screen. "Speaking of..."

She clicked on the screen and put the phone to her ear.

“Can you come over, like now?” Cort sounded urgent.

As she turned into the driveway, a large rig was pulling out onto the road. Nearing the house, Lexi spotted Cort leaning against the corral fence.

“What’s up?” she said as she slammed closed the driver’s-side door. Bandit circled her, looking for a pat on the head, which she gave gladly. She’d grown fond of Bandit. It would be almost as hard to leave him as it would be to leave Misty.

Cort sauntered toward her. Not saying a word, he grabbed her arms, pulled her close, and kissed her. The scent of hay and man filled the air. Memories sparked through her mind like hot wires touching.

When he pulled back, she was breathless.

“I got my mother’s present.”

She tugged her jacket into place. “And...?” The word came out on a steamy breath that vaporized in the cold air.

“That was a horse trailer pulling out just now, and the reason is, she’s bought me a horse.”

Lexi reeled back on her heels, feeling the impact of those words. “A *horse*? What horse? Why?”

Cort raised his chin toward the corral. There, standing in the pasture looking bewildered, stood a beautiful specimen of a quarter horse. The gelding had a shiny black coat and two white stockings on his hind legs. Silky black strands of hair composed his mane and tail. His pose was regal, exposing a well-formed chest and neck.

“He’s beautiful. But a horse?” How ironic now that her mother had convinced her that giving Misty to Cort would be best for all. Now he’d get *two* horses for Christmas. Both from women who were leaving him for their careers.

“I’d been talking to the breeder but realized I couldn’t afford him right now, what with buying your family ranch, although that’s also the reason I wanted him. I wasn’t sure what you had in mind for Misty, and I’m going to have to expand the crew and remuda to manage both spreads. Mom must have picked up on that, because she asked me about the breeder. I thought she was just making conversation, but she went and bought Socks.”

Lexi shook her head. It was quite the gesture. “Bet this is the best present ever.”

“Definitely up there, though my first two-wheeler was also pretty exciting.” He grinned ear-to-ear, looking like a kid Santa Claus had just visited.

“Does he have a formal name?”

“A long one, but he responds to Socks.”

“The white stockings, of course.” Lexi climbed up on the lower rail and leaned over the top one for a better look. “How old is he?”

“Five, so still learning, but I’ve ridden him and put him through his paces. He’s got the basics. Just needs more training with cows, someone to show him the ropes.” He paused for a heartbeat. “I was thinking maybe you’d like to help train him.”

Cort couldn’t have looked more eager if he’d been told the horse was made of gold. Lexi climbed down from the fence.

Training horses had been her dream job when she was younger. Before she’d become an investment banker. Before she’d had a career. She wasn’t that teenager anymore. Part of her wished she was.

“I don’t know when I’ll be going back.” She’d been procrastinating her job search, doing the basics and nothing more. If she was going to find a job and pay her bills, she had to get serious and be ready to go in the new year.

Cort stepped closer and drew her near again. “I’m thinking of breeding horses, too. I’ll have the space to do it when your ranch is added to mine.” He looked into her eyes as if seeking her approval or reassurance.

As if he was asking a very different question.

“Your father tells me you took some college courses in horse breeding,” he continued. “Said you were thinking of going into that before switching to finance. And we know you can train horses.” He swiped the end of her nose, which he seemed to be doing a lot lately. The now familiar gesture sent a warm tingle through her. “Pays not much, but there are benefits.”

She stared into sparkling blue eyes. No one had looked at her like they wanted to gobble her up in a very long time. “Cort, I...”

“Or you could stay just until you find that job and help me get started.” His smile had flatlined, but a glimmer of hope was shining in his eyes.

“Maybe I should meet him first.” To provide a distraction from the tempting man who was jumbling her mind and weakening her will power.

Like a boy who couldn’t wait to show off his prize, he practically ran to the corral gate. She followed him through the portal. Cort hung back as she slowly approached Socks on the side, talking to him in a low voice.

“Hey, buddy.” Lexi held out her hand, knowing her scent would drift to the horse’s nostrils.

The gelding sniffed the air, letting out a snort, then turned his head in Lexi’s direction as she laid her hand on his shoulder and patted his neck.

“He’s calm, so that’s good.”

“He just needs more cow experience. Someone to show him the ropes. I’ve never trained a horse and want it done

right. By someone who knows how to ease him into it without spooking him.”

Lexi looked Socks over from head to tail. He was a beautiful horse. She’d love to stay and work with him. Would love to see where things went with Cort.

“Have to keep him quarantined from the other horses for at least ten days, but I’d appreciate it if you could work with him even for a few hours if the weather cooperates. That is, if you want to.”

“Of course I want to. While I’m here.” But with Christmas just two days away, Simone arriving tomorrow, and then a mere week until New Year’s, it didn’t leave much time. “How about I come over a day or two after Christmas and see what he’s got?” And then what? She’d be leaving, the ranch would be sold, and her time with Cort would become just a memory.

“Speaking of other horses, now’s as good a time as any to tell you.” She bit her lip before continuing. Once she said it, she couldn’t take it back. But it was the right thing to do, in so many ways. “I’ve decided to leave Misty with you. Consider it a Christmas present. So... you’re getting *two* horses this Christmas. That is, if you want her.”

“Of course I want her.” He grabbed her hand as they walked back to the gate. “Are you sure, though? She’s a valuable horse. You’d get good money for her.” He held the gate open.

Was she sure? Of course she wasn’t. She didn’t want to give up the horse that had meant so much to her. The horse that had been her companion since college. The horse that had allowed her to keep a foot planted in Wyoming, in a life she’d loved. “It’s what’s best for Misty that matters to me. And I trust you to take good care of her.” And maybe, if—and it was a big *if*—they continued seeing each other, she’d see Misty once in a while. She’d be able to ride her again. Maybe she

wouldn't lose Misty—or Cort—for good. Maybe her mother was right. They'd find a way.

“You know I will.” He latched the gate behind her and drew her into his arms. His kiss was sweet and tender. “Thank you. Your trust means a lot to me.” He stared into her eyes as if he had something more to say.

She waited, hoping he would tell her how he felt about *her*, not just her present.

“Speaking of presents, I've got something for you.” There was that eager look again. “I want to give it to you now, while it's just the two of us.”

He stepped back and pulled a box wrapped in red paper covered with gold balls out of the breast pocket of his jacket. It was the size of a ring box.

Her pulse thumped in her ear.

“This is something that I hope means as much to you as it once did.” He held out the box.

He wasn't on bended knee, at least, but, still, her feelings were a tangle of confusion. She pulled off her gloves, stuffed them in her pockets, then tore open the wrapping paper. It was a box from Towne Jewelers. His smile broadened and his eyes shone even in the bright sunlight, but he said nothing. Just waited.

She opened the box.

A diamond-encrusted figure of a horse's head dangled from a silver chain and rested on a bed of black velvet, so similar to the dime-store broken necklace she had tucked away. The one he'd given her that summer when she'd been in love with him. The one where he'd said—

“Do you remember the one I gave you years ago?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

“Do you remember what I told you then?”

Her mouth dry, she swallowed. “That you gave this to me because I cared about horses and you hoped I cared about you, too.” It came out in a raspy whisper, as if the words were catching in her throat. “And that it was something to remember you by.”

“I wished you’d consider staying on and helping me out with the horse program, at least until you find a job.” He cocked his head. “Give us more time together. Who knows, maybe you’ll like it enough to consider my offer to run it.”

So tempting, but the reality was, the new year was almost upon them and she needed to concentrate on getting her career in gear if she was going to have a career. She needed money. She still had bills to pay, including rent for her apartment. Training horses was more of a hobby for most people, not a career, as he was well aware.

“Cort, I—”

He touched his finger to her mouth, silencing her. “Just think about it.”

Before she could respond, he wrapped his arms around her, pressed his firm lips against hers and kissed her again. The kiss was deep and sensual, his searching tongue tingling her very core, as if asking for a promise.

Chapter 17

Lexi rushed out of the barn as she heard the sound of a car's engine. Simone was here one day before Christmas Eve. Heaven forbid her friend should come any sooner than necessary. But... hadn't that been Lexi last year?

Simone emerged from the rental car dressed in a down coat and black leather boots with thin heels, looking every bit the queen.

"Oh my, Lexi. You look like such a farmer."

Lexi gazed down at her dirt-spotted jeans, her barn boots, and her mother's old weathered ranch jacket. Definitely a different fashion statement.

Simone had always been waif-thin, so when Lexi went in for a quick hug, she could barely find her in the down coat. Lexi stood back and took in her friend who had all the hallmarks of a high-fashion model. "Don't call this a farm around my father. He'd be insulted."

"There's a ranking?"

Simone was so easy to tease. "Just kidding. Some of our best friends are farmers."

"It's wicked cold out here." Simone crossed her arms and flapped her hands against her body. "And so windy."

"You get used to it. Let me help you with your luggage. Mom's set out the fixings for tacos, and... we have another guest."

"Another guest? I must be putting you out."

“Not at all. Mom’s thrilled to have a full house. Really.” Lexi lugged the heavy bag out of the backseat. “It’s an Air Force buddy of Rusty’s. He didn’t have family to go to either.”

“I hope he’s rugged and handsome. Give you another reason to get over Philip.”

“He’s both of those things, but I don’t need any more reasons to get over Philip.”

“I suppose Mr. McClane is reason enough.”

“I told you those things in confidence, Simone. And Cort’s going to be here tonight, so please don’t try to play matchmaker. My mom’s doing quite enough in that direction.”

“Is it working?” Simone asked as they climbed the porch steps.

“Maybe too well. I should be working on getting a new job but... let’s just say I’m conflicted. We’ll talk tonight before bed. You’re rooming with me. Cal, that’s Rusty’s friend, is staying in Rusty’s room. Come on in and meet everyone.”

That evening, the group gathered in the great room around the pine tree Cort had cut down that Rusty and Cal had dragged in from the barn and set on its stand. Boxes of ornaments, pulled down from the attic, were at the ready. Rusty, Cal, and Cort, working together, had already adorned the evergreen with lights while everyone sang Christmas carols. Lexi had been delighted to find that Cort was a classic tenor like Rusty, while Cal’s voice was a deep bass. Simone sang out in a lovely soprano as if she’d been born to it, so much better sounding than Lexi’s voice. Mom’s voice was, as always, strong and melodic as she led the group.

Now, Christmas music played softly in the background as the scent from the evergreen filled the room.

From the comfort of the sofa, her father supervised the tree-decorating chaos, his foot raised on a pillow, while her mother combed through the various boxes, looking for the ornaments she favored and handing them out to anyone who was free. Bandit lazed in front of the blazing fire. With the tree to the side of the fireplace, he was one more obstacle to navigate, albeit a furry one, along with the ladder Rusty had brought in to reach the top.

“So, you’re an investment banker, too?” Cort asked Simone as he placed a gaily colored ball on the tree. Cort seemed to have gotten into the spirit of things, despite his professed aversion to the holiday. In fact, he seemed pretty happy to be part of it all.

“Yes. Surprised?” Simone’s eyebrow arched.

Lexi paused, a glass ornament in hand, to hear Cort’s response.

