



Cowboy,
LOVE ME AGAIN

— COWBOY HOMECOMING BOOK THREE —

GENEVIEVE
TURNER

Cowboy, Love Me Again

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Ansel is completely off-limits. That's what Lark tells herself every day when she sees him. He's her friend. He's her coworker. And he can never be more. Except she can't help remembering their one wild night together years ago. And she can't help but wonder what might have been.

If Lark wants to pretend they're nothing more than friends, Ansel won't argue. His hands are full running his family's feedstore. And he's not willing to risk the friendship they have no matter how badly he wants just one more night with her.

Then one sizzling kiss at the county fair turns them upside down and has Ansel and Lark questioning everything. Are they ready for their second chance at forever?

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I



The trouble with peace offerings, Lark Westfall reflected, was that you couldn't say no to them. No matter how much you wanted to.

The peace offering before her was about a handspan taller than her and covered with a sheet. Probably a piece of furniture that she absolutely didn't need. It sat in the back of her brother's truck, which was currently parked in Lark's driveway.

She smiled at the giver, one Filippa with an *F* Crivelli. Pippa to those who loved her, which included Lark's brother Bear. Lark wouldn't quite include herself in that list even though she did use the nickname.

"Wow," Lark said. "This is for me?" She was impressed with how pleasantly surprised she sounded.

Pippa flared her hands like she was showing off a game show prize. "Yes! We found it with the other antiques, and I thought you'd like it."

Lark looked to her brother, but he was staring at Pippa, a besotted smile on his face. There'd be no help from him.

Whatever was under there, Lark would bet it was not actually an antique. Old, yes. Valuable, no. Pippa lived in a falling-down house that had actually fallen down. This present must have come from one of the sheds they were cleaning out on the property. Bear had told Lark about the mountains of trash they were hauling out weekly.

Pippa must have saved something from the pile—an antique—and decided to give it to Lark. It was a nice effort at least.

We don't have to be friends, Lark wanted to say. *You can still date my brother.*

But that was another problem with peace offerings. You had to take them in the spirit they were offered.

“I can't wait to see,” she said.

Bear grinned at her like she'd figured out the answer to a tough question. It was kind of cute how in love her brother was.

But Lark couldn't quite forget how much trouble had started when Pippa moved here. Legal trouble, which they were only just resolving, and the lawyer's bill would take even longer to pay off.

Lark had faced down Pippa on opposing sides of a law firm's conference table at one point. And now Bear was in love with her and wanted Lark to make nice.

She'd do her best, but abrupt U-turns were not Lark's specialty. Planning things down to the last detail, well in advance, that was her thing.

That was the other thing with this peace offering—Bear and Pippa had just shown up while Lark was getting ready for a 4-H meeting. She'd run home for a quick shower to freshen up after work and was only halfway through putting her makeup on. She didn't even have her mascara on yet, and they wanted her to do this? It was a bit much.

Pippa didn't seem to notice Lark's lack of mascara or how stiff her smile was. She pulled the sheet off with a flourish. “Ta-da!”

Lark blinked at what was underneath. “It's a mirror.”

A freestanding, full-length mirror with a frame more intricate than the ones around most of the pictures hanging in her house. The mirror itself was miraculously unbroken, the dark crackles at the edges telling how old it was. The frame

was heavy; the wood gleamed like silk. The mirror itself could pivot, allowing you to put it at just the right angle.

It was the kind of mirror a teenaged Lark had dreamed of. As the only girl among three boys, she got her own room, but that was as far as her parents went toward indulging her. Lark worked just as hard as the boys, if not harder.

But alone in her room with a mirror like that...

Well. It didn't matter because she'd never had one, and she'd done just fine without those kinds of frivolities. Better than fine.

She resisted the urge to touch it. She liked it, but she wasn't entranced by it. Not at all.

"I saw it and thought of you." Pippa's triumph was deflating rapidly. "I guess it's kind of big though. Maybe you don't have space."

Bear's brows snapped together, and he aimed a sharp look at Lark.

Right. The peace offering. Pippa really did make Bear happy, happier than Lark had ever seen him. She could make an effort for his sake. Even if it was difficult for her to put aside all the trouble Pippa had caused the family.

"No, it's lovely," Lark assured Pippa. "It just took me by surprise is all." She sent her own look to her brother because he knew how she felt about surprises. A little warning would have been nice. "I have the perfect spot for it in my bedroom."

"Oh great!" The relief on Pippa's face was almost embarrassing. Seriously, she shouldn't be so worried about Lark's reaction. It wasn't like Bear was going to break up with her if Lark wasn't her best friend. "Lead the way and we'll carry it."

Lark looked the mirror up and down, judging its weight with a practiced eye. She could tell a forty-pound bag of feed from a fifty-pound one with just a glance thanks to her job at Prime One Feeds. True, she didn't carry many feedbags these days, being pretty high up in the marketing department for the

largest feed company on the West Coast, but it wasn't like she'd forgotten her early skills.

She'd guess that the mirror itself was seventy to eighty pounds. Then add the frame, which was ornate and solid. There was no way one person alone could get a grip on it—it was too unwieldy. She'd seen Pippa struggling with feedbags at her job at the Cabrillo Feed and Seed and knew Pippa wouldn't be able to carry that mirror even with Bear's help.

It wasn't Pippa's fault she hadn't grown up on a ranch, and that wasn't what annoyed Lark about her. It was that Pippa was playing at being a hobby farmer now, with her chickens and goats and total lack of knowledge.

Bear found it charming, her mistakes. But then, he loved correcting them.

Lark didn't find it so cute. She'd seen too many people just like Pippa who bought farm animals and figured they'd learn as they went along. Often the results were sick, injured, or even dead animals and the owners too arrogant or uneducated to know they'd been directly responsible.

So far Pippa was doing fine, but if it weren't for Bear, she wouldn't be. One day she or her sisters would slip up and do something catastrophically wrong, and the animals would suffer for it.

Lark kept her mouth shut though. Bear didn't want to hear anything against the woman he stared at with his heart in his eyes.

"I can get it," Lark said. "Bear and I are used to carrying heavy things. And he knows where my bedroom is."

Before Pippa could protest, Lark climbed into the truck bed and started dragging the mirror to the tailgate. Yep, about a hundred pounds, maybe even a touch heavier, and awkward as hell as the mirror tried to pivot.

"Don't scratch the bottom," Bear warned.

Instead of rolling her eyes at him, Lark lifted the mirror up, handing it down to her brother. He took it easily.

They each took a side, carrying it between them into Lark's bungalow-style house. The place had been built in the sixties when a developer had the idea of trying to build suburban-style homes in the rural paradise of Cabrillo. It hadn't gone anywhere, leaving Lark's house and five others just like it on a block right off Main Street. It was perfect for her, not too small, not too big, with a fenced yard and only ten minutes away from the Fall West Ranch.

In the living room, Pippa got distracted by the dog. "Bozeman!" she called, stooping to pet him. The little terrier mix eagerly jumped up to lick her face.

Lark and Bear went on with their load. Once they'd set it down in Lark's bedroom, Bear said, "Pippa could have carried it."

"Mmm. She looks like she lifts with her back, not her legs."

"She's learning."

Lark could just imagine Bear teaching Pippa proper form for hefting heavy objects. "Well, I already know how to do it. And since I still need to get to this meeting"—she looked significantly at the door—"I figured I'd just do it."

Sometimes that seemed like the story of her life. Yes, she could wait for someone else to do what needed to be done, or she could simply do it herself. And make sure it was done right in the meantime. She also didn't have much patience for teaching things. Again, it was just easiest to do it herself.

"We'll get out of your hair," Bear said.

There was a small knock at the open door.

"Can I come in?" Pippa asked.

"Of course." Lark always made her bed the moment she woke up and never let dirty clothes touch the floor. There was nothing in here she'd be ashamed of Pippa seeing.

"It looks very nice in that corner," Pippa said. "Somehow I just knew it would work for you."

Lark had to admit it did fit well in that particular space. It was right next to her closet—she could try on an outfit and immediately check it in the mirror. But it was tucked away so she wouldn't see herself when she was lying in bed. Catching a glimpse of her reflection when it was dark and she was trying to fall asleep would probably give her a heart attack. She'd lived on her own too long to be seeing shadows at night and not get freaked out.

“Thank you,” Lark said with genuine feeling. It really was a nice gift. Not that it erased her suspicions about Pippa's incompetence when it came to her hobby farm, but still. “I love it.”

“Great.” Pippa beamed at her, then moved as if to hug Lark. Before Lark could react, Pippa thought better of it. “Um, we should get going. Enjoy the mirror!”

On the way out, Bear gave Bozeman a wistful pat. Lark waved goodbye, then shut the door as soon as she could.

She checked the clock in the living room. Crap—she was running late now. Well, not exactly late but not as far ahead as she liked. Lark would rather arrive early and just wait than arrive late and be rude. Being late made her break out in a cold sweat.

Thankfully the meeting was at Cabrillo Feed and Seed, which was not ten minutes away. She went back to her bedroom, into the attached bathroom, swept on her mascara, and put on some lip stain. She fluffed her hair and studied her reflection.

Good but professional was what she was going for. She had a meeting with Ansel after, so she'd be representing Prime One Feeds, not just herself. Her appearance shouldn't detract or distract, but it should also be pleasant, pleasing.

She'd hit exactly what she wanted. Lark smiled at herself in the mirror. She loved acing tests.

As she walked out of her bedroom, the new mirror caught her eye. She paused in the doorway. The mirror in her

bathroom was pretty big but not full length. It might be nice just to take a quick look in the new one.

She walked over, positioning herself in front of the mirror. With one hand she reached up, tilting it until the angle was just right. Then she looked up and into her own face.

She screamed.

It wasn't her in the mirror.

The face that had looked out at her was exhausted. Scared. Hair limp and tangled; deep, dark circles under her eyes. And those eyes... They'd burned with anxiety. Almost terror.

She didn't look like that. Not at all. That person looked haunted.

When she'd screamed, she'd jumped back, knocking the mirror out of place. She could see her legs and part of torso but not her face anymore.

She was afraid to look again.

For a moment she considered tossing a sheet over the thing and never using it again. In all kinds of stories there were tales of mirrors being used as pathways to other worlds. Dangerous worlds filled with menacing creatures. Things like that were fun to read about, but she'd never had a mirror... *trick* her before.

Was that horrid creature coming out through the mirror for *her*?

Ice ran down her spine, stiffened her limbs. She blinked hard, trying to get control of her reactions.

"Nothing is coming out of the mirror," she told herself.

Bozeman came running in then, barking like mad. He was bouncing on his little legs like a boxer psyching himself up.

"It's okay," she told him. "I just thought I saw something."

Having Bozeman come in, ready to defend her to the death, snapped her out of it. There was nothing in the mirror. She'd read too many fantasy novels was all.

Firmly, without hesitation, she pulled the mirror back into place. Forced herself to stare straight into her own face.

She looked completely normal.

The last bit of tension in her dissolved. Goodness, she'd been silly! Thinking there was something in the mirror when it was only her.

Lark took her time examining herself, turning this way and that, getting a head-to-toe view. Mostly she was doing it to kill the rest of her unease.

See? It's just a mirror. There's nothing lurking in it.

Bozeman sat and watched her, his lips sometimes curling. Like he saw something in the depths.

“Are you growling at yourself?” she asked him. “Silly dog.”

Bozeman continued to stare into the mirror.

Well, Lark didn't have any more time for that, not if she was going to stick to her schedule. She turned decisively on her heel and walked out, never letting herself look back at the mirror.

Bozeman took a lot longer to follow her. She told herself it was only because he'd never really seen himself in a mirror before.

And not because he was chasing ghosts in it.

2



Cabrillo Feed and Seed was almost as familiar to Lark as her childhood home.

The store was practically a town landmark at this point, with its false wooden front and rustic charm. John Wayne could go riding a horse past it and it would be right out of one of his movies.

Except of course for all the modern trucks in the parking lot, the side-by-side for sale parked in front, and the many, many Prime One Feeds advertisements in the windows.

The Sterling family had owned the feed and seed for as long as Lark could remember. First Herb and Ethel, who were the ones to build the current structure. Then Ansel, their son, who'd owned it since Herb passed some six years ago. Although Ansel had been working in the place since he turned thirteen. Turns out child labor laws didn't apply when it was family.

Ansel wasn't Prime One Feeds' biggest vendor, not even close. But he was one of what Lark liked to call their "core" clients—small feedstore owners whom people trusted. And when he recommended Prime One Feeds, people knew he wasn't just selling them something. He was recommending it because he believed in it.

You couldn't buy advertising like that.

Not that Lark saw Ansel as only advertising. They were friends too. She wouldn't have suggested they plan an awards

ceremony for the upcoming fair—the reason for their meeting later—if they weren't.

They were friends who worked together. It worked out perfectly for both of them.

She shut off her truck's engine and reached over for her Prime One Feeds branded messenger bag. It held her entire life—her work life, that is. Between her job at Prime One Feeds and her work for the family ranch, there wasn't much time for any other kind of life. Not that she minded.

Bozeman was in his usual position in the passenger seat, back legs on the seat with his front feet braced against the dash, staring out the window. He looked ready to take the day by the scruff of the neck and shake it until it gave him what he wanted.

“You look ready to kick ass and take names,” she told him.

He looked over with an expression that said *Of course. Always.*

“Let's go.”

The interior of the store was just as familiar as the exterior. If Ansel had changed anything since Herb had passed, Lark couldn't tell. Oh, he'd put up some new displays for Prime One Feeds when she'd brought them in, but those were temporary and could be taken down easily. The rest of it never moved.

She could navigate this place with her eyes closed—dog and cat supplies on aisle one, other pet supplies on aisle two. Horse tack on three, grooming supplies and supplements on four. Cattle supplies on five, poultry on six. Baby chicks were in a brooder at the end of that aisle. Small ruminants on seven. Past that, the doorway to the indoor feed yard where feedbags were stacked in case anyone wanted to grab a bag or two on their own. The big rolling door leading to the outdoor feed yard where the high school kids working their first jobs would load up hay or straw or bedding or anything else a customer needed. Just behind the register, past the vaccine fridge, was a

small door that led to a break room, a meeting room, and Ansel's office.

Lark had been in more feedstores than she could count, all up and down the West Coast, but this one would always be special to her. She'd stopped in this place at least once a week since before she could remember. She hoped to be doing it for the rest of her life.

As she went toward the meeting room where the kids would already be waiting for her, Bozeman at her side and on a leash, she stopped at what she privately called "her wall." Any 4-H or FFA kid who raised an animal on feed from the store could put their picture on the wall. There must have been almost a hundred of them, kids standing proud next to their animals, spanning decades.

Lark had her own photos on the wall, always taken after she'd won her ribbons. There was the first steer she'd ever shown, who'd taken reserve champion. She'd been nine, hardly up to the steer's shoulder, but as proud and straight as anything. There were four pictures in a row from when she'd won champion for her steer, pig, lamb, and turkey. Her smile wasn't as wide in that one because people had been pretty angry she'd swept the awards that year. Dad had told her not to worry about it, but she couldn't shake off the hurtful comments that easily.

She had at least one champion animal for every year from nine to eighteen and several reserve champions. Not to mention all the other ribbons she'd won. It had been hard work, some of the hardest of her life, but she remembered it fondly. She'd worked hard, done what she should have, and she'd been rewarded.

"Hey, Lark."

She stiffened at Porter Greene's voice behind her. Of all the people to run into...

"Hey." She gave him a glancing smile because he was still a customer of Prime One Feeds. However, if he ever switched brands, she wouldn't be too sad.

Bozeman went tense, pulling his leash taut. He wouldn't do anything, but he disliked Porter as much as she did.

“Still admiring yourself?” He smiled as he said it, but it wasn't a joke.

“Looking at the new pictures,” she said, motioning to one of Owen Warner with his chicken.

Porter was a few years older than her and had been in the beef project in 4-H with her. She remembered her first ever meeting, so excited to finally be allowed in the project since only older kids could raise large animals. Her brothers were already part of it, and she hated having to wait.

The leader was teaching them about general bovine health and asked for the symptoms of bloat. Little Lark raised her hand and rattled them off immediately. Her dad had told her all about them just the week before, and he'd been so proud she'd recalled them when he'd asked.

She was so proud of herself then. She knew all about this! And she could tell everyone so that they would know too.

And then Porter rolled his eyes and sniggered at her. “Good job, Lork,” he said under his breath.

“Lark,” she said, trying to ignore the burning in her throat. He didn't like her, and she didn't understand why.

“No,” he said clearly. “*Lork*. Rhymes with dork.”

Things hadn't gotten better after that. The awful Lork nickname had stuck, at least among Porter's circle. He didn't call her that anymore, but Porter still treated her like they were teens in a project meeting, her too annoying to stand and always the butt of his jokes. Except he pretended now that she was in on the joke and enjoyed it.

And she couldn't stop him.

“Right,” he said slowly. “I like your shirt. Makes you look like a feedbag.”

She bit back her response to that. Okay, the embroidered Prime One Feeds shirt she wore wasn't the most flattering

thing, but she was representing the company. And just because it had the logo on it didn't mean it looked like a feedbag.

Bozeman was pulling so hard on his leash it looked ready to snap.

“Can I help you find anything?” she asked brightly. “We have an entirely new line of chicken feeds. Have you seen them?”

“Yeah? They got poison in them?”

Lark's expression stiffened. Okay, that was a low blow. Yes, just last year Prime One had had some contaminated feed, but it had been the fault of one of their suppliers, not Prime One themselves. Everyone felt terrible, and the company was making amends and tightening their supply chain. The problem was being fixed.

“We regret that,” Lark said automatically. “We've addressed the problem with our supplier, and we're working to rebuild our trust with our customers.”

She'd spent hours with her team working on that very response, trying to be sympathetic, contrite, while also not leaving the company open to legal action. Prime One very much regretted what had happened, but there was no need for any lawsuits.

“You sound like a robot.” Porter's smirk made her want to... Well, something she definitely couldn't do as a representative of Prime One Feeds.

You look like a thumb. Yeah, she couldn't say that either. “Is there anything else I can help you with?” she chirped. Turning into the World's Most Unflappable Sales Rep was always a good bet.

Before Porter could respond, a shadow fell across both of them. A broad shoulder came between Lark and Porter, separating them.

Lark had a sudden flash of memory, that same shoulder naked, braced above her, her hand on bare skin. She shook it off like she always did when those uncomfortable and unwanted memories popped up around Ansel. It was a long

time ago, and they'd both forgotten about it. Or at least pretended to.

Ansel's back filled her vision. He was wearing a blue plaid button-down, tiny stripes of green mixed in. His black hair brushed the collar.

"Your feed's loaded," he told Porter in a cool, deep voice.

Ansel never lost his temper—Lark had never once even heard him raise his voice—but the implication was clear. He was telling Porter to get lost.

Her cheeks heated as she realized he must have heard the comment about her looking like a feedbag. She knew she didn't and Porter was just an annoying jerk, but she'd rather Ansel hadn't overheard.

Or maybe it was the poison comments or the robot one. Porter had served up a buffet worth of insults Lark didn't want Ansel hearing.

Bozeman sat down right on her feet, looking up at Ansel. The dog loved that guy.

"Thanks."

Lark couldn't see Porter's expression, but he sounded smug. He knew Ansel had come in to defend her, and it amused him. Ass.

"Later." Ansel was as unruffled as ever. Really, Lark should be taking lessons from him. He was never affected by anything.

Ansel half turned to her once Porter was gone. A thick eyebrow lifted, a silent question in his coal-black eyes.

"It's fine," she said to his unspoken inquiry. "Porter's just..." She smiled ruefully. "A customer."

One corner of his mouth quirked up. Ansel never really smiled, not a full, open-mouthed, teeth-showing kind of smile. Oh, he had a good sense of humor, but his smiles were always confined to one corner of his mouth. Sometimes the right, sometimes the left.

Lark suspected there was a code there, whether he smiled on the right or the left, but she'd never been able to figure it out.

“And the customer is always right,” Ansel said with resignation. He understood exactly what she meant. Porter might be irritating, but he was a loyal buyer.

She nodded. “He’s still mad I won grand champion that year when he went all the way out to Texas to buy his steer.” She shrugged. “He should have brought a better animal if he wanted to beat me.”

The other corner of Ansel’s mouth kicked up. That was another reason they were friends—Ansel wasn’t intimidated by her accomplishments. She wasn’t ever afraid to tell him everything she knew about something. To be, well... a know-it-all. He seemed to understand she wasn’t doing it to make him look bad; she was only ever trying to help.

Funny how few other people seemed to get that.

She patted her messenger bag. “I’ve got the final details for the award ceremony.”

He nodded toward his office. “And I’ve got sweet tea for you.”

Of course he did. He always had some kind of thoughtful touch for her when they had these meetings. Coffee in the mornings, sweet tea in the afternoons, sometimes even cookies in the evenings. It was very kind of him.

“Let me get through this 4-H meeting, and then we’ll get started.”

Ansel gestured for her to go first. So Lark marched forward, Bozeman trotting at her heels, putting Porter—and Ansel’s defense of her—out of her mind.

The kids needed her now.

3



Ansel tried not to stare at Lark's back as he followed her into the hallway leading to the meeting room, but he wasn't entirely successful.

One because she was right in front of him, and two because her hair was so shiny. And thick. Even he, someone who never thought much about hair, was dazzled by it.

Dumbass Porter, telling her she looked like a feedbag. She looked fine as heck, not that she wanted to hear that from Ansel. She'd made that clear. Even his little intervention between her and Porter was almost crossing a line.

Lark Westfall could handle herself and everyone else in the room. She'd proved that over and over again. And that she had no time for anyone who couldn't keep up with her, not that she was mean about it. More that she'd rather you let her charge ahead on her own than ask her to wait for you.

Which was exactly what he'd done all those years ago. Waited and waited for a sign from her, long past when someone else would have given up. But he'd finally wised up.

She hadn't waited for him, not even for a moment. Once she left him behind that morning, she hadn't thought about it again.