“Just that beauty and investment banking isn’t a combination I’ve encountered before, and the fact that your bank had it double is a surprise.”

Nice save, Cort.

“Why, Mr. McClane, if I didn’t know better...” Simone glanced in Lexi’s direction. “I’d say you were flirting with me. Or Lexi.”

Cort blushed.

Score one for Simone.

“How did you get started in that?” Cal, who hadn’t said more than hello since Simone had arrived, took a Madonna and child ornament from Mom’s hand.

“I’ve always been attracted to money.” Simone turned and put a ceramic Santa Claus on the tree. That Santa Claus, with

scratches through the red paint from wear, had originally been part of Lexi's grandmother's collection.

Lexi remembered the first time that Santa Claus had hung on their tree. Her mom had wept because having that Santa Claus meant she wouldn't celebrate Christmas with her own mother ever again. Ever the more wonder that her mom had been so generous with ornaments for Cort's tree.

"Isn't everyone attracted to money?" Cal asked

"Not from what I hear." Lexi glanced at Cort.

"Money isn't everything." Cort hung a ceramic white angel up high, being tall enough to do so.

"Spoken like someone who has it," Rusty said.

Lexi remembered when her mother had bought the angel Cort had hung and another one just like it from a stand at the winter festival. She hadn't noticed an ornament stand there this year. Things change.

Her dad held up a ball ornament covered in beads, waiting for someone to grab it from him.

Rusty obliged.

Her mom continued sorting through the boxes, placing the ornaments she liked on the ottoman for someone to grab.

Lexi scanned the room, mentally capturing the scene in her mind. After this year, memories were all they would have of spending Christmas in this house, the house where several generations had decorated countless evergreens. There was the mantel an ancestor had carved, upon which were hung the stockings Grandmother Russell had made with their names stitched in a neat hand. This time, two more store-bought ones had been added. There were the wood beams that graced the ceiling, hand-hewn by her great-grandfather. Around the tree was a red tree skirt that had been hand-sewn by her grandmother Reilly.

Nostalgia swelled, threatening to swamp her if she didn't do something—anything—to distract herself. She reached for a simple ball that was still in the box.

“Not that one.” Her mother swatted her hand. “Here, take this.” She picked a second ceramic angel off the ottoman and handed it to Lexi. “You picked a winner of a tree, Lexi, as the last tree in the house.” Her mom swiped a hand across her cheek and managed a smile as she slid into the large comfy chair on the other side of the fireplace. “I wonder what kind of trees we'll have when we finally land.”

Lexi plopped onto the arm of her mother's chair. “Silent Night” played in the background, a favorite of Grandpa Reilly as she recalled. “Is everything okay, Mom?”

Her mother nodded, but her smile had drooped. “This will be our last Christmas in this house. For our whole married life, we've celebrated Christmas in this room.”

Lexi's emotions had been swinging between a profound sense of loss and the joy she got from celebrating the holiday. She could only imagine what her mother must be feeling. She leaned her head against the back of the chair.

“At least we're all together this Christmas.” She'd cling to that thought.

Mom closed her eyes for a second. “But soon you'll be off to heaven-knows-where with barely a day to spare us a visit.”

Lexi kissed her mother's cheek, feeling both the truth of that statement and the hope that it wouldn't be like that. “I'll be better about visiting, Mom.” She'd do her best to keep that promise. Nothing like losing the generational abode to drive home the importance of family. These last few weeks had been a wake-up call, one she knew she needed to heed.

Her mom took a deep breath. “You're right, though. I've got to be thankful for the fact that my family is here, and enjoy the moment.” She stood up as if someone had prodded her, grabbed one of the ornaments, a cutout Christmas tree dotted

with colored sequins that Lexi had made years ago, and hung it in the center of the tree.

Her father leaned over. “The reality is hitting your mom, is all. It’s hitting me, too.”

The ending of the Russell legacy was barreling down on them all. She watched Cort climb the ladder to hang a pretty red ball near the top.

“When are you going to sign the contract, Dad?”

“He said we could take until the new year, but I thought it’d make a good gift if I did it after dinner on Christmas. When June will be here, too.”

It would make a nice Christmas memory for Cort, though likely not for her parents.

She picked up another ornament. It was of an angel dog. They’d gotten that one the year Scamper had passed.

“Are you and Cort a thing, Lexi?”

Lexi stopped moving at the hopeful tone in her father’s voice. She checked to see if Cort had overheard. He was coming down the ladder and hadn’t paused.

She shrugged, not sure how to answer.

“You know, Lexi, I’m not worried about whether he has feelings. I’m worried whether you’ll figure out that you do, too, and before it’s too late.”

* * *

“You have a really nice family, Lexi.” Simone sat on the other twin bed in her pink silk pajamas.

“Don’t sound so surprised.” Lexi climbed under the blankets and flannel sheets of her twin bed, clothed in her

flannel pajamas. The house was old and drafty, and she luxuriated in every bit of flannel.

“You do have a reputation of being a go-getter and very ambitious. I guess I expected your family to be that way, but they’re pretty mellow. Even your brother. I mean, he’s seen combat, yet he seems like a gentle soul.”

Gentle wasn’t exactly the way she’d describe Rusty, remembering the choke holds he used to have her in when she’d tease him. “He surprised us by announcing he’s not reenlisting. He’s going to finish up some college courses and apply to the police force. He’s ready to settle down and stop roaming the world.”

And what was Lexi ready to do? Join the rat race again?

Simone picked up her phone and switched it to silent mode. “Really? Do you think Cal’s staying in the army?”

Lexi tried to hide her smile. Cal and Simone would make an interesting couple.

“Don’t know. He’s kind of a quiet guy, hasn’t said much.”

Simone slipped her hair under a net. “I didn’t find him so quiet. Maybe cautious. It’s a little intimidating to be thrown in the middle of someone else’s family, someone else’s traditions. Takes a bit to find your sea legs.”

“I take it that’s how you feel even though you think my family is, as you say, nice.”

“They’ve been very welcoming even though I’m an outsider. I can’t think of a better family to be with other than my own.” Simone took a dab of cream from a jar and smoothed it on her skin. “You said you had something you wanted to talk about. Maybe something about that handsome cowboy who is definitely smitten with you?”

Smitten? “It’s sort of about that.”

“I’m listening.” Simone threw back the covers and crawled under the flannel bedding, pulling the blankets up tight to her chin as she turned on her side toward Lexi. “It’s cold in here.”

“The flannel sheets will warm you in no time.” Lexi took a deep breath. “As I told you, Cort’s buying the ranch, and he told me he wants to use part of it for breeding and training horses.”

Simone propped her head up with her bent arm. “Sounds like a plan, though I have no idea if it’s a good plan. Do you?”

“Money-wise? No clue. But, in terms of my dreams, it’s lit.” Her younger dreams anyway. “That’s what I’d always wanted to do. Well, until I went into investment banking.” Then her dreams had changed to big houses, traveling to glamorous places, and buying luxury items, none of which she’d done. None of which held much appeal at the moment.

Simone was looking at her, waiting for what came next.

Lexi took a deep breath. “I was thinking that... maybe... I could run that program. Before I went into finance, I took equine studies, so I know something about breeding.”

Simone bolted upright, swung her legs over the side of the bed, and leaned forward. “Lexi, you’re an investment banker and a good one. Why would you give that up for this?” She waved her arm in the air.

“I know. It’s crazy, right? But these last few weeks... I’ve realized how much satisfaction I get from ranch work. It’d be doing something I love instead of doing something just for the money.” If she was ever going to live her young dreams, this would be the time.

“If you’re doing it just to be near a certain cowboy, it’s crazy. Maybe all this sudden interest in ranching is tied up in a rebound romance. Have you ever heard of long-distance relationships? Lots of people do it.”

“I don’t think that’ll work with Cort. Our jobs will make it impossible to get away. You know that. You couldn’t even take time off to spend Christmas with your family.”

Simone rested her elbows on her knees, her hands propping up her chin. “He’d have to be a really special guy to be worth giving up your career, the money, your future. I can’t believe you’d trade it all for this.” Again, she waved her arm.

“I know it sounds foolish.” Especially since she had no idea if he felt anything for her beyond the obvious. “He asked if I could at least help him set up the program while I did my job search.”

“Doesn’t exactly sound like a declaration of love, Lexi.” Simone tsked. “Seems like he’s looking for free labor while you languish out here. You know you won’t give your job search a hundred percent if you stay here. I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to choose. Either your career or your cowboy, and, if you choose the cowboy, you’d better make damn sure your cowboy loves you and you love your cowboy.”

Did she love him? Something was different this time. Since the other night, she’d been thinking about him constantly. Wondering what he was doing. How he was doing. But she didn’t have a clue how deep Cort’s feelings ran for her. She’d be risking her finance career to find out.

She unlatched the necklace from her neck and placed it on the bedside table while she let Simone’s words sink in. How did she know if this was love or infatuation or a rebound romance?

“Is that from him?” Simone pointed at the necklace.

Lexi nodded.

“It’s a little dainty for you, but it’s pretty.”

Lexi pulled the covers up to her chin. “It has sentimental meaning.”

If only he felt something for her, because she surely was starting to feel something for him. And if he did, then what? Buying the Russell ranch meant Cort was in it for the long haul. It wouldn't be something he could easily give up, nor would someone who loved him ask that of him.

Simone shifted onto her back and pulled the covers up tighter. "Is he worth it, Lexi?"

That was the million-dollar question.

"Do you want a riding lesson?" Lexi stood at the railing with Simone as Sheba and Misty munched on hay inside the corral. A light snow was already falling on this Christmas Eve. They would have a white Christmas after all.

Cort had stopped by—to check in, he'd said. Because his crew was on holiday and Socks was getting adjusted, he'd passed on dinner with the family that night but promised he would be there for Christmas dinner. A quick kiss that took her breath away, and then he left, taking with him the temptation of his touch. She had to keep a tight rein on her feelings. It all felt so new and she was having a hard time handling it—whatever "it" was.

Simone hugged her down coat to her body as snowflakes decorated her hair as if someone had thrown white glitter on her. "I'd need it to be spring when it isn't so cold. Or windy. Or snowing."

"Wind is a fact of life in Wyoming, but the cold does go away... eventually. And we need the snow."

"Is this really where you want to be?" Simone made a circular wave with her hand. "Are you sure you aren't just getting sentimental over it, like with that necklace?" Simone placed her hand on Lexi's shoulder. "Change like this is hard.

You're not just losing your family ranch, you're leaving a legacy. But change can be good."

"True. But going from investment banker to a cowgirl again might be a good change, too. Even if it's just until I get a banking job." It would also give her the time to see if she and Cort had something real, something they could build on.

"If you're out of work even a few months, it's going to be that much harder to jump back in. Get a job and try a long-distance relationship first with the guy to see if he has staying power."

Of course, that was the sensible, practical approach, but would Cort go for it? Did he even want to try?

"Your right. We really are just..." Lexi didn't know what they were exactly.

"You're just what?" Simone raised her chin, as if she was all ears.

Lexi was saved from responding when she spotted a beige van coming up the drive. It stopped several feet before the corral. Cass Courier Service was scrawled on the van's side.

The bundled-up driver climbed out with a manila envelope in one hand and a tablet in the other. Lexi met him on the path to the house. "I can take that."