He sighed silently. This wasn't the time or place for *that*. They were going to talk about an awards ceremony for the upcoming fair, all very proper and businesslike. At least once she was done leading this 4-H meeting.

There were about a dozen kids waiting in the meeting room next to his office. His parents had used the room for file storage, but now that everything was digital, he didn't need it for that anymore. So he'd offered it to the 4-H club as a meeting space. They were always looking for more of those.

Each parent in the room nodded to him. Ansel nodded back. He knew everyone here. Knew almost everyone in town. In fact, he could name most of their kids, could definitely tell you about all their animals, what they were working on at their property—there was always work to be done on the property—what they liked to plant in spring, and even a few of their deeper, darker secrets.

But he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen some of them outside the feedstore. He'd grown up here, had friends everywhere... but once he'd inherited the feedstore, he had other things to worry about. He couldn't go out every weekend, not when he had to open every morning. He said no enough times that people stopped inviting him.

And then the marriages started and the kids came after and it was Saturdays at the local arena for the kids' rodeo or the fields at Moreno Park for soccer. He heard about these things each week at the feedstore, but he had no part in them.

He'd always wanted to, of course. A wife and family were part of his dream for the future, except he'd always thought of it as far off in the future. Something to see to once the feedstore was in a certain place. A place where he could leave it alone for a few days.

Except... he was starting to realize the future never got any closer. And he was still spending all his time worrying about the store. His parents had managed to have a family and run the store, but somehow Ansel just couldn't figure it out.

Lark clapped her hands to call the meeting to order. She'd done that her very first meeting as 4-H president. It was her go-to call to attention.

The kids subsided, shifting in their chairs. The parents settled down too—Lark expected everyone to be quiet and respectful in meetings, and that included the parents. She'd

tossed out more than one parent who insisted on talking over the kids at a meeting.

Even Bozeman had his head on his paws in a patient, attentive way.

“All right,” Lark said. “We’re practicing our presentations for the awards ceremony today. Did everyone write up a final draft of their presentations?”

There was a chorus of yeses. Diana Gonzales, the youngest in the communications project, piped up. “I’ve already memorized mine!”

There was a smattering of chuckles from the parents.

Lark smiled fondly. “That’s great. You’re ahead of the game. Will you be presenting without notes today?”

Diana nodded so vigorously her braid smacked against her back.

Her sister, Nadia, about five years older, groaned. “I’m not ready. I’m not ready at all.” Her voice cracked. She sounded close to a panic attack.

The poor kid had them occasionally, but she’d also asked to give the opening speech at the awards. Nadia hated public speaking but was determined to get good at it. She was even more stubborn than Lark.

Lark looked straight and steady into Nadia’s eyes. “What do we need to do to get you ready then?”

Most other leaders would tell her that she was just fine, that she was only having an attack of nerves. But Lark knew that whatever the kid was feeling, it was very real and very scary to her. Lark didn’t dismiss that.

She was genuinely great with the kids, which was probably why Ansel was still there watching when he had work to do. He wondered if starting a family was something she ever thought about. Probably not often—she didn’t seem to date, and she worked even more than he did.

Ansel tried to imagine her with a husband and a kid. His stomach twisted uneasily.

Lark was whispering with Nadia, a thoughtful look on her face. Whatever Nadia was saying, Lark was taking it completely seriously.

Lark straightened up. “Okay, while Nadia presents her speech, we, the audience, are going to do something to help her.” Lark clasped her hands. “We’re going to turn around so we’re here but not watching her.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Lark started twirling her finger in the air, encouraging them all to turn around. And to indicate she meant business. Everyone had to do it.

Nadia was twisting her hands together. She didn’t seem convinced people would do it and looked more than a touch embarrassed she even had to ask.

Lark continued to spin her finger as if this was completely normal. Ansel wondered whose idea this was, Lark’s or Nadia’s. He wouldn’t have been surprised if it was Lark’s suggestion.

Slowly everyone started to turn around. Shoes scuffed on the floor, chair legs squealed, papers rustled. There was one small giggle, quickly snuffed.

Ansel put his back to her too, propping one shoulder against the doorframe. Really, he needed to get some work done, but he couldn’t seem to pull himself away.

Behind him, everything went quiet. There was a sharp, shaky inhale, probably Nadia bracing herself to start.

When she did begin her speech, her voice was faint. She was going too fast and her tone was too flat, not enough inflection. Slowly though, she started to gain confidence. She enunciated more, projected to the back of the room. She got a rhythm going, although she was still speaking too quickly.

She talked about what the fair meant to everyone who entered, about testing yourself against your peers, being proud of what you made or raised even if it didn’t win a ribbon, using this experience to get better for next year. It made Ansel remember his own years raising animals for the fair. He’d never been as competitive as Lark—most people weren’t—but

he was still proud of what he'd accomplished. And his parents had always loved to come cheer for him. Being the only kid of older parents, he got a lot of affection.

He missed them every day.

Nadia suddenly stopped. She cleared her throat. "You guys can turn around now. It's okay."

Ansel smiled to himself. Looked like Lark's trick worked. As he faced the room again, he caught Lark's eye. She gave him a small, secret smile, clearly pleased with Nadia's improvement. He returned it because Lark had done a good job here. She should be pleased.

Nadia went on, no sign of any discomfort or panic in her tone. When she finished, everyone applauded, including Ansel. For a kid who hated public speaking, she was pretty good at it.

"Thank you, Nadia—that was great," Lark said, still clapping. "Does anyone have any suggestions for her?"

"She talked too fast," Uriah Harper said.

"Okay," Lark said, tapping her chin. "Is there a way we could put it that would be more constructive? Maybe 'If you slowed down some, I could understand more of what you were saying. When you talk fast, it's hard to follow along.' And don't forget to add something you liked!"

Uriah nodded. "Yeah, that's more what I wanted to say. And I liked the joke at the beginning."

Nadia gave a shy smile. "Thanks. Diana helped me write that."

Diana beamed, showing off the gap where she'd recently lost a tooth.

Ansel watched a few minutes more, wondering if he should give some suggestions. There was nothing worse than giving a speech in front of everyone and getting zero questions or feedback. Made you wonder if anyone bothered listening to you in the first place.

But Lark had it under control, nudging the kids along to give their feedback before letting the parents ask questions and give advice. She especially made sure the quieter kids were heard. She'd done that from the very first day she'd been president of the 4-H club all those years ago.

Really, it was like she was born to encourage these kids. Which made him wonder again if she might want some kids of her own. Which was his cue to get back to his own work.

Once he was back in his office, he could still hear the meeting going on, smaller, higher voices reading out their speeches, Lark's lower, quieter tones interrupting every so often. It was a nice soundtrack as Ansel did the inventory for the week.

After about an hour, there was a general hubbub as the meeting broke up. And then Lark was marching into his office, not a bit tired from corralling a dozen kids through their speeches.

Even before her butt hit the chair in his office, she was pulling out her laptop. "I've come up with a program, a loose one, just to keep everything running on time. And Luke Merrill agreed to be our MC. I think he's a good choice, don't you?" She looked up at him.

No time to even catch her breath. But that was Lark's style, to not waste even a second. "Nadia did good today," he said. "Once she got her nerves under control. That was a smart idea."

Lark shrugged. "It was that or tell her to imagine everyone in their underwear, which wouldn't have been appropriate. The audience isn't going to do that at the awards, but she can at least pretend no one's actually looking at her."

"Is that what you do when you give a presentation? Or do you do the underwear trick?"

She laughed. "No. But I did used to throw up before every 4-H community meeting. You know those bathrooms at the front of the Grange Hall? I had to get to every meeting at least ten minutes early because I was in there being sick."

“Really?” He knew the exact bathrooms she was talking about since the 4-H had been meeting in that hall since it was built. He couldn’t imagine her sick with nerves before every meeting. She was always so... so unflappable. “Did your parents know?”

She shook her head. “They might not have let me be president, and I couldn’t have that. So I just made myself power through.”

He took a moment to pour her a large glass of sweet tea from the mini fridge in his office. Jeez, to think that she’d been doing that for years and not even her parents had noticed. It made him ill himself to think about. “Do you still do that?” he asked too casually.

“Oh no.” She took the glass from him. “Thank you. I’ve got nerves of steel now.”

And maybe even an ulcer, he’d bet. Not that she’d ever admit it.

Lark went on as if she hadn’t just admitted she’d suffered silently so much. “And I came up with a playlist for before everything starts. Which reminds me”—she pulled out her phone, started typing on it—“I need to double-check on the bunting.”

He sat down himself and pulled out his paper planner. “I already talked to Fran this morning. Bunting is on track to be finished on Friday.”

Lark nibbled her bottom lip. Ansel looked at his desk instead of her. “Friday is cutting it close with the displays on Saturday.”

“Fran can get it done. And Luke’s a good choice—he’s got the personality for it. But really, anyone is fine as long as it’s not me.”

That had been Lark’s original idea, that not only would Prime One Feeds and Cabrillo Feed and Seed sponsor the awards ceremony but Ansel himself would lead it. He’d said no the moment she suggested it. He wasn’t shy, but he knew his limits. He’d do anything for her, but not that.

“Well good, because he already said yes.” She smiled up at him. “And I still think you would have done fine.”

“I wouldn’t have.” He flipped through his planner to the page he needed. “Juniper gave me a quote on the catering if we want to give her a firm commitment soon.”

Lark waved that away. “Whatever she wants. Prime One set a healthy budget for this. We want to make connections with the community here.”

And sell a ton of feed.

That wasn’t entirely fair of him since he wasn’t sponsoring this solely out of the goodness of his heart. But he did get tired of Lark insisting that everything Prime One did was for the betterment of society. That incident with the tainted feed was still sharp in a lot of people’s minds, and Prime One’s response hadn’t been reassuring. They’d insisted everything was fine right up until some of the animals’ owners produced lab analyses that showed definitively the feed was bad.

He never brought that up with her though. He did wonder what she thought about the company’s actions beyond the corporate spiel she was probably legally required to give. Did she actually buy the crap she was spouting? She was too smart for that, but she was also one hundred percent committed to her job.

“Of course,” he said.

She kept her attention on her laptop. Her expression was focused, then slowly dissolved into something bleak. Just for a moment, before she got control of herself.

“Don’t worry about him,” Ansel said gruffly. When she looked up questioningly, he went on. “Porter. He’s always been a dick. He’s not worth fretting over.”

Her mouth flattened. “I’m not thinking about him,” she said crisply. “I’m just worried about how much work is left to do for this.”

There wasn’t that much. They were only cleaning up small details at this point. But of course she didn’t want him

commenting on her tiny moment of emotion. He wasn't supposed to notice she had any weaknesses.

"We're almost done. Then you can get on with your day."

For a second she looked ready to... apologize? Admit she was still smarting from Porter's remarks? He couldn't tell. Ansel never had figured out the knack of reading her, not that he hadn't tried.

God, he was in a mood today. He ran a thumb along the bridge of his nose. Usually he could keep his thoughts calm, friendly around her, not this useless bitterness. Overhearing Porter had set him off. At least as much off as he let himself get. Ansel was very aware of how big he was—one swat from him could actually kill Porter if he aimed right.

Not that Porter would be much of a loss to the world. But Ansel wasn't willing to go away for life for that guy.

Now for *Lark*...

Again, not thoughts he should be having. He rubbed his nose harder.

"Headache?"

At her sympathetic tone, he dropped his hand. She'd stopped with her computer and was petting Bozeman, who was trying to climb onto her lap. The dog must have sensed she was still upset, because usually he would lie down and stay down when she was in a meeting.

"No," he said. "Just a rough day. Gina Thornbridge was in here this morning, and she told me in strictest confidence"—that got an eye roll from Lark because Gina was an infamous gossip—"that a Tractor Supply was going in at the highway junction."

The junction was at least twenty minutes out of town, but it was too close for his comfort if a feed megastore was going in. His store might survive with a Tractor Supply that close—might—but it would be rough.

"People have been saying that for years." Lark's tone was carefully neutral.

Ansel wondered if she knew about it already. Prime One certainly sold way more feed through Tractor Supply than they did through his store. It would make sense that she was kept up to date on store openings.

“Gina would know though,” he said, just as neutrally. “Being on the planning commission.”

“She also talks a lot.” Lark held his gaze. “You really don’t have to worry about it. A Tractor Supply could never take the place of this store. This place has history.”

She sounded like she really meant it. She also didn’t say if Tractor Supply was actually coming or not, just that he shouldn’t be worried. Even if she knew, she probably couldn’t tell him.

Still, she was right about the history part. The first feed and seed in Cabrillo had been built in the 1890s—Dad had had to tear that building down when he’d bought the place in the sixties. Dad had been barely twenty when he’d gotten the loan to buy the old feed and seed and rebuild it, something Ansel could hardly believe. Ansel was just past thirty and couldn’t imagine getting a loan like that today.

His parents had built this place into what it was now. Ansel only felt like a caretaker most days, steering what had been given to him and trying to avoid the rocks of disaster. A Tractor Supply coming in was a waterfall, one he couldn’t avoid. The store was going to go off the edge, and all he could do was hold on.

“It’s not exactly a historic landmark.” His office hadn’t changed much since it had belonged to his dad. If someone didn’t see the charm of the store, it would mostly look dated, dusty to them. The chicken calendar on the wall that the CDFA gave out for free each year. A picture of Ansel and his parents from when he was nine, all of them standing in front of the store. A handwritten list of company reps that Dad had started and Ansel added to when needed. Lark’s name was down near the bottom in Ansel’s handwriting. “Maybe the original store was. But Dad told me it was falling down when he bought it. There wasn’t anything to save.”

Maybe there might not be anything left to save once Tractor Supply was up and running. The thought made his stomach twist. His parents had spent decades building this store, and he couldn't face that it might fail under his watch.

Ansel touched the initials carved into the desk—HS + ES—and sighed. *Sorry, Mom; sorry, Dad. I'm doing my best.*

Lark tilted her head. “Speaking of falling down, Pippa brought me a mirror this morning. She found it in one of the sheds.”

It took him a moment to process. Of course Lark was done talking about Tractor Supply—her livelihood wasn't at stake. The falling-down comment referred to the house Pippa and her sisters had been living in, which had fallen down. Literally on top of them. Luckily his cousins hadn't been seriously hurt. They were rebuilding the house now and going through all the stuff their great-aunt Esme had left on the property.

“A mirror? They've been finding a lot of strange things—Lulu found a spinning wheel a few weeks ago—but I haven't seen that.”

He could guess why Pippa had given Lark the mirror. Lark hadn't exactly been warm with his cousin when they'd met. And with Pippa working in the feedstore, they ran into each other fairly often. Pippa probably considered Lark family now that she was dating Bear, or at least thought Lark was on the way to becoming family.

So she wanted to be close to Lark. He could see Pippa's reasoning.

Look at how Pippa had immediately warmed up to Ansel when she'd moved to Cabrillo a few months ago. They'd played together as kids in spite of only being distantly related, but the moment she saw him again, it had been like a long-lost sister coming home. At least how he thought that should feel. Without any siblings, he didn't have firsthand experience. But with his cousins finally living here, he felt like he was getting sisters for the first time in his life.

He watched Lark now, trying to see how she'd taken the gift. Pippa's heart was so open; if Lark had been anything but enthusiastic, it would have hurt her.

"It was something." A shadow passed over Lark's expression. Bozeman scratched at her leg, begging to be let up. "What's gotten into you? Okay, you can come up here but just because we're in Ansel's office. Don't even try this at work." She kissed the top of the dog's head as he settled against her, looking easier.

"Good something?" Ansel asked. "Or bad something?" He didn't let his hope for Pippa's offering get into his tone.

"It was a very sweet gesture." She sighed. "Pippa's nice; she really is. But I can't forget that not a month ago she was practically our enemy. Apparently Bear can though."

Funny, Ansel would have said that forgetfulness ran in the family. Certainly Lark had forgotten their night together easily enough.

It had been years ago though. He was the one who should be letting it go. And on the surface, he had. Not a word about it had left his lips since then. If he remembered it at odd moments, that was his own problem.

"Give it time," he said. "Pippa's good at winning people over. She does it every day in the store."

"Yes," Lark said slowly. "She's very enthusiastic."

Enthusiastic but not knowledgeable, she meant. It was true, Pippa didn't know everything about livestock or farming, but she was trying. Not everyone could be as smart as Lark about it. But then Lark had been simmering in this world her entire life, not to mention how she kept up to date on practically everything. If he asked about some new component in their chicken feed, she'd immediately know what he was talking about and could recite all the studies about it and what it did. She'd always been able to do that, rattle off facts about anything.

That was what Porter really hated about her—that she hadn't peaked in high school but kept learning, kept studying,

kept achieving. She was ambitious and a hard worker while Porter was neither and never would be.

Ansel was a hard worker, but he wouldn't call himself ambitious. Not like Lark. The feedstore was more than enough for him. Which was probably why it was so easy for her to forget about their one wild night together.

And why the heck was he harping on that so much today? Normally he could be around Lark and not think about it at all.

He was just unsettled, that was it. Tomorrow everything would be normal again. Except that Tractor Supply was probably still coming. He'd have to ask around—discreetly—about that.

“She is,” he agreed. “Enthusiasm is good around here. Helps sell feed.”

Lark smiled at that, gently pushing Bozeman off her lap. She tucked her laptop away and rose. “That’s what we want, right?”

“Yep.” And that was enough, because wanting more with her never had worked out well.



Lark climbed up into her truck, settling into the driver's seat. Bozeman was already in the passenger seat, ready to go.

But instead of starting the truck, she sat there for a moment. She had the strangest feeling in her chest. Heavy and churning, like her heart had indigestion. What was going on?

And then she remembered Ansel asking about the Tractor Supply. That was why she was upset.

She couldn't tell him—it was known only to higher-ups at Prime One—but a Tractor Supply *was* coming. Although it wasn't public yet, the land had been bought and the permits were being processed. In a year or so, it would open.

It had felt gross, looking into his eyes as he'd asked, knowing that she couldn't tell what she knew. Of course the

feed and seed would survive—the feed and seed had always been in Cabrillo—but the store would take a hit for sure.

And once the information was public, Ansel would probably figure out that she'd known. Heck, he might have already figured it out. But he would have to understand. Of course he would. As a Prime One employee, there were just certain things she couldn't discuss. Not even with an old friend.

That settled, she shook her head once, decisively.

But she still didn't start the engine.

He'd looked at her during the 4-H meeting. Like, *looked* at her. Heavy-lidded, his expression taut with the kind of imagining that she shouldn't let herself think of.

She shouldn't dwell on that look. She'd been trying to help Nadia and the rest of the kids, and maybe he hadn't even been thinking of her. He might have been thinking of taxes or inventory or stuff that was still on back order.

It would be safest if that's what he was thinking of. And not her.

Except... Her breath caught.

She remembered that look.

Ansel moving under her, pumping into her. The moonlight spilling over his face, the planes of it harsh. And when he opened his eyes, that look.

She shivered. So hard the keys fell out of her nerveless fingers.

Bozeman barked once, worried for her. *Mom?* that bark asked. *Are you okay?*

"I'm fine." She cleared her throat and tried to act normal for her dog. "Let me get the keys and we'll get out of here."

Bozeman cocked his head at her. He didn't seem reassured.

"Just old memories," she told him softly. "They don't matter. Not anymore."

She forced herself to grab the keys and start the truck finally. And if the memory kept popping up at totally inappropriate moments, at least there was only Bozeman to notice.

And he'd never tell.

4



Ansel looked at the sky and set his jaw. If those storm clouds opened up before he'd hauled all this stuff into the covered arena, he was going to be pissed.

And when all her carefully prepared decorations got wet, Lark was going to be pissed. So he'd better get moving before both their days were ruined.

Lark jogged up to his truck, hair bouncing. He'd pulled into the fairgrounds, right next to the arena where the livestock show and auction would be held and where Lark was planning to hold the awards ceremony. He'd gotten as close as he could, but there wasn't a sheltered area big enough to pull the truck under, so they still had to haul everything a good distance. Luckily Lark was strong and didn't mind bucking bales of straw.

She stopped at the tailgate, shucking off her work gloves and slapping them against her thigh. "Is there another straw bale? I didn't measure right, and we need just one more."

"Brought extra." He climbed up into the bed to drag it to the tailgate.

She smiled up at him. "You're brilliant." She set a hand on the fender's edge. "I can't believe you've had this truck for so long. Since high school, right?"

He couldn't look at her hand sitting there, or the memories of her in this very truck would swamp him. "Not quite," he said. "It was a graduation present."

His parents had presented him with the keys, expecting that he'd take the truck with him to college. Then that summer Dad had passed, leaving the store to Ansel, and college wasn't happening. Ansel had settled into the office there and never left. He didn't mind, not really, but sometimes he wondered what it would have been like to go away to school. Lark seemed to have had a great time while she was at college.

"That's right," she said. "High school for me then." Because she was two years younger than Ansel.

"It still runs, so there's no point in getting rid of it." He dumped the bale on the tailgate.

Lark tugged her gloves back on. "You take such good care of it. The interior is clean as a whistle."

"No kids to get it messy."

Not that he didn't want kids someday. He wasn't opposed to meeting someone and settling down; it just hadn't happened yet. He sure would have liked to have given his mom some grandkids before she passed, but since he'd only been twenty-two when she died, it hadn't happened. And with the feedstore taking up all his time, there wasn't a chance to meet anybody.

Maybe he should try to get out one of these weekends. Make himself head out to the Stampede one Friday night and suffer through the hangover on Saturday. If he wanted to find someone, he wasn't going to do it by spending all his time in the feedstore.

He did not allow himself to even look at Lark as he thought that.

Lark grabbed the baling strings. "You don't let Porkina in there?"

He laughed. "She's cleaner than a kid, but no."

Porkina was the potbellied pig he'd inherited from a customer who'd passed a few years ago. The family hadn't known what to do with her—pigs, even well-mannered ones, weren't a thing in the suburbs—so Ansel had offered to keep her until they found new owners. The new owners were never

found, but that was fine with Ansel because she'd snorted and snuffled her way into his heart by then.