"It's for Ian McClane." The driver's voice was as gravelly as their driveway.

"That's my father."

"You need to sign for it." He tucked the envelope under his arm and held out the tablet.

She signed her name, and the envelope was placed in her hands. She glanced at the return address—Bretton Brothers Development Corporation. Possibilities tumbled around her mind like rocks in a spinner.

“What do you think it is?” Simone peered over Lexi’s shoulder as snowflakes spotted the envelope.

“The end of Cort’s ranch dreams.”

“Now why do you think I’m getting something from Bretton Brothers Development Corporation, Lexi? I thought you were okay with selling to Cort.” Dad took his glasses out of his shirt pocket and slid them on.

He sat at the head of the table, while Mom stood behind him to get a better view of the contents when revealed. Simone had discreetly gone back to the bedroom, and Rusty and Cal were at the mall, likely buying some last-minute presents.

Despite having come in from the cold, beads of perspiration dampened her neck. “Honestly, Dad, I haven’t been in touch with them since that day in the field.”

Nodding, he tore open the envelope and pulled out a thick stack of papers.

Mom peered over Dad’s shoulder, and they both read the top sheet. Her mother gasped. Her father sighed. They looked at each other with concern before smiles gave way.

“What?” Lexi brushed her jeans with clammy hands.

Dad settled the first sheet back on top of the stack. “He’s gone and done it. Gummed up the whole works.”

“Gone and done what?” But Lexi feared she knew exactly what Steve Bretton had done.

Mom straightened. “He’s made us an offer. A good offer.”

Her stomach constricted with dread, strangling her breathing. “How good?”

“Lot more than Cort’s offer.” Her dad tapped the stack of papers. “I don’t know what to do.” He looked back at his wife.

“It’s tempting.” She patted her husband’s shoulder as she circled back to her familiar seat. “We’ll have to think about it. Have our lawyer look over the contract.”

“You’re going to consider it?” She thought of Cort, so excited to be running both ranches. She thought of his plans for horse breeding and a training facility. This offer had landed like a grenade, with the potential to blow it all to smithereens.

“We have to. I mean, it’s a lot of money on the table.” Her mom set her hand on her dad’s forearm. “Don’t we?”

He nodded. “We wouldn’t be doing right if we didn’t consider it.”

“And Cort?” He’d added Socks; had placed advertisements for more ranch hands; had lined up a feedlot in anticipation.

“We were thinking of signing the letter of intent tomorrow on Christmas. But he said we had until the end of the year, so that’s another week. I think we need to take that time to think about it and ask our lawyer to look this over.”

Mom looked at Lexi. “Don’t tell him about this. It’s only material if we decide to go with the developer. I wouldn’t want to cause him anxiety for no reason.”

Lexi fidgeted with the empty envelope, wishing she could stuff the contents back in and return it to the sender. “I thought money wasn’t your yardstick.”

“Honey, did you hear what Dad said? It’s *serious* money. We have to give it some thought.”

Chapter 18

The chaos of Christmas morning had always warmed Lexi's heart. Wrapping paper thrown everywhere, lots of hugs, phones snapping pictures, and voices raised in laughter. Rusty liked the backpack and camping gear Lexi had bought him—less bulky than the ones he usually carried around, he had said. Her father had laughed at the pickle ball paddle she gave to each parent, saying he knew nothing about the game and wondered if his knees would hold up. The website had said it was great for older adults, and she'd looked at some of the tournaments on YouTube that were filled with people who looked her parents' age. Simone was happy with the designer pen Lexi had given her, and Cal seemed pleased with the cowboy hat she and her parents had bought for him. He hadn't stopped wearing it since he'd taken it out of the box.

Lexi had gotten a new ranch coat from her parents, which wouldn't get much use if she was only visiting Junie now and again. Rusty had bought her a hat and scarf set for the cold. Simone had gotten her a fancy pink top suitable for a New Year's Eve party, and Cal had bought her gloves to go with her hat and scarf.

The next round commenced with the arrival of Junie, Todd, and Parker. Junie and Todd got the regular round of scarves, gloves, hats, tops, and pants that adults get for Christmas. Parker, on the other hand, made out like a bandit.

He loved the large block set, musical school bus, picture books, and several learning toys that her parents had brought him. Along with the red vest, Lexi had gotten him a pint-sized cowboy hat, a toddler-sized pair of jeans, and a western shirt

to complete the outfit. Like Cal, Parker wasn't taking his hat off.

As she sat on the couch with Simone and watched her nephew playing with his toys, she scanned the room. Why hadn't she left well enough alone? Why had she been so set on getting her parents more money that she'd contacted the developer in the first place?

And now she might have ruined things for Cort as well. How would she face him?

* * *

Cort stepped through the doorway of the Russell household, right before the dinner hour, holding a card and a large box. Lexi greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and he caught the scent of lavender. She looked as good as a Christmas cookie wearing a pretty red sweater with embroidered Christmas trees and black sparkly pants. Silver Christmas trees hung from her ears and the horse-head necklace glittered around her neck. He hoped the fact she was wearing it meant something.

Maybe there was hope she would stay long enough to figure this out.

Before he could reach for her, she was leading him into the chaos of the living room. Bandit followed, seemingly unfazed by the crowd.

People were plopped on every square inch of seating and heads turned as he entered the room.

"Glad you're here. We're all hungry," Rusty said. The nods of the others showed the guy was speaking for the group.

"Livestock to attend to. Sorry if I held you up."

Lexi speared Rusty with a glance. “You’re right on time. In fact, there’s time for you to open up your gifts.”

Cort set the large box down as Junie slid over closer to her dad to make room for him to sit on the couch. It had been awhile since he’d opened presents in front of a crowd. An awkward feeling set in as Lexi set two packages before him, making him glad they’d exchanged their gifts in private.

“Let Parker open this one first.” He pushed the box in Parker’s direction. With two year old excitement, Parker tore into the wrapping paper.

Todd helped Parker open the box. The little boy gasped at the play pony on wheels inside, and then began squealing to get it out.

Junie prompted Parker to say thank you and the little boy obliged, excitement visible in his flushed face and gleaming eyes.

Seeing the little boy’s elation did his heart good. Cort looked around. “Not much room to ride it partner.”

Todd extracted the toy from the box. “I’ll take it to the hallway and he can ride up and down.”

Parker was jumping all the way to the hall.

Cort drew out an envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to Ian as the rumble of the toy pony moving down the hall provided a sound track. “Figure you could use this when you move.”

Ian opened the envelope. “Certainly will come in handy. Thanks.” It contained a gift card to a big box store.

“Your turn,” Lexi said.

All he wanted for Christmas was for Lexi to stay longer.

The first present was a tool box from Lexi’s parents. “Thank you. Definitely something I’ll need now that I won’t be able to borrow from you guys.”

He unwrapped the smaller, second present. It was a silver belt buckle from Lexi.

“It’s a beauty but you didn’t have to get me anything more.” In fact, just being with her was a gift, though he wasn’t about to say that.

She leaned over. “I wanted to. Besides, it completes the cowboy look.”

He wanted to show his appreciation with a kiss but with the attention of the whole room focused on them, he said a simple thank you.

The last package contained chew toys for Bandit. The dog wagged his tail at the sight. Cort tossed him one and Bandit settled down to gnaw away.

“Clearly Bandit appreciates you guys thinking of him.”

“Let’s eat!” Rusty said.

As always, the rib roast with all the trimmings was delicious but, with Lexi sitting across from him, all Cort could think about was getting Lexi alone. The family was noisy and loud as they discussed everything from Parker’s new tooth to Junie’s floral business to Ian’s recovery, with the exception of Cal and Simone who seemed more comfortable as observers than participants. He guessed he felt that way too.

As the group finished dessert at the large wood table the din of everyone talking over each other had become deafening. Cort, being an only child, had never had the chance to be part of all this Christmas exuberance, especially with two emotionally-distant parents.

As he helped fetch some beers from the refrigerator, he glanced at Lexi, flitting around offering cookies.

He placed the beer bottles on the table and sidled over to the counter where she was filling mugs with coffee. “Need help?”

Lexi cocked her head. The smile on her face didn't reach her eyes, though. She handed him a mug. "You can set these on the table. I have to go feed the horses." Her tone was curt.

"Something wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Just feeling nostalgic."

"Let me help feed the horses." Maybe then he could find out what was bothering her, because she certainly wasn't showing much enthusiasm at the moment.

If Lexi could have prevented Cort from following her out into the corral, she would have. Knowing the offer from the developer was on the table, she didn't relish being alone with Cort. But Cort wouldn't be deterred and so she found herself alone with him, nonetheless.

"I don't know how to thank you and your family, Lexi." He matched her stride for stride as they headed to the corral walking over packed snow. "With no family moments to look forward to, spending it alone in front of the television, Christmas had become my least favorite holiday. But spending it with you and your family has reminded me of all the reasons to love Christmas."

Even in the weak light of the single bulb casting a glow out into the corral, Lexi could see his broad smile. A smile that would be nonexistent after he learned that a developer was buying the ranch. Her stomach roiled at the thought.

As she closed the gate behind them and stepped into the corral, Cort grabbed her, wrapped his arms around her. The heat from his body warded off the nip in the air. She wanted to lose herself in his arms, but instead she leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad you enjoyed today. Everyone who celebrates should have a good Christmas."

The thought of Cort spending Christmas alone tugged at her heart. Where would he go next year, and the year after

that?

His finger lifted her chin. His kiss was sensual, his lips encompassing hers, his tongue seeking hers. She tried to give as good as she got.

“What is it?” he said, pulling back, clearly sensing something was wrong.

“Just feeling sad about leaving the place. Coming home and staying this past month reminded me how much I love it here—and why.” All of which was true. Just not the reason for her tepid response.

“I’m not planning on changing much. The house, the corrals will all be here. Of course, you don’t *have* to leave. At least, not right away. Have you thought about my offer to stay and help me out, at least while you look for a job? The pay wouldn’t be what you’re used to, but did I mention there would be fringe benefits?” He wagged his eyebrows as if he expected her to laugh.

Instead, she burrowed her face into his jacket. “Simone thinks I’ve wasted too much time already.” He hadn’t said one word about how he felt about her, about them.

He stepped back, the smile gone. “Best get to feeding the horses then.”

* * *

Lexi saw the strange vehicle coming up the drive. For a sleepy ranch, her driveway was getting a lot of traffic of late. She stepped across the thawing corral ground and stood at the fence, Bandit joining her, his ears alert. She didn’t expect Cort. He’d gone with her father to the South Dakota finishing lot to renegotiate next year’s contract. Lexi hoped that was a sign her parents were planning to sell to Cort, though neither

had said so. Knowing that a developer could snatch away Cort's plans had been weighing on her conscience.

Rusty had left a half an hour ago to take Cal to the airport for his flight back to base and then was meeting up with some friends. Simone had left bright and early the day before, with the admonition for Lexi to get her job search going. And Cort still hadn't said how he felt about her except to ask her to stay to help with Socks. Not exactly a declaration to build a life around.

She shielded her eyes from the sun and watched the Lincoln SUV come to a stop at the edge of the driveway. Her jaw literally dropped as a familiar blond-haired figure stepped out.

Bandit barked at Lexi's side.

"It's okay, Bandit. Quiet." The dog stopped barking, but his eyes were fixed on the man.

Philip had on a sleek, camel-haired coat that the ever-present wind in Wyoming was already whipping through, if the fact that he was hugging himself against the cold was any indication.

A low growl emanated from Bandit as Philip moved closer.

"Quiet, Bandit. It's okay." It took her a minute before her legs started moving. She opened the gate and stepped out to greet him, Bandit by her side, as if she needed protection.

"Philip? What brings you here?"

Bandit circled Philip's legs, preventing him from moving closer.

"Sit, Bandit." Bandit obeyed, but the dog kept his focus on Philip just the same.

Philip's gaze roved over her, but thank goodness he didn't reach for her. Perhaps the watchful Bandit made him think

twice. “I don’t think I ever saw you dressed like that, much less...”

“Shoveling out a corral?” This was a long way from the corridors of wealth and power.

“Yeah.” He shifted on his feet, which were clad in the Italian leather shoes he favored.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m fine, but to say I’m surprised is an understatement.”

He crossed his arms and patted his gloved hands against the arms of his coat. “I came to see you and—”

“And what?” She couldn’t think of one reason why her cheating ex-boyfriend was standing before her.

“Can we go someplace to talk? I’m freezing my tail off.”

Not really her problem. But she was curious as to what had brought him all that way. “Sure.” She latched the gate.

Philip looked around, as if expecting someone to jump out at him. “The last place I saw was quite a ways back.”

Lexi glanced down at her ranch jacket and jeans. She probably smelled of horse and cattle, not that anyone in Smokey’s would mind. “I have to put Bandit in the house and tell my mother I’m going out.” And wouldn’t her mother be shocked at the news.

“I suppose you told her about us.” He was switching his weight from one foot to the next, doing a dance in the packed snow.

She shielded her eyes from the sun, still trying to grasp why he’d come, uninvited, to Wyoming. “It was pretty obvious when you weren’t with me at Thanksgiving.”

“That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Lexi lowered her menu. “So, you said we’d talk about it once we got to Smokey’s. We’re here now, so…”

Her mother had literally thrown up her hands when Philip had walked through the door. She’d known instantly who he was since Lexi had shared with her mother several pictures over the past year of her and Philip. After composing herself, her mom had offered him coffee, which he’d declined.

When Lexi had gone to her room to change, her mother had followed, leaving Philip alone with the ever-watchful Bandit. Her mother had demanded to know what was up, and Lexi had had to convince her she hadn’t a clue. Now that they were at Smokey’s, though, Lexi wanted answers.

“Maybe we should order first.”

Lexi looked around the wood-paneled restaurant. It was the latter half of the lunch hour, and the place was largely empty except for a few stragglers. She caught Charlene’s eye. The waitress was tending bar at this time of the day, chatting up a man in a trucker cap, but she nodded at Lexi, and, within a minute, she was standing at their booth.

“What can I get you two? You having your regular, Lexi?”

She appreciated that Charlene had remembered. “Yes, and a Dancing Fool.” A little liquid courage might calm the tap dancing going on in her gut.

“That fancy stuff’s gotten to you, too, has it?” But she was smiling as she turned to Philip. “And you, sir?”

Dressed in a suit but with an open collar and no tie, Philip still looked more polished than most of the clientele who frequented Smokey’s. She had once thought him sophisticated. Now, he just seemed pretentious. Still, he had come all the way to Wyoming to talk with her, so whatever it was must be serious.

A litany of possibilities had run through her mind like a mouse in a maze looking for the cheese. Had Chloe died? Tragic, but not worth a trip. Did he have a serious disease? Wouldn't Candy be the one he'd tell? Did he have a job for her? That would be interesting but more worthy of a phone call than a trip, although she wasn't certain she would have answered his call. In any event, he hadn't called her, because she'd checked her phone for recent calls while she'd been changing her clothes and his number wasn't on the list.

"What do you recommend, Lexi?" He looked perplexed by the menu of artery-clogging options.

"The rodeo burger," Charlene answered for her.

"It's delicious. Better than anything we get in San Francisco," Lexi seconded.

"Oh, a Californian, are you?" Charlene sniffed, as if a rotten smell had invaded the place. "We've been getting a lot more of them lately." Apparently, being from the coastal state was considered an invasion.

Philip frowned as he studied the menu. "Guess I'm not going to get any poke' here."

"No one's going to poke you, I promise," Charlene tsked.

Lexi had to stifle a laugh. "Order the rodeo burger and live a little."

"Fine. Rare please." He closed the menu. "I suppose I shouldn't order wine."

"He'll have a bottle of Dancing Fool, too," Lexi said. If he didn't want it, she'd likely need it. At least she wasn't driving.

Charlene finished writing, shoved the pencil behind her ear, then sauntered away, as if it had been a burden to take their orders.

"So, what does bring you to Wyoming?" She couldn't fathom his answer.

Philip snorted as if he was expelling San Francisco smog. “You, Lexi. I wanted to see you.”

She had no desire to see him, but she would be friendly. “And why is that? Is this about a job or something?” Hopefully.

“It’s about a job *and* something.”

Her heart sped up at the news. “Your bank has a job for me? That would be terrific.” Or would it? Because it would also mean running into Philip more times than she wanted. And then she’d be leaving Wyoming and Cort behind, possibly for good

Philip explained the aspects of the job in acquisitions, which was in line with her previous position.

“And the salary?” she asked as Charlene plopped two bottles of Dancing Fool on the table.

“Burgers will be up shortly,” Charlene said before heading back to the bar.

He named a figure pretty much at parity with what she’d been earning.

“When are they interviewing?”

“They’d want to see your résumé, of course. And then they said they’d start interviewing next week. There’re a few candidates lined up already, but I think, with your background and my stamp of approval, you’ll be a shoe-in. But you need to send in your résumé today. I’ll text you the email address.”

“It’s very decent of you to support me for this job.” No doubt trying to assuage his guilt—in her mind, he had a lot to feel guilty about. “But you didn’t have to fly all the way out to Wyoming to tell me. They’ve invented something called the telephone, you know.”

Charlene set a rodeo burger platter in front of each of them, pulled the ketchup out of her pocket, then returned to the bar

without saying a word, a sure sign Charlene did not like her customer from California.

He surveyed the pile of burger, bacon, cheese, BBQ sauce, and onion rings on a bun that was perched on his plate. “This looks like a heart attack waiting to happen.”

“Taste it and then complain.” She bit into hers, and the flavors of char-broiled beef, greasy bacon, smoky BBQ sauce, tangy onions, and mellow cheese filled her mouth.

Philip picked up his burger as if it had a disease, then took a small bite. And then another.

His mouth full, Lexi asked again, “What else has you flying out to Wyoming?”

He swallowed. “I wanted to apologize. In person. For what I put you through. For what I did to us.” He took another bite, larger than the first one.

“I admit it was a surprise, but, again, you could have done that over the phone. I appreciate the apology, but no worries—I’ve moved on.” In fact, her memory of her time with Philip already had become fuzzy, like a blurred picture.

“Does that mean there’s someone else?” He cocked his head.

She wasn’t going to answer that because it was none of his business. Besides, anything that had happened with Cort was not in the same category as Philip’s announcement that Candy was the one. “You have someone else; you’ve moved on. I’m just saying that being here has helped me move on.”

He put down his burger. “That’s the thing, Lexi, I haven’t moved on. And I’m hoping you haven’t—at least not completely.”

She frowned. “Meaning?”

“We broke up, Candy and I.”

“Broke up? You said she was the one.” And had thrown his and Lexi’s relationship away without a second thought. That restaurant conversation had left a painful mark upon her heart, like a scar from a wasp sting.

“Our relationship happened so quickly—too quickly. I was caught up in the attraction and didn’t think. I mean, Candy and I have nothing in common.”

She could have told him that. “You have Chloe. Nothing has happened to her, I hope.” She’d been very fond of that ball of fluff.

“Chloe is fine, but she isn’t overly fond of the person who cuts her hair these days. In fact, she bit Candy when Candy was grooming her.”

“Bit Candy? Like, hard?” She couldn’t imagine sweet Chloe biting anyone.

“Drew blood. And Candy, who works with animals all day long, overreacted. She hit Chloe when she got bit. She said she didn’t mean to, that she’d been frightened and it was an instinctive reaction, but still... Chloe had let go already.”

“Oh dear.” It sounded traumatic for everyone involved.

“We weren’t right for each other anyway. Thanksgiving with her family was... stressful. She has a big family. Everyone was loud and boisterous. They started singing Christmas carols and expected everyone to chime in. And it was still Thanksgiving.”

“My family sings Christmas carols.”

“Well, it’s a quaint tradition, I guess, but it went on forever.” He strung out the word *forever*. “I couldn’t wait to leave. After dinner, we stopped at my family’s house, sat around the fireplace with our brandy snifters, and commented on the world. It was relaxing. Through it all, Candy barely said a word.”

She still didn't understand why he'd come all this way to tell her this news. He had to know that he'd burned whatever bridge had once connected them. "I'm sorry it didn't work out. And I hope Candy's okay from the bite."

"You know, I found a nip on Chloe's ear, a clean one like a scissor might make. No wonder Chloe bit Candy. But, regardless, after those first few heady weeks, it just wasn't working for either of us. We broke up right before Christmas."

And, so, he thought of good old Lexi?

"If you came here hoping we'd get back together—"

"I came here to tell you about the job. And I realized I needed to apologize. What happens after this neither of us can predict." He shrugged. "We'll be working with each other, seeing each other. We can see where things go."

Things weren't going anywhere. Time in Wyoming had made her realize she'd had a narrow escape from a relationship that wouldn't have lasted. So different from the desire to be wrapped in Cort's arms every time she thought about the man, which was happening almost hourly these days. But Cort had yet to comment on—much less commit to—a relationship and, unfortunately, she *did* need a job.

"I'm interested in the position, but, with regards to us, as I said, I've moved on. So, if it's going to be awkward working with me under those circumstances, then don't send me the email information. I'll understand."

Philip had polished off the burger already and had started on the crispy fries. "Look, I know it will take time to restore trust. I cheated on you. I get it." He waved a fork in her direction.

"Do you? Because it sounds like you think it's a one-off. I don't believe that."

"Believe it. I've told you everything. And I'm being sincere here. I want to get back together."

“I’m not going to be cooking you dinners and waiting patiently for you to get home so I can serve you.”

“Gosh, you make it sound like something out of a *Mad Men* script.”

“It does, doesn’t it? And it’s definitely not where my head is at.”

“We’ll both be making enough money to hire other people to do that for us. No need for my wife to do it.”

“Whoa.” Lexi put her hand up. “We’re about as far from marriage as we were before we met. Farther, actually.”

He set his fork down and leaned forward. “What I’m trying to say is that having things in common is far, far more important than getting home-cooked meals. It may not work out between us. I’ll have to accept that and my part in causing that. But, at the same time, if we’re colleagues, if there’s a chance, I’ll be looking for an opportunity.”

“I’m not the forgive-and-forget’ type.” She’d thought he was going to propose that night, which had made the whole thing worse. “So, if that’s the main reason you’re supporting me for this position, no thanks.”