He still didn't let her ride in the cab though. She had a very nice dog crate she rode in in the truck bed.

"Poor baby." Lark clucked her tongue as she hauled out the bale.

"Do you want me to get it?" He already knew the answer but figured he'd ask anyway.

She glared at him. "Absolutely not."

Watching her hair and hips swing as she walked away was a terrible idea, but he couldn't stop himself. If he ever met another woman who could carry a bale like she could... Well, he'd have some kids to put in his truck after that.

So his plan was to go to the Stampede on Friday and have women carry hay bales? He shook his head at himself. No wonder he was single.

"Ansel!" Pippa waved to him.

Allie, her sister, was at her side. They must be coming from dropping off their entries in the exhibition hall. They'd taken to the idea of a fair with a vengeance, entering every category they could and making big plans for next year. He'd even caught Pippa giving the goats a pep talk the other day, psyching them up for the goat show. She'd caught ribbon fever.

He jumped down from the truck bed. Pippa wrapped him in a hug as soon as she was close enough. She saw him nearly every day, but she greeted him like this every time. It was nice to be appreciated. He was so glad she and her sisters had decided to stay in Cabrillo. Even if it had inconvenienced Lark and her family.

Well, maybe not Bear. He seemed pretty happy with his end of the deal.

Allie held back and only waved at him. Which was fine—Allie seemed to be working through some stuff. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

“Have you seen Lulu today?” Pippa asked. “We saw she dropped off her yarn—it’s gorgeous—but we haven’t seen her.”

He frowned. The three of them were living in travel trailers on the old farm while the new house was being built. It would be hard not to see Lulu, all of them living like that. “No. Is she okay?”

“Probably.” Pippa didn’t sound certain. “I thought we’d made up since she said she was going to move away, but maybe she’s upset about something else.”

“She didn’t tell me anything.” Not that she would—Lulu was closed off compared to Pippa. When Pippa had told him Lulu planned to move away soon, he wasn’t surprised. Lulu didn’t seem as into the homesteading project as Pippa was. Or even Allie.

Con, the oldest sister, only visited on weekends to help clear out some of the junk. She was definitely not into the homesteading thing.

“Well, we’ll see her sooner or later.” Pippa peered into the back of the truck. “Is this all for the awards ceremony? Can we see? Can we help unload?”

“Yes times three.” He grabbed the box with the bunting in it and handed it to Pippa. The box with the strings of lights and lanterns went to Allie. He grabbed two of the folding tables that the awards would sit on. “This way.”

Lark had put the bale where she wanted it and was striding back to the truck when they met up with her. She slowed and stopped when she saw who was with him, her smile uncertain.

I can’t forget we used to be enemies. Judging by his cousins’ expressions, they were having a hard time forgetting too. It seemed the gift of the mirror hadn’t done much to smooth things over.

“I brought reinforcements,” Ansel announced. “We’ll need them if we want to get everything set up before the rain comes.”

“Right,” Lark said briskly. She always did best when she had a clear task in front of her, and making friends with his cousins was as muddled as it got. She’d be happier just setting up the awards decorations instead of making awkward conversation. “Let’s get the tables set up first.”

Soon Lark had them working together smoothly, assembling the vision she had planned with Ansel. Even as he hung lights and bunting and moved chairs and connected speakers, he admired Lark as she hustled around. She was good at this, really good. Taking charge and making things happen. She was hot too, which he tried not to notice too hard. But he couldn’t ignore it completely.

People didn’t like it, called her bossy, but things got done when Lark took command. And she’d been doing it since she was fourteen, when she was first elected president of their 4-H club.

Ansel had been sixteen then, not exactly world-weary but definitely skeptical of Lark’s ability to wrangle three dozen kids ranging from five to eighteen. She’d done it though, and kept doing it, getting reelected president until she was eighteen and aged out. He’d missed those last two years, but he doubted she’d faltered at all.

The truck was nearly empty in about twenty minutes. Ansel grabbed the last box, keeping an eye on the clouds. It looked like they’d beat the rain. In fact, they might even miss the rain entirely—the clouds were lighter, more broken up now.

Rain was definitely coming this weekend though. Ansel hoped it wouldn’t rain out the awards ceremony. He’d heard from more than one person—and a bunch of 4-H and FFA kids—that they were really looking forward to it. People were proud of the ribbons they won at the fair, and yeah, they wanted to show off a bit in front of the whole town. There were a lot of talented people in Cabrillo, adults and kids alike. Everyone should take a few hours to celebrate that.

When he walked back into the arena, Lark was making minute adjustments to the bunting, tugging on it here and there

to make sure it wouldn't come down in the night.

“Will it last?” Pippa was asking, looking anxious. “It's supposed to rain.”

“The rain itself shouldn't reach this part.” Lark gave another tug. “Only the wind will be a problem. As long as this holds until Sunday night and the end of the awards...” She paused and looked over her shoulder at Pippa. “Thank you again for the mirror. It was really thoughtful.”

Ansel's chest tightened. That was the thing about Lark—she had a really good heart. In the end, she wanted to do what was right. Yeah, she ran the 4-H club with an iron fist, but she also had them doing more community service than they ever had before. She made sure the quieter kids had a chance to speak up. She was passionate about making everyone feel that they belonged.

Maybe that's why he couldn't forget their one night together no matter how hard he tried. He knew that under the brassy exterior was someone worth knowing.

Too bad it was so easy for her to forget. Like it had never happened.

“I'm so glad you liked it.” Pippa's happiness beamed out of her. “I thought you might think a mirror was a strange gift, but Bear said you'd love it.”

“Did he?” Lark's mouth hinted at a smile—she looked ready to tease her brother about it next time she saw him. “He was right.”

“It's amazing,” Pippa said, “that the glass is still intact. You can see yourself perfectly in it.”

Something flickered in Lark's expression. “Yeah. It's remarkable.”

“Did you guys finish clearing out all those sheds?” Ansel asked. “Was there anything else special in there?”

Allie perked up, a lantern decoration in one hand. “We found a handwritten cookbook. There's no name on it, so we don't know who it belonged to, but it must be from the 1800s

at least. And a photo album with some really old pictures. Con's looking into how to preserve it since it's got some rot already creeping in."

"You should talk to Lale," Lark cut in. "Hank Moreno's girlfriend. She knows all about that kind of stuff since she studies it."

"Will she be at the awards ceremony?" Pippa asked.

Lark and Ansel exchanged a look. Ansel decided to tackle the question before she had to. "Hank doesn't like crowds, so probably not. But I can call him, arrange for you to meet her. She's really big into local history—she'd love to meet you. And she might even be able to name some of the people in the album."

"You should look too," Allie said. "It's your family as well."

That was true. He didn't have any old photographs or heirlooms from that side of the family. It'd be nice to see some of them. The few things he did have just sat in his closet—with no siblings, there was no one to share them with.

"How exactly are you guys related?" Lark asked. There was a hint of wistfulness in her tone.

Maybe she was a touch envious of the roots the Crivellis had here. She'd grown up here, but her parents hadn't. The Westfalls were newcomers compared to the Crivellis, although the sisters hadn't grown up here.

Ansel himself was what he'd call half-and-half. His mom's mom had grown up here, then moved away when she got married. When Mom and Dad had been looking for a place to settle down, they'd come back to the town Grandma had such fond memories of.

"I have to think about it." He started to construct a family tree in his head. "Esme is their great-aunt. On your dad's side, right?"

Both Allie and Pippa nodded. "Yep. She's Dad's aunt," Pippa said. "I don't think our grandpa got along with her very well, but Dad tried."

Esme hadn't been the easiest person to get along with. Mostly she wasn't interested in pretending to make people feel better. She spoke her mind and didn't care about the consequences. She'd been lonely at the end, not that she'd ever admit it. Ansel had made a point to visit her once every week or so, although she never acted too happy to see him. But all the same, he kept coming.

Ansel thought a bit more. "My great-grandmother was Esme's aunt. Great-grandmother on my mother's side."

Pippa nodded decisively. "Which makes us..." Her brows drew together in confusion. "Um, some kind of cousin? I think?"

"Definitely related at least." Ansel smiled at the sisters because it didn't really matter exactly how they were related. He was just happy to have them here. After his parents had died, he'd had his friends of course, but it wasn't until Pippa had come here that he realized how much he missed having family around too. "So we can just say cousins."

Lark was watching them with a guarded smile. Ansel wondered what she was thinking. She had her brothers here, and friends of course, but he'd never heard her mention cousins. Or maybe it was the sister part she was missing. She held her own with her brothers, but maybe she was wistful about what she'd never had.

Or maybe he was projecting his own feelings about siblings and family onto her. Lark was probably just trying to be nice.

"Yeah." Pippa shrugged. "Cousins works. I was so happy Ansel was still here. And gave me a job."

Lark's smile slipped for a moment. "That was really lucky for you."

An uncomfortable beat passed between them. Oh boy, he'd better steer this somewhere else. "What's left to put up? Anything else going in the storage area there?" He waved toward the side of the arena where a tall wooden fence marked

off a space to put anything you didn't want out in the open. They'd already started stacking boxes there.

"Just the last of those lanterns." Lark gestured to what Allie was holding. "I think this bunting is secure enough. Has anyone seen Bozeman?"

The dog lifted his head at his name—he was sitting on a hay bale, waiting for Lark to be done.

"There you are." Lark turned back to them, speaking in her best *I'm running this meeting* voice. "I can do the rest. Thank you all so much for your help."

"Are you sure—?"

Ansel cut Pippa's question off. "No problem. Teri is going to give you the final list of ribbons once all the judges are done?"

Lark nodded. "I'll email it to you once I've got it." Then she grabbed up three lanterns at once and started hanging them.

His cousins looked like they wanted to stay and help, but Ansel shook his head at Pippa's questioning look. No point in them hanging around even if they wanted to help more.

What they didn't realize was that it was useless. Lark had dismissed them. And she was a pro at that.



As Lark looked around the finished awards-ceremony decorations, she took a few moments to be pleased with herself. It looked good. Better than good—it looked great.

She'd waited until Ansel and his cousins were gone before she let herself be smug though. These little moments of pride she tried to keep private, although she was so happy with how it had all turned out. When people came on Sunday to celebrate their achievements with most of the town watching and celebrating along, they'd have a lovely space to do it. And

there was even a photo area with a nice backdrop, perfect for snapping pics of people holding up their ribbons.

Lark figured she'd see more than a few of those photos up on the wall at the feed and seed.

She pulled out her phone and took some pictures of the ceremony space, then sent them to her boss, Clive Roberts, VP of Marketing for the West Coast. He was going to love what she'd done here.

Sure enough, right after she'd gotten Bozeman into her truck and pulled out of the fairgrounds, Clive called her.

“Amazing,” he said. “You’re a genius.”

She wasn't, not really. It had more been hard work and planning, not some strike of inspiration from the heavens. Also, it had been something she'd thought about as a teen leading the 4-H club. The livestock kids had their moment in the sun at the end of their shows when ribbons were handed out, but the still exhibits just had a ribbon stuck on them at the end of judging. No handing over of ribbons, no ceremony.

The fair was one of the most important social events of the year, a chance for everyone to show off their skills. People up here should be just as proud of their accomplishments as any famous person. She wanted to have more celebrations of that.