“I’m supporting you because you’re good at what you do, but I’m prepared to put in the effort to earn back your trust, Lexi. I know I hurt you. I know I’m the one who has to make this right.” He reached across the table as he’d done that night.

This time, she let him hold her hand. His was cool and soft.

“We’re perfect for each other, Lexi. We understand each other. We’re from the same world.”

“*I’m* from Wyoming. This bar is considered classy in this town. And I like it.” They were so *not* from the same world.

His head swiveled as he scanned the room before focusing back on her. “But you understand my work, how important it

is to me. I understand how important your work is to you. We both want the same things in this world.”

This was the speech she’d hoped she would hear that night, only, now, it no longer resonated. In fact, it sounded stilted and rehearsed.

But she couldn’t just turn down a job opportunity on the hopes that Cort would commit to a relationship either. Her intuition had been seriously off about Philip. What if Simone was right and what Lexi had with Cort was nothing more than a rebound romance? He hadn’t offered her anything but a job.

And she still didn’t know what her parents would do about the developer’s offer, which would blow up any plans Cort had with regards to breeding and training horses.

She stared across the table at Philip. He looked earnest and was holding on tight to her hand, as if afraid she’d get up and leave.

“Come back to San Francisco, interview for the job, and just see where things go.”

“I’ll have to think about it, Philip. The job, I mean.” She couldn’t imagine getting back together with him. But it would be easy enough to slip into another investment-banker role.

The only thing holding her back was Cort. But... if he truly cared about her, maybe they could try a long-distance relationship.

“I’m willing to wait, Lexi, so you can work through your feelings.” He squeezed her hand. When he released it, she placed both hands in her lap.

“I assure you, no amount of work will change them.” Could that be said about her feelings for Cort?

Charlene plunked the check on the table. “You can pay me or at the register. Makes no difference.” She hadn’t even asked if they wanted anything else before she returned to the bar.

Philip stared down at his plate, as if surprised to find it empty.

“Are you staying overnight?” Lexi asked.

“I have a room at one of the hotels by the airport. I fly back tomorrow morning. It’s an ordeal getting out here, by the way, but I did it for you. For us.”

If he was staying over, the thought of inviting him for supper crossed her mind. It would be the friendly thing to do. After all, he was offering to help her get a job.

“There is no us, Philip, but since you’re staying over, I’m sure my mom would be happy to have you for dinner. Though, I warn you, she might be cooking beef.”

“You could join me for dinner in town,” Philip said. “I actually passed a Japanese restaurant near the airport.”

She didn’t relish spending any more time alone with Philip. “Can’t. I have to tend to the livestock and—”

“Then I accept your invitation. I’m sure your mother’s cooking is far superior to anything I would find in town anyway, beef or no beef.” Philip threw some bills on the table.

“Thanks for lunch, but a word of caution,” Lexi said as she rose. “I wouldn’t mention how you feel about beef at the dinner table. This is cattle country.”

He grinned, a cocky kind of grin. “I’ll be on my best behavior. I want them to like me.”

“There’s likely to be another person at dinner,” she said as they walked out to his rental car. “He owns the neighboring ranch.”

“A real cowboy?” He smiled as if he liked the idea.

“Well, he actually earned a ton of money from a tech buyout, and when he inherited his uncle’s ranch, he decided to invest in it and become a rancher.”

“People can just decide to become a rancher?” He opened the car door for her. “I would have never thought that was a career choice. Thought you were either born into it or roped into it.” He chuckled at his own little joke... and it was very little.

She scooted into the passenger’s seat. “Yes. People do decide to ranch. It’s a wonderful life.” And yet, she was turning her back on it. Out of fear it wouldn’t be enough. Or... that she wouldn’t be enough for a certain cowboy.

He slid into the driver’s seat then closed the door. “I can’t imagine why that would be, but I look forward to meeting this rich cowboy. I’ll drop you off at your place, head out to check into the hotel and make some phone calls for work, then head back.”

“Dinner’s at six o’clock. Sharp.”

Chapter 19

Cort pulled the pickup to a stop in front of the stables, parking next to an unfamiliar car. No Lexi in sight.

“You expecting company?” Cort asked Lexi’s father, who sat in the passenger’s seat.

“Not that I’m aware of, but that’s not to say I would have been informed. In any event, Jewel invited you for supper, so, whoever it is, it’s likely we’ll be breaking bread with them.” Ian moved gingerly to get out of the car and groaned.

“Still hurting?” Cort asked as he exited.

“Just uncomfortable. The physical therapist really worked me yesterday.”

“It’s the best thing for you, though.”

“But not always the easiest. Which brings me to our situation.”

Cort halted and waited until Ian came around beside him. “And?” This had been the moment he’d been waiting for. The fact that Ian had wanted to go along and didn’t correct Cort when he’d talked herd size, including the Russell herd in his count, he’d taken as a sign that Ian was finally ready to commit. As far as Cort knew, the lawyers had worked out the language and all that was needed were signatures.

“I don’t know if Lexi told you—” Ian held up his hand —”and I’d rather not know. But that developer she found did make us an offer. A good one. We sent it to our lawyer for review, and he just sent it back yesterday. I never saw so much red ink. Looked like someone had bled all over the papers.”

Cort did a hard swallow. Developers that Lexi had scrounged up? Even though she'd told him that she'd accepted him buying the place? Something sharp pricked his heart.

Hadn't she said she was okay with Cort buying the ranch? And he'd been foolish enough to believe her.

It was clear that there'd never been a chance she wouldn't go back to investment banking. Tempting her with training Socks, hoping to stir her interest in the breeding program, wanting to give her a reason to stay a little longer, was simply spitting in the wind. And now he'd lose the Russell ranch and his dreams. All of his dreams.

Ian winked. "That's my way of saying we won't be taking that offer. The water rights would have been a sticking point anyhow. It's gonna be all yours."

Cort blew out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Thanks." He stuck out his left hand so Ian could shake it, considering the man's injury.

"We'll sign the letter of intent and give it to you New Year's Eve and let the lawyers work out the details and closing date. Smokey's is having a shindig and Jewel thought it would be a good way for all of us to celebrate. But I've a favor to ask."

"Don't know how I could say no." Even if he was smarting from Lexi's betrayal. "And if you want to stay in the house longer, it's fine by me."

"Well, that would be great because I think we're going to have a heck of a time packing up a lifetime of memories, much less finding a house. But this is about Lexi."

"I'm listening."

"I get the impression that you two like each other these days." He lifted his hat and resettled it on his head. "If it ain't the real deal for you, don't string it out. She's been hurt before, and she needs to move on. And, if that is the case, the

sooner she gets a job, the sooner she can do that.” Ian continued, “I always thought she’d take on the ranch, that is, until she went to college and started thinking about money all the time.” He shook his head.

Cort stubbed at the muddy snow. “I won’t.” Because Ian was right. They both had to move on. “I appreciate your support, Ian. I imagine the deal the developer offered was a lot better than mine.”

“It was. But I checked things out beforehand, and I knew your offer was a fair one if someone is going to ranch the land. Don’t expect a rancher to match a developer’s offer. Happy that the land my ancestors fought for is going to live on as a ranch.”

“I hope I can call on you now and again if I need advice.”

Ian patted Cort on the shoulder as they climbed the porch steps. “Of course you can. You’re like a son to me. But after seeing you with that beef contractor, I don’t know how much you’ll be calling. You’re going to make one hell of a rancher. You really know your way around a futures contract.”

“I had to deal with this stuff in my former career. Our technology hardware used a lot of rare metals that are traded on the Chicago Exchange, so that’s where I learned how to deal with the commodities market.”

“You’re full of surprises, Cort. Let’s go eat. I think Jewel is making her special meatloaf. My mouth has been watering all day just thinking about it.” Ian opened the door and stepped into the kitchen.

Cort followed suit. Bandit bounded over to Cort, tail wagging, looking for a greeting. Cort obliged, ruffling the fur on Bandit’s head. “How have you been, boy?”

Bandit shoved his snout into Cort’s leg as he hung up his coat and removed his hat.

Jewel turned around from the stove and glanced sideways. There, sitting at the kitchen table next to Lexi, was a guy. Blond hair, blue eyes, patrician looking, in a suit with no tie, and an open-collared shirt.

Cort was vaguely aware of Jewel giving Ian a welcoming kiss, but his focus was on the man sitting next to Lexi. She was dressed in a tight blue turtleneck and jeans, looking too good for the likes of her guest.

“Hi, Cort,” Lexi said, her voice an octave higher than usual. “I hope you had a productive trip. Cort McClane, I’d like you to meet Philip Norcross. A colleague of mine from San Francisco.”

Philip stood and reached a hand across the table. Cort shook it, hard. The guy had squishy fingers.

“We were more than colleagues, Lexi.” Philip stared straight at Cort, a dare in his eyes.

Lexi shifted her attention to her father, who had stepped closer to Philip. “And my dad.”

Another handshake, though Philip had to shift to his left hand to accommodate Ian’s braced arm.

“Please to meet you.” Ian looked confused. “You know Lexi from work?”

Philip resumed his seat, but Cort didn’t feel like sitting. He guessed who Philip was—the *former* boyfriend. And here he was, sitting next to her as if being there was a commonplace occurrence.

“We worked in different investment banks and met working on the same deal representing opposing interests.” Philip shifted in his seat so he could look more directly at Ian. “I was impressed with Lexi’s business acumen, among other things, and we started dating.” He shot a glance at Cort, and it wasn’t a friendly one.

“But we are no longer dating.” Lexi was running her fingers up and down the knife at her place setting.

Then what was the guy doing at the Russell ranch?

“His company may have a job for me.”

It was as if Lexi had read his thoughts. Hopefully not *all* of his thoughts. “And he had to come in person to let you know?”

“Among other reasons,” Philip chimed in.

The guy looked like a pompous idiot sitting there with his arm stretched out over the back of Lexi’s chair.

“So, are you taking it?” With laser-like focus, Cort stared at Lexi, looking for an answer, a reaction, anything that told him she wasn’t considering it.

She averted her eyes. Looked over at her mother. “Philip just told me about it today. I have to apply for it first.”

Cort clenched his hands, forming fists. That was all he needed to hear. Ian had said not to drag things out. He’d oblige. He walked over to Jewel. “I’m sorry, Jewel, but I need to get back to feed the horses. Socks is still getting adjusted, so I’m the only one feeding him.” So far. “Been away the whole day, so best I check on him. If it’s okay, I’ll take a rain check on dinner.”

“It’s ready,” Jewel said, a frown on her face. “I’ll pack up some to take with you.” She opened the cabinet.

“That’s kind, but only if you’re sure you have enough.”

“For you, always enough.” She took out a plastic tub and put a few pieces of the cut meatloaf into the container and heaped a scoop of potatoes in there as well. After sealing it, she handed it to Cort.

“Appreciate it, Jewel.” He turned to Ian, who had taken his seat at the head of the table. “Thanks for coming with me, Ian. And for the news.”

“My pleasure. See you tomorrow?”

Cort glanced back at Lexi, who hadn't moved, but her gaze was focused on him. She hadn't said another word. Hadn't tried to stop him from leaving. She was letting him walk away.

“Sure. Have a good evening.” He popped open the door, Bandit following. He stood on the porch for an extra moment. Didn't sound like anyone was rushing out to explain things. He headed down the steps.

She'd made her choice.

* * *

Sitting at the kitchen table after Philip left, Lexi scrolled down her bank account page on the laptop screen as minus sign after minus sign rolled by. There were no plus signs.

Her heartbeat sounded in her ears and the palms of her hands were clammy as she clicked on the bill pay tab, typed in the four digit amount of her rent, hit the send button, and watched the amount in her checking account descend to three digits. Hopefully, that few weeks of severance would hit her account soon.

“Are you sure you want to work with Philip?” Her mother closed the door to the dishwasher and Lexi heard the rushing sound of water filling the appliance. “I didn't find him all that impressive.”

No surprise after watching Philip stumble through a stilted conversation with her parents at dinner.

“I don't have a choice. I don't have another option.” She took a last look at her bank statement. “I need the money.”

“You could stay here and look for a better job, help out Cort and, we could certainly use help packing up—once we find a place.”

“I’ll be back to help you.” She’d negotiate the time off up front. “But you know what they say, a bird in hand—” She couldn’t afford to decline Philip’s offer. *Literally* couldn’t afford to decline it.

“I think you and Cort could have something, if you give it a chance, nurture it a bit.”

Lexi closed the lid of her laptop. “I don’t know if he’d be interested in a long-distance relationship because the only thing he’s offered is temporary work, nothing more.” Each word she uttered pinched a piece of her heart. “So I’m out of options. The job with Philip would be good for my career.” And she needed a paycheck.

“And if Cort offered something more, like marriage, would you become a rancher’s wife?” Her mother slid into the chair beside Lexi. “Do you love him?”

She couldn’t allow herself to answer that question. “He hasn’t told me how he feels and I can’t base my career decision on a hypothetical. How could I financially justify that?”

“You should know that we’ve decided to sell to Cort as originally intended. Dad told him today and we’re all going to celebrate at Smokey’s on New Year’s Eve. We’ve seen his financials, Lexi. He’s pretty well off, though financing this purchase will stretch him a bit. But I don’t think it’s the financial risk you’re worried about, is it? It’s the emotional risk you’re afraid of. It’s putting yourself out there and getting hurt again. Have *you* told *him* how you feel?”

A wave of queasiness lapped at her stomach. Maybe the reason Cort left so abruptly wasn’t because of Philip, but because he’d gotten the news he’d been waiting to hear. And didn’t need to hang around any longer. Maybe he didn’t care about her, not enough anyway.

“After what happened with Philip, I’ve no desire to slit my heart open again.” Because what if Cort said he didn’t feel the

same. “If he’s interested, we can always date long-distance. Plenty of people do.” But would Cort?

“Maybe he doesn’t feel he has a right to ask you to forgo a career for him. Especially considering his mother wouldn’t.”

“He doesn’t have the right. But he could certainly tell me he has feelings for me and let me decide.”

“And what would you decide? Would you take a risk on him? Or would you hedge and only agree to a long-distance relationship?”

Lexi leaned her elbows on the table and cupped her head in her hands, hoping it would relieve the pressure. “I don’t know.”

The next morning, as Lexi sat atop Misty and wound her way along the path to Cort’s house, it felt like an anvil was pressing down on her chest. She would drop Misty off today, and try to gauge if Cort would be willing to pursue a relationship even though she would be living and working in San Francisco. She’d done a lot of thinking last night, and it was the safest course for them both. They could see where things went— without having to make a life-altering commitment they might regret.

She’d texted him, assuring him that there was nothing between her and Philip. That she was just interested in the job.

He hadn’t texted back.

Misty trotted down the frozen path that led to the main house and barns on Cort’s property. The air was crisp, cool, and breezy. The sun was shining, a perfect day for a ride. Her last ride on Misty... maybe forever.

That anvil got heavier.

“I’m willing to try,” she muttered to herself as she stopped Misty in front of the corral fences. Several horses picked up their heads and looked.

“You miss your buddies?” She slid off the saddle and grabbed the reins to tie them to the fence rail. “I guess Sheba isn’t such great company for you. Well, soon you’ll be doing what you love.” And Lexi would be gone, leaving Misty behind. Leaving Cort behind. Leaving ranch life behind.

The thought of going back to San Francisco caused a quaking in her stomach like an earthquake rattling a house. Considering that’s where her safe, secure world had collapsed, she wasn’t looking forward to returning or rebuilding. Truth be told, that world had been built on pretense. Pretending she liked the workaholic lifestyle. Pretending she didn’t mind spending tons of money on rent to have the “right” address. Pretending she liked fancy red wines when she couldn’t tell the difference. Too bad it was the only realistic, well-paying option.

Lexi glimpsed Socks in the far corral. It would have been nice to work with the gelding. Bring out his cow horse potential as she had done with Misty.

As she tied the knot in the reins securing Misty to the rail, Cort emerged from the far barn.

As he approached, Lexi tried to control her pulse, which was tapping away at her temple. He could be the poster boy for a cowboy now. Tall, lean, muscular. Cowboy hat covering his thick brown hair, with the ranch jacket, jeans, and boots completing the look. Not to mention the rugged features of his face and the determined look in his eyes. It was hard to imagine the man in khakis and a polo shirt now that jeans and flannel made up his wardrobe.

Her heart did a pitter-patter beat as if trying to get its bearings before he stopped a few feet from her and crossed his arms.

“I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“We had a date.” She instantly regretted that word choice as he frowned. “For me to work with Socks this week. I was hoping now would be a good time. I texted you.”

“Didn’t see it. Thought that since you had a visitor...”

“He’s gone back to San Francisco.” Where he belonged. But... was it where she belonged?

“Amazing that he came all this way to tell you about a job opportunity.”

“He also came to apologize.”

“For...”

“Cheating on me. Dumping me.” He had a lot to apologize for.

“And...?”

“I accepted his apology, but I also told him it didn’t change anything. There’s nothing between Philip and me, and there never will be.”

“But you’re going to pursue the job?”

“Dad’s selling the ranch to you.” Given that fact, she’d expected to find Cort in a better mood, but, instead he seemed ticked off. “I really have to explore this job opportunity. It’s the first one that’s come along.”

“If that’s what you want.”

What she wanted was Cort to give her a sign he cared. A sense that she meant more to him than merely someone to help train his new horse or warm his bed. “Maybe we should saddle Socks, and I’ll see what he’s got.”

“Fine.” He said the word with such force and finality it echoed in the air.

An hour later, it was clear that Socks had promise. He was a little skittish around the cones Cort had set out to see how he moved, but that was likely nerves.

As Lexi slid off the saddle, Cort walked into the corral. “What do you think?”

“He’s got potential, but the proof will be with the herd.” She’d love the opportunity to work the herd with Socks and be with Cort, but she couldn’t risk throwing away a job opportunity on the possibility that his feelings for her would grow. Seemed her only hope was that he cared enough about her to try a long-distance relationship.

“I promised Mom I’d help her go through some things in preparation for moving, so I don’t think I’ll be riding Misty again before I leave. I’d like to leave her with you now.” Tears popped into Lexi’s eyes as she looked at Misty calmly standing at the railing, no clue that this could be the last time, maybe forever, that Lexi would be riding her. She brushed away the wet on her cheek.

He took a step closer, but he didn’t reach for her. Lexi shook her head, as if that would stop the tears from falling, and fingered the horse-head necklace which had become a talisman of sorts, a symbol of her long-ago hopes and dreams.

He stood with his legs apart and crossed his arms in a fighter’s stance.

“Guess I’ll have to find someone else who can help sharpen Socks’ cow-cutting skills. Tamara offered.”

That name stung like an open-palm slap. She squared her shoulders and blinked back the tears. This was the moment of truth. “If I get this job, I’m willing to give long-distance a try.”

The furrows on his brow deepened. “With you working with your former boyfriend who still has a thing for you?”

“I told you that you don’t have to worry about me and Philip.”

“Just about you being married to your career. Like my mom.”

Was his lip quivering?

“It’s how I make a living, Cort.” Why didn’t he understand that?

Cort gazed out into the pasture as if the two horses munching grass were the most engrossing thing in the world. “It’s not going to work, Lexi. I know that from experience.”

Her stomach cramped into ripples of pain. She crossed her arms over her body, trying to hold herself together. This was the end of things, and yet, standing there staring at him, seeing the despair in his eyes, a kernel of hope persisted. Because why would he look so lost if he didn’t feel anything? “I believe that if we want it to happen, we can make it work.”

“I saw what it did to my parents. To me.” He stubbed the ground with his boot toe. “I don’t think we want the same things, probably never did.” He shrugged and turned toward the fence. “Unsaddle Misty and then I’ll take you back in the truck.”

Sitting in Cort’s truck, Lexi concentrated on holding back the tears still threatening to spill out of her. She was losing the ranch, her horse, and Cort with one scratched signature on a document.

“I’ll be heading out New Year’s Day. Fares are cheaper, and the job interview is scheduled for the Tuesday after New Year’s.”

“So, you’ll start the new year in San Francisco. That’s fitting.” The scorn in his voice was like a sharp blade, making a cut with each uttered word.

“Tell me you at least understand why I’m doing this?” *Tell me you care.*

“I understand. Doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

A glimmer of hope. “Mom said you’ll be at Smokey’s on New Year’s Eve. To celebrate the sale.” One last opportunity to convince him not to slam the door shut.

He kept his focus on the road. “Your dad invited me, so guess it’s better than sitting on the front porch with Bandit.”

“Could you pick me up?” It could also be the last time she’d be alone with him.

He glanced her way. Finally. “You want me to?”

“Yes.”

“What time?” He turned the truck into their driveway.

At least he hadn’t refused. “Nine? Unless you want to come by earlier to eat something before we go.”

“I’ll see you at nine.” Cort stopped the pickup in front of the fence. He glanced out the windshield, as if the fence needed his attention.

She hesitated, wishing she could read the expression on his face. She leaned over to kiss his cheek.

He didn’t turn his head.

Chapter 20

Smokey's was jumping by the time Cort and Lexi got there. Rusty had tagged along with them, negating the need for her and Cort to actually speak to each other and, thus, foiling her plans. But Rusty said he'd catch a ride back with their parents, explaining he wasn't interested in staying long, but thought he might see some old friends from high school at the bar.

Charlene waved them over to the last booth at the end of the row. "I managed to save this one for you once Jewel called and said you'd all be coming."

"Thanks, Charlene. Mom and Dad should be here any minute." Lexi slid into the booth.

Rusty grabbed an empty chair from the side of the room and set it down at the end of the table. Cort sat across from her, looking like he was sitting in a dentist chair rather than a booth at Smokey's.

Charlene plunked down napkins. "Good to see you, Rusty, and thanks for your service. Got to say that now because heaven knows how busy we'll get. Good crowd tonight, and they're still coming in."

"Thanks, Charlene. I'm leaving the service. Going to be a civilian again." Rusty turned the chair around and sat on it facing the table.

"That so? Well, what will you have to celebrate?"

"Whiskey. The good kind."

"For you, the best. And this one will be on me." She scooted away without taking Cort's and Lexi's orders.

“You rate,” Lexi said.