So she made a celebration herself.

“Thank you,” she said. “I hope everyone loves it.”

“Great brand placement,” he said. “This is exactly the kind of event that fits in with our We’re in YOUR Community theme for the coming year.”

Prime One had some ground to make up after the tainted-feed issue. They needed to rebuild trust and remind people that when it came to feeds, they were still the best. The community ad campaign was top secret at the moment. Prime One set a marketing theme for each year—Lark had been integral in coming up with that theme. And Clive knew it.

She was integral to a lot of things at Prime One Feeds, and most of them had been wildly successful. She'd even helped

steer them through the scandal, along with Clive. When her annual review came around, she'd make sure that was highlighted.

What she really wanted was a VP position. There had never been a female VP at Prime One Feeds. And from there... Well, she'd never been afraid to reach for the stars. Or the president's position in this case.

"I'm glad it all worked out," she said. "At least I hope it will." She peered at the clouds through the windshield. "We might get rained out."

"No, it won't," Clive said confidently. "Because I know you already accounted for possible rain and have a plan. You always have a plan."

She did, but it was nice to hear someone appreciate that. Sometimes people just leaned on her to plan for everything and never lifted a finger themselves. Or even said a word of thanks.

Funny that it had been Pippa and Allie helping today. She might have had some mean thoughts—thoughts she'd kept entirely to herself—about how they relied on her brothers to help with so much work around their little hobby farm. Certainly her brothers had more than enough work of their own.

And the Crivellis had even managed to corral Sayer into their plans when he hadn't even been speaking to the rest of his own siblings! Okay, Lark would admit, she was still salty about that. Sayer could go over there to help strangers but couldn't come make amends with his own family? Things were slowly getting better now, but her sense of betrayal still lingered.

They'd roped Ansel into their ready-made family too. All that about their very distant connection and how it didn't matter... Her throat had gotten a bit tight as they'd gone on and on. Ansel had sounded like he'd actually been lonely before the Crivelli sisters had come. And then they'd shown up and all been closer than close.

Her own family wasn't like that. Yes, she and her brothers worked together on the ranch, but they fought as often as they got along. And Sayer hadn't been talking to any of them for the better part of a year. Her parents had kept out of it, far away in Texas at their new home, enjoying their retirement. They said it was for the kids to work it all out among themselves, even when Lark had begged them to do something.

The Westfall siblings certainly weren't welcoming distant cousins with open arms. They could barely keep a good relationship among themselves.

She cleared her throat. This wasn't the time or place to start fretting about this. Although she already knew it would keep her up tonight. Knotty, impossible-to-solve problems always did.

"We're ready for rain," she admitted. "I just worry we'll have a low turnout if it does."

"This is *the* social event of the year according to you. They'll come."

She really hoped so. "We'll see. I'm on my way to the office now."

"Are you alone?"

That was... strange. Clive had asked it matter-of-factly, but unease prickled over her skin. "Just Bozeman is with me."

The dog looked over at her, and she swore he cocked an eyebrow at her. "I wasn't talking to you," she mouthed at him.

"Good," Clive said. "I know he'll keep this a secret too."

The unease spiked into full-on anxiety. Lark was so glad there was no one here to see her. "What is it?" She struggled to keep her tone normal.

She was already imagining disaster. Something worse, even bigger, than the tainted feed.

He drew in such a deep breath she heard it over the speakerphone. Her skin crackled with bad energy. Was he sick? Was she fired?

“I’m retiring at the end of this year.”

“What? No,” she said automatically. But it made sense—Clive had been with the company almost thirty years. He was healthy, his kids were all out of the house; why not retire and enjoy himself? “You can’t leave. I’ll miss you.”

She didn’t regret saying that so nakedly. Clive was a great mentor. An amazing one. She’d never have come so far without him. He’d been there thirty years, her only three, but she was already immediately below him and remarkably independent. He trusted her to do what she needed to, knowing she knew exactly what that was.

And then the fuller implications hit her. Her pulse thumped, her heart dancing in time to it.

Clive was leaving. And someone would have to take his position.

She was so, so glad she was alone in her truck for this, could let her hunger for this fill her expression. Because she wanted this. She wanted it badly.

“I’ll miss you too,” Clive said. “But it’s time. I’ve been with Prime One for decades. And this last thing, with the bad feed...” He sighed deeply. “It was a lot. I’m ready to be done.”

Lark could understand that. She’d seen how much it had taken out of him, mentally and physically. She hadn’t even been able to finish the vet reports from the affected animals—it had been too upsetting.

So yeah, Clive was probably feeling pretty worn out right now. Still, he had a lot of life and wisdom left in him. “We’re recovering from that... issue,” she said. “Give it some time—you’ll feel more like yourself again. The company still needs you.”

“No, it’s time,” he said firmly. “I know it. And you’ll do fine without me. In fact...”

She leaned forward as if she could physically catch the thread of what he was about to say through the speaker.

“In fact, I think you might be ready for a promotion.”

Oh. Oh boy, she wasn't misreading this. "Really?" she got out.

"I'm giving my notice to the company today," he said. "They'll start a search for a new VP within a few weeks. Internal and external candidates."

Of course they would. He reported to the president himself and only the president. It was a vital position at Prime One Feeds. Her mouth was so dry it was hard to talk. "I see."

"I'm sure you do," he said. "The thing is, I want the job to go to you."

Lark had hoped, had prayed, had dreamed about this. But she'd never expected it to happen so soon. Or to have Clive just flat out admit he wanted her to get his job.

"I don't know what to say." That was pure honesty on her part. Her mind was blank. She needed to think though, to plan, to... to do something.

He laughed. "Lark Westfall, speechless. Well, that is something. Look, I'm telling you now so you have time to prepare. You're a little young for this, and I think you know it. But you've got a lot of work behind you, really great work."

"But I need more." Something big, something splashy. But focused on community, to fit with the theme. To help erase the tainted-feed scandal from everyone's minds.

"More is always better," Clive said. "You're very good."

"But I need to be the best." She wanted to pull over, to start wildly scribbling down all the ideas swimming in her head. But she had to get to the office, and she still had a full day of work ahead of her.

She wasn't going to sleep tonight, she could already tell.

"Right," Clive said. "And I know you can. If you use this time wisely."

"I'm already thinking." She sobered. "Seriously, thank you so much for this. For your mentorship, for your faith in me. It means so much. I won't let you down."

“I know you won’t.” There was a catch in his voice. “Which is why I want it to go to you.”

Lark pressed her lips tightly together. She was really going to miss Clive. He deserved this retirement more than anyone she knew, but not having him there every day was going to be hard.

She blinked rapidly, willing herself not to cry. “Again, thank you.”

“Keep it to yourself for now,” he warned. “I’m not supposed to be telling you this.”

“Not a word,” she promised. “Not even to my brothers.”

“Good. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Lark ended the call and tried to process everything she’d just heard while also trying to think up a brilliant strategy to cinch the job.

She looked over at Bozeman, who was watching her raptly. He didn’t know exactly what was happening, but he knew something was up. And he was excited.

So was she.

“This is what we’ve been waiting for, buddy.” She tried to slow her pulse because otherwise it was going to be difficult to drive. She was so damn keyed up. “We’re going to get this. I promise.”

As she talked to Bozeman, she realized there was no one else she could tell about this, at least not until the job posting was officially public. The most important moment of her life and only him to share it with.

Her chest felt tight, which was weird. She loved Bozeman. He was more than enough. And she wanted this job more than anything.

So why was she feeling so... conflicted?

Wait, she wasn’t feeling *conflicted*. She was emotional, which made sense. This was her dream job, and she was being given the perfect shot at it.

As long as she didn't mess up. Her breathing went shallow again.

But she wouldn't. That was the one thing Lark didn't do.

She didn't mess up. No matter how hard a thing was or how much effort it took—she always succeeded. No matter what.



The awards ceremony went off perfectly.

Lark watched from the storage area as Luke Merrill thanked everyone for coming and asked for one last round of applause for all the winners. The cheers were loud. Even though it had rained yesterday, that hadn't kept people away.

"Thank the sponsors," she muttered, not that Luke could hear her. She was glad everything had gone so well—the kids in particular looked really happy—but Prime One needed to get a mention here.

All her 4-H kids had done brilliantly, giving their speeches like pros. They'd each introduced the awards categories, explaining the skills demonstrated and what the judges were looking for, providing context for anyone who might not know what something like "crocheted wearing apparel" was.

And Nadia had done best of all, welcoming everyone to the ceremony with her speech. Lark had wanted to burst; she was so filled with pride for these kids.

But now that her kids were done and things were winding down, she could focus on Prime One getting the recognition it deserved. She glanced back at Ansel, who was sorting leftover ribbons. Cabrillo Feed and Seed needed a mention too. Ansel had been incredibly helpful today, seeming to know what needed to be done before she even said anything. It had helped so much with the stress of everything. Even though she planned things down to the smallest detail, she still got so

worked up when it was time for them to go off. Like she couldn't trust her own plans or something.

Or that something would go wrong that she hadn't thought of. That had kept her up last night along with more obsessing over the VP position. She had a headache that no amount of coffee or ibuprofen could dent.

She touched her cheek. When she'd looked in the mirror this morning, the one Pippa had given her, the face staring back had been haggard. Exhausted. So stressed the lines on her face were carved deep.

It hadn't exactly scared her, not like the other time, but when she looked in the bathroom mirror, she swore she didn't look quite that bad. Tired, yes, but not about to fall over.

And then when she'd gone back to the big mirror, she'd looked mostly normal. Like she did in the bathroom mirror. It was the strangest thing. Maybe the light in her bedroom was just bad and that's why she always looked awful in that mirror. She ought to move it, see if that helped.

"I want to take a moment to thank our generous sponsors," Luke was saying.

Lark's shoulders relaxed a fraction. She'd reminded him to do that before the ceremony had started, but she couldn't really trust he'd do it until he had. Delegating things was so nerve-racking.

"Hey."

She jumped at Ansel's whisper so close to her ear. He put a hand on her elbow to steady her.

Even through her jacket, the connection was electric. He hadn't touched her since...

His hand on her rib cage, skin against bare skin. His palm so big he swallowed her up.

She exhaled roughly. Her skin was aflame.

He dropped his hand. "You okay?" He sounded genuinely worried.

Lark looked down at her feet, trying to get herself back into calm-professional mode. What the heck had just happened to her? Besides a very inconvenient memory surfacing?

“Just a headache,” she said. “I can’t seem to get rid of it.”

Ansel nodded. “You’ve done a lot. I imagine it’s been a long week.”

He didn’t even know the half of it. She’d been pitching ideas to Bozeman, but his feedback mostly consisted of head tilts and nose licks. Not very helpful.

“Well, we’re almost done,” she said. Luke was setting down the microphone as everyone gave one last round of applause. “Did he mention Prime One and the feedstore when he thanked the sponsors?”

She’d been short-circuiting over a simple touch, and she’d missed it. She’d have kicked herself if she could.

“Yep.” Ansel didn’t sound too concerned. “Now we get to start cleaning up.”