Cort looked at his hands resting on the table—apparently any sight but her was worthy of his gaze. She’d worn the pink glitzy top that Simone had bought her, hoping it would catch Cort’s eye but apparently not.

“I *should* rate after all I’ve been through, though I wouldn’t change any of it.”

“Next one’s on me,” Cort said. He glanced Rusty’s way for a split second, then scanned the room, looking anywhere but at her.

“That’s neighborly of you. Considering I’m going to be a poor student, I’ll take you up on that.”

“I could use some ranch help if you’re inclined.” At least Cort was engaging in conversation with someone.

“I’ll keep that in mind, but, while I like dressing like a cowboy...” Rusty glanced down at his jeans and western shirt, “I don’t find much joy in ranching. Just never took to it. I’ll do it. Don’t want to if I don’t have to.”

“I didn’t like it at first either. Lexi remembers.” When he said her name and actually turned to look at her, her heart hitched.

“Sure do. He was afraid of Sheba. But he warmed to it soon enough.”

“Well, I do declare. Rusty Russell as I live and breathe.”

They all knew that voice, Rusty more than any of them. To his credit, he turned around.

There was Tamara, posing in a fringed, rhinestone-studded western shirt with several buttons open so a piece of her bra’s red lace was visible. She had on tight blue jeans with swirls of rhinestones outlining the pockets, and gorgeous red boots studded with the gems. Tamara’s blonde hair was in loose

waves around her shoulders. Lexi had to admit, Tamara, despite all the bling, cleaned up nicely.

“Tamara Lynn. You’re a sight for sore eyes.” Rusty wore a cocky grin.

“You on leave, honey.”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of? Sounds like a story. You want to come over to our table, just me and a few old friends, and tell it to me?” She batted her eyelashes. Subtlety was never one of Tamara’s strengths. “Cort and Lexi are welcome, too. We can all squeeze in.”

“We’re fine right here, but thank you, Tamara,” Lexi answered before Cort could. “How’s your mom?”

Tamara nodded, her expression serious. “Coming along, thank you.”

She turned her focus on Rusty as he got out of the chair and unfolded to his true height of six-feet-three.

He lifted his jacket off the chair. “I’ll be back.”

Lexi doubted that. And also doubted that Rusty would need a ride home after all. Not that she was happy about it, but she had to trust that Rusty was more than able to take care of himself after all these years.

Charlene found Rusty at Tamara’s table and then hurried over to Lexi and Cort. “Sorry about that. But I wanted to make sure Rusty was taken care of. Always loved that boy. Now, what can I get you two?”

They both ordered Dancing Fools. “And put Rusty’s next one on my tab,” Cort said.

“I’ve always liked you, too, Cort,” Charlene said before hurrying to another table.

“Place is filling up.” Lexi checked the smart watch on her wrist. “They should be here shortly.”

Cort looked around, as if expecting someone to save him. When he turned back to face her, he looked like he'd swallowed turpentine and it was eating at his gut. "Why did you pursue that developer and get him to offer for the ranch?"

Her whole body flushed, the warmth spilling over her like someone had dumped a bucket of hot water on her. She could have used a cold beer right then. Apparently, her father had told him about the offer.

"I did contact Bretton Brothers right after Thanksgiving, trying to get a better offer. But shortly after, Dad met Steven Bretton." That encounter and the words her father had said were burned into her memory. "He told the guy right off he wasn't interested, and me as well. I accepted that and thought that was the end of it. But the guy offered anyway."

"And a lot of money, I'm sure." His jaw bunched.

She nodded, not sure how much she should reveal. "I swear I wasn't in contact with him. You have to believe that."

He leaned forward. "You didn't feel the need to tell me when the offer came through?"

She gulped a breath of air, her stomach churning. "They asked me not to. They didn't want to needlessly worry you."

He sat back and looked away, as if he needed a minute to digest what she'd said.

"Do you believe me?"

He turned back and his Adam's apple moved in a swallow. "I thought you'd lied to me, Lexi."

The hurt in his eyes scorched her like a fire-hot branding iron, reminding her of the searing pain that had shot through her when Philip told her Candy was the one. "I want you to have the ranch, Cort. I'm glad you're able to purchase it. Glad you're taking Misty." She wished she could join him. She reached a hand across the table to touch his.

He let her.

It was now or never. Her parents would be here any minute, and she might not be going home with him the way things were progressing. “Cort, just because I’m going to be in San Francisco shouldn’t mean we can’t see each other. And no matter what happens, I’ll be back to help my parents pack up.” Her voice sounded raspy, as if her vocal cords had been coated with unshed tears. “And you can come visit me for a weekend here and there. I really think we could make this work.”

Cort slipped his hand from under hers and clasped both hands together. “Calving season is around the corner, Lexi. I can’t leave the ranch. It will be my first time, and now I’ll have two herds to handle.”

“You’ve got Luther. He’s a seasoned foreman.”

“Yeah, and as I said, I’ve got two herds. Bottom line, I just don’t see a long-distance relationship working out. With anyone.” He rubbed his face with his hands.

“Then I’ll come out and see you.”

He placed his palms flat on the table, as if bracing himself. “How many weekends did you *not* work in your old job?”

She didn’t answer because she couldn’t think of a weekend when she hadn’t worked at least one of the two days.

“You’re going to be in a new job and people will expect things from you.”

“Maybe I won’t get that job.” And then she’d have plenty of time to visit. Strange how part of her wanted that to be the case.

“Don’t jinx yourself, and, besides, you’ve got a strong supporter in your ex, at least by the way he looked at you.” Cort’s hands fisted.

“He can look all he wants, but nothing will be happening. And it won’t be calving season forever. You said you have a

good crew. You can come for a visit in April.”

“So, we’d go four months without seeing each other? What makes you think there’ll be anything left between us come April?”

Maybe the fact that she loved him. That thought smacked her right in the head with the impact of a speeding truck hitting a cement wall. Once again, she’d fallen for a guy who didn’t have the same feelings for her.

With exquisite timing, Lexi’s parents drew up to the table, saving her from having to respond.

Cort slid over so her dad could sit, and Lexi did the same for her mom.

“You two looked like you were having a deep conversation,” Jewel said as she shrugged out of her jacket.

With that, Charlene appeared with their beers.

“What will you two have?” she asked Lexi’s parents.

“Whatever’s on tap,” her father responded.

“Me, too,” Mom said.

“People after my own heart. Do you want anything to eat, because it’s going to get crazy in here in a little bit and I’m not sure when I’ll be able to circle back.”

“Bring some nachos, onion rings, and whatever else anyone is interested in. Put it on my tab. We’re celebrating tonight,” her father said. There was a gleam in his eye when he mentioned celebrating.

“So, Cort, you’ve waited long enough.” Mom slid a packet out of her pocketbook and pushed it in Cort’s direction as Charlene headed to another table.

“We got this signed and notarized today at the bank.” Dad pushed the envelope the rest of the way. “It’s your letter of intent.”

Cort's expression was akin to a child's on Christmas morning. "As long as you keep your promise to answer my calls now and again. I'm going to need your advice."

"I'd be upset if you didn't call. Wouldn't like to think that taking over my ranch is as easy as flipping a switch. Once we get the closing date settled, we'll work out how long we can rent the house back from you. We just started looking for places, so I'll still be around for a little bit. Maybe even through calving season, if that's all right with you. But, just so you know, I won't be getting up in the middle of the night to deliver calves in the snow and wind."

"I wouldn't ask you to." Cort's smile stretched ear-to-ear. "I'll see the lawyer as soon as I can get an appointment next week and we'll hammer out the details." Cort took a deep breath and leaned back in his seat.

Charlene dropped the pints in front of her parents. "Your food should be up soon."

Dad raised his glass. "I propose a toast. To Cort and the continuation of both our families' ranching legacy."

They clicked glasses. They all seemed happy, so why was Lexi still swallowing back tears?

The sky was dark, not a twinkle of a star visible, and the wind whistled outside the cab as they sat in Cort's pickup outside Lexi's house. Heavy snow was forecast for the early morning, meaning Cort would have to check on the herd before heading to bed.

He wished he could just drop her off and leave. Go home and nurse his aching heart, because this was the moment he'd been dreading. The moment when they said goodbye.

They might see each other again when she came back to help her parents, but it wouldn't be the same. The hope and promise he'd held when helping her with the chores, learning how to skijor, fixing that tractor tire, and holding her in his arms had vaporized when Lexi had decided to go back to San Francisco.

He should have known it was coming. Instead, he'd convinced himself that she'd changed. That she wanted a ranching life. With him. But, like his mother, she wanted a career more. At least he hadn't made a fool out of himself and asked her to marry him, only to get rejected.

From the knot in his stomach to the pounding at his temples, he was reminded of the day he'd been at the airport to see his mother off on her flight to Paris. He'd been left standing in a sea of strangers while the most important person in his life headed for the boarding tunnel. Ten years later, it was happening again.

"I'm leaving on the earliest flight out to beat the worst of the storm, hopefully." Lexi had her hand on the door handle.

"Hopefully." Was it wrong to wish she *didn't* beat the storm? That she'd be snowed in for a few days more, even if it would be delaying the inevitable?

She was going back to San Francisco. Likely to a new job and an old boyfriend—leaving him behind. At least he knew she hadn't betrayed him with the developer. Gave him some faith he hadn't been totally wrong about her.

"Will you call me before my flight leaves?" she asked.

"If you want me to." Although he couldn't fathom why she wanted him to.

"And will you call me when I'm in San Francisco? We can video chat."

"Sure." But he knew that it wouldn't go on for long like that. The excuses would come. She'd be involved with a big

deal. He'd be trying to keep his head above water during calving season. Good intentions would go awry.

That was what had happened with his mom.

Once again, he'd be left behind by someone he loved.

She raised her gaze to meet his, confusion in her eyes. "It's not like I *want* to go. But I *have* to go. I have to work."

Same thing his mother had said to him all those years ago.

"How are you getting to the airport? Likely it will be nasty weather. I could take you." And he could torture himself even more.

"Rusty is driving me in the SUV."

"You've got it covered, then."

He touched under her chin with his finger, looked into her moist eyes and gathered her to him. He kissed her. The last kiss.

He was going to make it one she'd remember.

Chapter 21

Lexi reviewed her ticket as she waited in line at the airport check-in. Only about two dozen people were in the lounge area in various stages of standing, walking, and sitting. She looked through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the snow falling on the tarmac. It was supposed to continue for much of the day. But the worst of it was due to arrive from the south after her flight departed—if it left on time. Blizzard conditions were expected that evening.

Could the storm be a sign?

Now that she was leaving and reality had settled in like a bear claiming a cave, she knew she loved him. She knew that fact as plain as the falling snow. How it had happened so fast she hadn't a clue, but that it had happened, she was sure.

It was her turn at the counter and she handed over her ticket and ID to the attendant. “Do you think we’ll be boarding in this weather?” She wasn’t sure whether she wanted a yes or a no.

The attendant shrugged. “It’s pretty bad out there, but, so far, I was able to check you in on your Denver flight as well.”

Maybe not a sign then.