Lark would never admit it, but she loved cleanup. Putting everything back where it belonged, taking some quiet time to reflect on what worked and what didn’t, maybe even mentally patting herself on the back a bit.

The next few hours were going to be spent breaking everything back down, and while she did all those mindless tasks, she was going to think hard about the VP job and what she could do to stand out.

“That went great,” Luke said as he came back to where they were. “This was a terrific idea. If you do it again next year, give me a call. I’ll get Benedict to sponsor some of it.” A twinkle lit his eyes. “And I bet Ana could talk to the casino about a sponsorship. She hates it when I outdo her.”

“Thank you so much for your help.” Lark shook his hand, smiling at him. “We couldn’t have done it without you.” As she said it, she calculated how much more they could do next year with a bigger budget. Of course Prime One Feeds would be the primary sponsor, but maybe they could add a sit-down dinner. Or even dancing. Turn it into a real party. “And you’ll

be the first person I call next year. You were amazing out there.”

Ansel shook Luke’s hand next. They chatted for a bit while Lark started to take down the sound system. They were borrowing it from the fair, and she didn’t want anything to happen to it.

Her 4-H kids came up then, all of them talking at once about how they’d done and showing off their ribbons. Clearly they’d all helped themselves to treats from the dessert table, judging by how hyped-up they were.

“I’m so proud of you guys!” She started hugging them one by one. “Everyone was so awesome! All that practice paid off.”

“Thank you for all your help, Miss Lark,” Nadia said solemnly. “Thinking about everyone being turned around really helped me. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Yes, you could have,” Lark said as she gave the girl a squeeze. “You were brilliant.”

The kids handed her a brownie from the dessert table—“I saved it just for you!” little Diana announced—then headed off to enjoy the rest of the fair. Lark tucked the brownie in her bag for later, then got back to cleaning up, a smile on her face. Those kids really were the best.

“Congratulations,” Ansel said when he came out to help her. “I think you started a whole new tradition here.”

Oh, that had a nice sound to it—A Whole New Tradition. Maybe she could work that up into something for the VP job. “You did it too.”

“It was mostly your idea.” He lifted one of the speakers, his arms straining.

Her mouth went dry. She was used to being around men who could easily lift heavy things, but Ansel took it to a whole new level.

He put the speaker on a flatbed cart. “And you did most of the work.” He grabbed another speaker.

“That’s not true.” She sounded way too distracted. So she grabbed a microphone and started looping up the cord. “What do you think we should add for next year? Or change? I don’t know that straw bales really worked there. A few of the kids climbed over them to get their ribbon.”

His smile was fond. Maybe even condescending. And on the left side of his mouth, she noticed. “You never stop, do you?”

She stiffened. *You look like a feedbag.* What Ansel had said wasn’t anywhere near as bad, but she suspected he was verbally patting her head. *Silly Lark, always planning and worrying.*

If she didn’t plan and worry and all the rest of it, things didn’t get done. She’d learned that at a young age.

His face dropped. “I didn’t mean it like that. Just that...”

Just that she needed to chill out? Yeah, she’d heard that one before. But she didn’t say anything. She’d thought that Ansel wasn’t like that. That he appreciated her as she was.

“You should let yourself enjoy this,” he said. “I can tell you haven’t been sleeping. You should take a minute to appreciate what you’ve done.”

Out of all that, she focused in on the bad part. Her brain couldn’t do anything else. “I look tired?” She ran a hand down her face, remembering how she’d appeared in the big mirror. Thank goodness she hadn’t been the MC of the awards, her dark circles and slack skin front and center.

Ansel shook his head. “You’re still beautiful.” He picked up one of the tables and headed for the storage space. Over his shoulder, he said, “Always were.”

That... She stared after him, slack-jawed. What did he...? She shook her head.

Beautiful?

Somehow that cut through her daze. Cut right through to her anger. Her entire body buzzed with it.

She stomped after him. How dare he say something like that, then just disappear? He did not get to do that.

His back was to her as he set the table against the wooden fence. Outside, there were the sounds of the fair, kids screaming, adults laughing, the low roar of the carnival rides. But mostly Lark heard a hum in her own ears. And his voice saying she was beautiful.

She barreled toward him. “Ansel—”

He turned. He was close, closer than she thought.

She slammed on the brakes, but not quick enough. She wobbled, about half a second away from falling into him. There was nothing to grab on to but his strong, solid self.

“What the—” He grabbed her arms, his hands completely encircling them.

She wasn't in danger of falling anymore, but she still felt dizzy. Like the ground under her was shifting.

Craning her neck, she looked up at him. Looked into his snapping black eyes.

The heat in his gaze as he watched her, their mouths not even an inch apart. The stars behind him.

It had been cold that night. It wasn't cold now. No, heat was rolling off her. Rolling off him too—she could feel it.

She pulled her arms free, looped them around his neck. And pressed her lips to his.

Ansel was a quiet man, but he didn't kiss like one. The moment their mouths met, his hand cupped her ass, pulling her up, his other hand spreading over the small of her back, pushing her into him. His legs spread, the better to bring her between them.

He kissed with his entire body. She'd wanted to forget that, but she never could.

His teeth found her lower lip and bit, hard enough to let her know how much he wanted her. She moaned as her pulse

beat hard, low and deep in her core. He released her lip with a muttered curse.

She slicked her tongue into his mouth, wanting him to crumble completely. Wanting him to prove with his hands, his mouth, his body, just how *always beautiful* he found her. She couldn't stop remembering him that night, so long ago, and she wanted him to remember too.

The slide of her hand down his back—*remember that?* The roll of her hips into his growing hardness—*remember that?*

The thundering of her heart, the needy heat consuming her, he wouldn't remember. That was all her own.

Outside, someone screamed. Loud and frightened. Different from the ones coming from the roller coasters.

It sliced through Lark. Brought her immediately back to where she was.

And what she was doing.

Ansel had already let her go. Somehow he'd known before she had that they needed to stop. She walked as far away from him as she could, running her hands through her hair. Everything inside her was quaking.

She could hear him breathing behind her, like he'd just run as far and as fast as he could. She couldn't ever remember hearing that from him, not even that one night. The night she should not be thinking about.

He hadn't said a word to her about it after. It had been seven months before she saw him again, and when she did, he smiled vaguely at her—she couldn't recall which side, right or left—as if trying to remember where he knew her from. No call, no text, not even a roundabout check-in through their mutual friends.

She put a hand over her eyes. This incident was going to have to suffer the same fate. Maybe not forgotten—no, definitely not—but ignored so hard it might never have happened.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have done that."

He made a sharp, skeptical noise, so harsh it made her flinch. “So that’s the line you’re taking.”

Her head snapped up. He sounded angry with her. Really angry.

And why not? She’d kissed him in the middle of a professional event. It was beyond inappropriate. If Clive ever found out, she’d never get the VP job.

She could even be fired.

“You’re a client,” she said stiffly. She still couldn’t turn around, too afraid to see his expression. “It was completely wrong of me to violate that boundary.”

“Right,” he said slowly. “Because Prime One Feeds always comes first for you.”

At that, she swung around, temper sparking off her. “And you’d give up the feedstore for a kiss? It means that little to you?”

His mouth was a flat, hard line, his brows drawn tight together. His gaze was as cold as a winter’s midnight. “I wasn’t thinking about the feedstore, that’s for damn sure.”

She hadn’t been thinking about her responsibilities either. Which was entirely the problem.

“Again, I’m sorry.” She straightened her shoulders, made her expression distant. “If you feel you can’t work with me after this...”

Lark actually didn’t know what she would do if he said he couldn’t. She’d have to request someone else be put on this account. People would ask why. She wouldn’t know how to explain it.

She wouldn’t see Ansel nearly every day. She’d have to avoid him, in fact. Her belly twisted at the thought.

He watched her for a long moment. She stared back because she had no idea what else to do. Short of rewinding time and not kissing him, she couldn’t fix this.

Why had she been so stupid? Was it the lack of sleep? It must have been.

After a while, he sighed. It sounded more exasperated than resigned. “Fine. Don’t worry about it. I’ll forget about this and never mention it again.” He leaned close, his voice dropping menacingly. “Just like last time.”

And then he stalked off, leaving her frozen in place, stewing in a toxic mix of regret and anxiety.



Ansel walked into his house, his anger still simmering.

She’d kissed him. Again. And she’d rejected him.

Again.

He threw his keys and wallet onto the kitchen counter, his teeth grinding. It had been over five years now since they’d hooked up. One night. One wild, wicked night when she’d been home from college.

It must have been spring break because a bunch of Ansel’s high school friends were home too. His life didn’t run according to the school calendar, hadn’t for four years, so he wasn’t entirely sure. But whenever they came home, he made sure to meet up with them.

College might be out of reach for him, but he still liked hearing about it. The classes, the parties, the futures they could pick and choose from—it was like listening to stories from another planet. It turned out life had other plans for him, and he didn’t regret running the feedstore, but sometimes...

He shook his head. No point dwelling on any of that, the college stories, his one night with Lark. And yet that couldn’t stop him sometimes. Like tonight.

Porkina rolled out of her bed in the living room, trotting over to him. He scratched her back as she whuffled a hello at him. She pushed her snout against his leg, then turned so he could scratch her other side.

“Did you sleep all day?” he asked her. “I bet you did. What a spoiled princess you are.”

Her curly tail wagged just like a dog’s. Ansel had never expected to own a pet pig—growing up, they’d been livestock, not pets—but Porkina had won him over entirely. Smarter than a dog, quieter—at least when he wasn’t late with her meals—and with personality oozing out her ears. Which might not be made of silk but were still pretty cute.

He went and opened the back door for her. “Go out and do your business.” She was housebroken, thank goodness.

Porkina daintily pranced out, sniffing the evening air. He wondered what it was like for her, having such poor vision and seeing the world entirely through her nose. Could she smell that it was evening? Could she smell where he’d been today on his clothes?

He lifted his arm, sniffed his shirt. He could definitely smell Lark’s perfume on him. It was light, floral, not quite what you might expect from her personality.

She’d worn something muskier in college. He didn’t know much about perfumes, but he’d bet it had one of those hard, cold names. The kind that they advertised in soft-focus-shot commercials that made no sense. He still remembered how it had filled his nose.

They’d all gone down to the Spot by the creek that night. Some of his friends from high school who were home from college, some friends of friends, all gathered together to catch up and have some fun. The Spot was close to the road with space to park and an open stretch of riverbank. It didn’t have any official name that Ansel knew. They’d just called it the Spot all through high school. A few of them, Lark included, hadn’t been old enough to drink, so the Stampede was out.

Someone had brought a thirty-six case of beers, someone else a radio, and they’d had an impromptu party out there. Ansel hadn’t planned to stay long since he had to get up early to meet a feed delivery. He hadn’t had a day off since his dad had died. And he didn’t know when he’d get another.

So those few hours by the creek to catch up with his friends were all the break he got. He was fine with that, fine with his plans to leave early... until he'd started talking to Lark.

Of course he remembered her. Serious, sober Lark, always in charge. But college had changed her. She'd grown up into herself, still confident, still a bit bossy, but funny too. And relaxed.