“Oops. They just delayed this flight by...” The attendant squinted at her terminal. “An hour.” She tapped on the screen. “But good news—your flight leaving Denver is delayed an hour and a half, so you should be good.” She handed Lexi her boarding pass and ID as the intercom blasted out the news of the delay to the groans of the crowd.

Having checked in, Lexi found a seat in the small lounge area and tapped her phone. She'd expected to hear from Cort and was tempted to call him ... but to what purpose? Tell him she loved him? She couldn't do that without knowing he reciprocated those feelings, and considering he hadn't called her yet, she guessed he had doubts about her, about them.

Instead, she called her mother and reported the delay. Rusty hadn't gotten back yet from dropping her off, but they heard on the news that conditions on the highway were deteriorating.

"I hope you don't get stranded at the airport," her mother said. "I know Todd would come get you so you could stay at Junie's. Just promise to let us know."

Lexi promised, rang off, and shoved the phone into her carry-on bag.

She glanced out the windows at the swirling snow that had decreased visibility considerably. The only place she wanted to be was with Cort. Wrapped in his arms in front of a warm fire.

She'd been too scared to tell him that. Too worried he didn't reciprocate those feelings—just as Philip hadn't—because she didn't want to risk another rejection.

Just like she hadn't wanted to take on the risks of ranching.

She'd done nothing to change the trajectory on either front, even though all the risks she'd feared about ranching didn't scare her anymore when she thought about Cort being by her side.

Cort heard a church bell ringing. He turned over in bed and covered his head with a pillow. The sound wasn't going away.

Bandit's doggy breath reached him as the dog's snout appeared under the pillow.

Heck.

He sat up and reached for his phone on the bedside table as Bandit settled down on the bed, his job done.

What time was it? Lexi would be leaving for the airport, and he'd promised he'd say goodbye. He squinted at the clock as he hit the Talk button. After nine o'clock. He'd missed Lexi.

"Hello." He practically shouted into the phone. "Mom? Sorry. I was asleep. Long night checking on cattle. Happy New Year to you, too."

He needed to get off the phone and call Lexi.

But say what?

"How's Socks?" she asked.

"Socks is doing great. Listen, Mom, Lexi is leaving this morning, and I overslept. I need to call her to say goodbye."

"Goodbye for good?" his mother asked. The words pinged around his head, slamming into reality, and forcing him awake.

"She's got a job opportunity in San Francisco." With her ex-boyfriend.

"Did you tell her how you feel?"

"What do you mean?" How would his mother know how he felt?

"Look, Cort, I'm going to give you some motherly advice, for what it's worth. If you believe in someone, if the relationship is good, fight for it. I didn't. Not with your father, not with you. Those are the two biggest regrets of my life—huge, gargantuan regrets. Don't miss this opportunity to tell her how you feel. If she says no, you've tried. But you may not get another chance."

“I don’t know if she feels the same.”

“Ask her. Lexi is a bright woman. Give her a choice in this. Don’t just assume... like I did. In the end, you’ll know where you stand. Rejection means you took action—and taking action is the only way to get a yes.”

He rubbed his eyes, wishing he could rub away the fuzziness in his brain. “I may not reach her in time to stop her.” Not that she seemed inclined to be stopped, based on last night. She’d been willing to try a long-distance relationship, but she hadn’t considered staying with him. Building something together.

“If you can’t get her, call and tell her after the plane sets down. But you have to tell her how you feel. Are you willing to put yourself out there?”

Was he? If it meant she might change her mind?

“All I want is your happiness, so promise me you’ll tell her.”

It would cost him his pride, but he had nothing else to lose. “Okay.”

“I’m hanging up now, but I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Mom.” He thought he heard a snuffle before the phone went dead.

* * *

Cort switched the wipers on to the fastest speed as the wind whistled by the truck window. The blowing snow had diminished visibility. He’d tried to call Lexi, but she hadn’t answered. What if she was already on the plane? His only hope was that her flight had been delayed.

He’d been such an idiot. He’d fallen in love with her, but was letting her go without saying anything. He wanted more

than a long-distance relationship, but if that's what it took to get to the point where she'd agree to be Mrs. McClane, then that's what he'd do. Because he couldn't conceive of life without her in it.

Bandit, sitting in the backseat, panted his warm breath on Cort's shoulder, as if with each pant he was telling Cort to go faster. But the conditions didn't allow for anything more than thirty-five miles an hour. Thankfully, few people were fool enough to be on the road.

He glanced at the dashboard clock. He was still fifteen minutes away. In any event, he had to try. A phone call wouldn't cut it, and he didn't want to wait until she got to San Francisco—and Philip—before telling her what was in his heart. He just had to hope he'd be in time.

Lexi shifted on the hard plastic molded seat, trying to get comfortable. She dug out her phone to check the weather conditions in Denver for some clue as to whether she would actually be able to board the plane in Gillette.

And, there, she saw it—Cort *had* called.

She dialed his number. The message came up that he was driving.

Driving? Driving where? And in this weather?

Maybe he was driving out to check on the cattle. Now, she had to worry about that.

She tucked the phone back in her bag and tried to distract herself by watching the people streaming by.

It didn't work.

On the one hand, she had the potential for a job that would pay her handsomely but wasn't fulfilling. On the other hand,

she had an opportunity to do the kind of work she loved, but for not much money.

She had the risk of working for another company that didn't care about her, but her other option was working for Cort who she hoped *did* care about her.

She'd probably never find her soul mate in San Francisco, but she *had* found him in Wyoming.

Was she running away because she didn't want to take a risk? Not just the financial risk, but the emotional one like her mother said? Was she going to be ruled by fear?

She glanced out the window at the snow rapidly piling up on the ground. Cort had made a choice to do what he wanted even though it was risky. Rusty was starting a whole new career. Junie had opened her own business. Her parents had been successful ranchers despite the uncertainties. As for her heart, wasn't a chance at happiness worth the risk?

Lexie gathered up her stuff. She'd call Todd to pick her up. She bunk down at Junie's and, tomorrow, she'd have a heart-to-heart with Cort. Find out once and for all if there was a reason for staying. Ask him right out if he had feelings for her.

Simone had said the cowboy had better be worth it. Now, more than ever, she was sure Cort was if only he felt about her the same way she felt about him.

Over the loudspeaker a voice blared out the news that her flight to Denver had been cancelled.

Had to be a sign.

"Lexi Russell, please come to the airport information desk."

Hearing her name called over the loudspeaker caused her to jump. Was this about her flight from Denver? Slings her bag over her shoulder, she headed for the information booth near the entrance doors.

She brushed by several passengers and passed the TSA scanners. As she closed in on the information booth, there was a cowboy—a cowboy she recognized—with Bandit sitting patiently by his side. Bandit’s tail wagged, and Lexi’s heart pumped its beat in her ears.

A crowd seemed to materialize out of thin air as she covered the last few feet to stand before Cort, breathless. “What are you doing here?” she managed to squeak out.

“I’m here for you, Lexi,” Cort said, his voice strong and steady. A smile was on his face and a dimple in his cheek. “I can’t let you go without telling you that I love you, Lexi Russell.”

He loved her.

Her knees weakened and her lungs tightened, making it difficult to stand, to breathe.

“I know it doesn’t make sense. I know it’s too soon. But I also know what I feel. And the truth of the matter is that I don’t want to do this without you in my life. If you can’t stay, I’m open to a long-distance relationship. But, either way, I’m asking you to take a chance on me. On us. Together, I know we can do anything. Just to be clear, I’m hoping this will end—or begin, depending how you look at it—in marriage. Are you willing to take a risk? On us?” His face was flushed, his expression earnest, his eyes pleading.

Bandit cocked his head, as if waiting for her answer.

She flung her arms around Cort’s neck. The crowd broke out in applause, and Bandit gave a yelp. “Yes, Cort McClane,” she whispered against his cheek. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Epilogue

They'd decided on an early May wedding—after calving season and before her parents moved into their new house in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Yes, Mom and Dad had stayed on a few months longer, mainly because it took time for them to find the right place to move to, but also because Dad wanted to be there if Cort needed advice on calving and Mom wanted to be there to keep the flames fanned between Cort and Lexi.

While Cort may have needed Dad's help, she did *not* need her mother's. There was enough heat between her and Cort to fuel a forest fire.

The wedding was a well-attended affair which they held in Cort's equipment barn that'd been cleared out for the occasion. Lexi rode in on Misty and Cort did the honors on Socks.

Parker was an adorable ring bearer.

Lexi got to meet Cort's father and the new family, and Kate had been accompanied by a man she'd introduced as a friend, but Lexi was sure there was more to it. Simone came dateless, as did Cal, and Lexi wouldn't have been surprised to learn that they'd kept in touch. Tamara came with Mel, but Rusty came alone. Lexi and Junie committed to finding Rusty a girlfriend in the next few months—because love was worth the risk.

Dear Readers,

I hope you enjoyed Cort and Lexi's story. If you did, I hope you'll consider leaving a review on Amazon's website here. This helps increase visibility of the book so other readers can find it. All you need to write is a sentence or two. It means the world to authors to know what readers think of their books.

Country Snow and Mistletoe is the start of a new series: Wyoming Romance, where love is worth the risk. Rusty Russell's story will be up next, hopefully published sometime next year.

If you haven't read the books in the Hearts of Wyoming series, where love gets a second chance, there are five books ready for you to enjoy. **Loving a Cowboy** is Libby and Chance's story and the first book in the series. **The Maverick Meets His Match** is Mandy and Ty's story and the second book in the series. **The Rancher's Heart** is Cat and Cody's story and the third book in the series. **The Loner's Heart** is Haylee and Trace's story and the fourth book in the series. And **Tangled Up with a Cowboy** is the fifth book and details Lonnie and Livvy's story.

There should be no problem reading them out of order because these books were written to stand alone. Interconnected by friendships and relatives, all the stories feature rugged cowboys and the women who love them.

You can keep abreast of new books and what is happening in the Wyoming Romance series by signing up for my newsletter at:

<http://www.annecarrole.com/news.html>

See you around the corral!

Hugs,
Anne

Hearts of Wyoming series

Book 1: *Loving a Cowboy*

Book 2: *The Maverick Meets His Match*

Book 3: *The Rancher's Heart*

Book 4: *The Loner's Heart*

Book 5: *Tangled Up With A Cowboy*

Wyoming Romance Series

Book 1: *Country Snow and Mistletoe*

Book 2: *The Cowboy's Country Charm* (tentative title—
Coming 2023)

About the Author

I have been creating stories since I first wondered where Sally was running to in those early-reader books. One of three sisters, I was raised on a farm where we had horses, dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, chickens, and anything else we could convince our parents to shelter. Besides reading and writing romances, you might find me researching western history, at the rodeo, watching football with my hubby, in the garden, or on the tennis court. Married to my own sweet-talking hero, we are the proud parents of an awesome twentysomething cowgirl.

I'm also the founder of the western romance fan page:

<http://www.facebook.com/lovewesternromances.com>.

I love hearing from readers. You can friend, follow, or find me on:

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Twitter: <http://twitter.com/annecarrole>

Web: <http://www.annecarrole.com>

(where you can also sign up for my newsletter)

Titles by Anne Carrole

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Other Titles

Falling for a Cowboy (short contemporary Western)

Saving Cole Turner (short historical Western)

When Love Comes Calling (short historical Western)