They'd talked about her classes, the livestock barns she worked in as part of her work-study, the research the university was doing on rotational grazing, anything and everything. Someone else might have found it boring—he suspected everyone else there did—but Ansel was fascinated. She just knew so much about everything, and if she didn't know, she wanted to learn.

As they'd had more beers, they'd moved on to talking about her future. She wanted to work for a feed company or maybe stay and get her masters or maybe come home and apply what she'd learned to her parents' operation. She'd tossed all those options out like they were dice and her numbers were sure to come up.

She'd turned to him then, her hair falling over her shoulders, her eyes sparkling. The look she gave him... It had hooked right into his chest.

“And what do you want to do?” she'd asked.

He'd almost laughed because *want* had nothing to do with it. “I have to run the feedstore.”

Her face had fallen. “I'm sorry about your dad. He was a great guy.” She ran a hand down his forearm.

He sucked in a breath. Their gazes locked. And Ansel suddenly realized they were alone. Everyone else had taken off. The moment pulsed between them with heat.

“Want to go in the creek?” she asked breathlessly.

“It'll be cold.” His warning came out husky.

“I'm not afraid.”

He wasn't either.

Laughing, they'd shucked off their clothes and jumped in. And immediately screamed in unison.

"Oh my God!" Lark was already shivering. "Okay, I take it back—I'm afraid."

He let himself look over at her since he was trying to be a gentleman earlier. Sadly, only her shoulders were above the water. But *those* shoulders...

"Give it a second," he said. "You'll get used to it." He clenched his jaw so she wouldn't hear his teeth chatter. It was damn cold.

She pushed off from the bank, moving to the deeper water. "I misjudged you, Ansel Sterling."

"How so?" Already he felt warmer. Or maybe it was the sight of her naked, blurred limbs beneath the surface.

"I never guessed you'd go skinny-dipping in the creek. Or even stay out this late."

"I'm just full of surprises." He wasn't, but for her he could make the effort. He moved out to where she was, watching her as he approached.

He might not be a college boy, but he could tell when a woman was flirting with him. If she only meant to flirt, he'd give her space to move off. If she meant more...

She held his gaze as he came closer, her arms milling through the water. Her lips were parted, her chest rising and falling with her breaths.

He'd never seen anything as beautiful as her in the water under the moonlight, looking at him like that, the stars spread behind her. He'd remember it until he died.

Soon he was close enough to reach out and touch her. The currents from her movements brushed against him.

"Warmer now?" he asked gruffly.

She tilted her head. "Still a little cold."

Not even he could miss that invitation. All of him hardened in a rush. “Want me to help?”

She nodded. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, and it was somehow more arousing than anything else she could have done.

Suppressing his instinctive groan, he pulled her into his arms. She bobbed in the water, then settled as he tightened his hold on her. She was warm, warmer than he’d expected, her limbs sliding along his. Her breasts were soft against his chest, the strands of her hair curling around his shoulders.

“Better?” he asked.

She nodded again. If she was half as hot as he was, she was burning up.

He took a moment to simply enjoy this, Lark naked and in his arms. Before tonight, she’d just been a girl he knew, and now...

Now she was more.

He put his forehead to her temple and breathed her in. The trouble was, he couldn’t decide where to kiss her first.

Lark had never had a problem being indecisive though. She put her mouth right on the base of his throat, licking at his pulse point. In response, it tried to thump right out of his body.

“Jesus,” he rumbled.

The look she gave him could have made snow spontaneously ignite. “I’ve wanted to do that all night.”

He kissed her then, deep and hungry. She kissed him back, just as needy and urgent. They became a tangle of limbs and lust, panting into each other’s mouth when they bothered to come up for air.

Lark kissed like she was going to die if she couldn’t climb inside him. And Ansel wanted to let her because he needed her just as bad.

God, to think he might have never known this about her. What a waste of a life if he hadn’t.

“Do you want to go back to my truck?” he asked roughly.

She nodded shakily, then laughed. “Oh my goodness—we don’t have any towels! We’re going to freeze.”

“I’ve got some in the truck.”

She looked up at him with the kind of admiration that made him feel ten feet tall. “A man who plans ahead. I love it.”

God, when she said that... “Wait here.”

He’d gone back for the towels and their clothes, then carried her back to his truck. It had been the best night of his life.

When morning came and he had to go to work, for the very first time he regretted that he’d skipped college and immediately taken over the feedstore.

They’d exchanged numbers and kissed goodbye as the sun rose. She’d looked like he’d felt—stunned, delighted, hardly able to believe what had just happened.

He’d waited for her call. Yeah, she was going back to college the next day, but surely she’d send a text at some point. So he waited. And waited. And waited.

After a month, it hit him—she wasn’t going to call. Or text. Whatever he’d felt that night, well, she didn’t feel the same. Ansel was just a hometown fling, easily forgotten when she went back to school.

There had been the feedstore and Mom’s final sickness, so Ansel had no time to mope. Yeah, it hurt, but the world was big. Disappointment happened to everyone.

And if he never found another woman who made him feel like Lark did... that was his own personal problem. Just his foolhearted memory getting stuck on someone who didn’t deserve it.

And then he’d gone and kissed her today and given her another chance to reject him. What an idiot he was.

He heard the *click click* of Porkina's hooves on the ramp to the door he'd built for her. Pigs couldn't jump, and even the small step up to the back door was too much for her. Ansel grabbed the bag of veggie scraps he'd saved for her and went to the back door.

"Ready to eat?" he asked her.

She snuffled and wagged her tail.

Ansel grabbed her bowl and added a cup of mini pig pellets. The sight of the Prime One logo on the bag made his jaw tighten.

You're a client.

He'd thought they might have more to their relationship than just that—weren't they at least friends?—but not to Lark. Her job came first. College came first. Those kinds of things were important to her.

Not kissing Ansel. That definitely came last.

He dumped the veggies in the bowl and put it down for Porkina. She squealed appreciatively and started eating.

Absently he flopped down into one of the chairs on the porch and started scratching the white band over her shoulders. She was going to need a bath and some hide lotion soon. Maybe if it was warm enough tomorrow, he'd do it.

Would he see Lark tomorrow? Probably. She'd be full of ideas for the next awards ceremony. After he'd told her he'd forget again, just like the last time, she'd been silent as she'd cleaned up. He might have felt worse about it if he weren't so mad himself.

She kissed him. And then pulled away and said, *You're a client.* So yeah, he'd been pissed. Still was.

The bowl scraped loudly across the concrete as Porkina licked it clean. Then she lifted her head, gave a snort, and trotted off to root in a corner of the yard. She'd torn up the yard so badly with her rooting and digging Ansel had just had to accept that it was Porkina's yard now. Luckily he had

enough land to put his garden beds somewhere else. Even if he didn't, it made Porkina happy, so he wouldn't stop her.

He sighed and got to his feet. If he could, he'd take tomorrow off and avoid any chance of seeing Lark. His temper was still touchy when it came to her. But he hadn't taken a day off in... in...

He frowned. He couldn't remember. It must have been years at this point. He opened the store most mornings; he closed the store most nights. And he was there every day.

So no day off tomorrow. And if he saw Lark, he'd do exactly what he'd promised:

Pretend it never happened. Again.

6



“**Y**ou’re in a mood.”

Lark’s head snapped up at her brother Thorne’s tone. “You’re one to talk. If they had a Nobel Prize for being in a mood, you’d win every year.”

Next to him, Bear chuckled. “I think you can only win that once. But yeah, he’d be a shoo-in.”

Thorne glared at his twin. “You just said this morning that Lark was being a stone-cold—”

Lark lowered her camera and held up her palm. “Okay, don’t finish that. And all I asked was that you two try to have normal expressions on your faces. Every picture I’m getting, you guys look stupid.”

“I just look like myself,” Bear grumbled. “How am I supposed to not look stupid?”

“Pretend you’re me,” Lark retorted. “Just... just look normal, okay?”

She’d come out to the Fall West today to take pictures of the animals and her brothers to put on the ranch website and Instagram. She was in charge of their marketing strategy and knew that posts like this helped sell meat. People wanted to meet the people raising their food these days.

Her brothers were more skeptical.

“This is my normal face,” Bear said.

“And you didn’t ask, you yelled,” Thorne said.

She was very certain she had not yelled. Okay, maybe she had demanded very strenuously that they fix their expressions, but there had been no yelling. “Let’s try again.” She raised the camera to her eye. “Three, two, one.”

The camera clicked. The new picture popped up on the screen.

Bear looked constipated, and Thorne wasn’t even looking at the camera. He was scowling off into the distance. To be fair, Thorne was usually scowling, but she’d specifically asked him to try to look happy. Or at least not like he wanted to rip someone’s head off. No one wanted to buy ranch-raised beef from a face like that.

Lark rolled her eyes. She’d already tried to get some of them smiling, but they both had deer-in-the-headlight expressions when she did, their mouths stretched in something more like fear than happiness. “You two are so unphotogenic it’s not funny.”

Bear gestured for the camera. “Here, let me take some of you. See how you like it.”

She clutched it closer to her. “No. I can’t get pictures of myself because I have to take them. The last time you touched my camera, I had a dozen pictures of blurry grass.”

Bear set a fist on his hip. “Seriously, are you okay? I thought you’d be happier today, what with the awards being over. People can’t stop talking about it. You did great. Ansel too.”

She started fiddling with the camera, praying that her expression didn’t give her away. “No, that was fine. I’m so happy everyone had such a good time. I’ve just got a headache that won’t quit.”

It wouldn’t stop because she couldn’t sleep. And she couldn’t sleep because she’d kissed Ansel when she shouldn’t have.

She also couldn’t sleep because it kept replaying in her head.

If she told her brothers about the kiss, she wondered what they would do. They were protective of her, but they generally weren't assholes to the guys she brought home. Not that there had been a lot. Okay, just one actually, back in college, and she'd been relieved when it hadn't worked out.

They hadn't been aggressive with that guy—what was his name again? It was on the tip of her tongue—but they hadn't been friendly either. They were friends with Ansel.

Wait, she was friends with Ansel too. At least she had been. Maybe he would feel different when she saw him again. She planned to stay out of the feedstore for a while, the better to let his anger cool.

She'd never seen him like that before, so cold, so cutting.

Just like last time.

He hadn't forgotten the last time. Not at all. In that moment, he'd sounded as if the memories haunted him. But if they had, why hadn't he ever said anything? Or reached out to her after?

“Lark.”

She blinked as she came back to herself, suddenly aware that Bear was gently tugging the camera out of her hand.

“You should go lie down,” he said. “Thorne even has your old room made up.”

Her fingers tightened on the camera. She didn't lie down or take naps or any of that. She never had the time. In fact, she needed to be thinking up a project, a big one, for the VP position. Her mind had been frustratingly blank since... since she'd kissed Ansel.

Maybe she did need a break. She'd called in sick to work today, not wanting to face her commute with her head pounding and planning instead to catch up on everything she needed to do for the ranch. But she could just take the entire day off. Read in bed. Watch TV. Or do nothing at all.

Her stomach shimmied at the thought, and not in a good way. Was she really thinking of doing nothing all day because

she had a headache?

Okay, actually because she'd kissed a guy she shouldn't have, but the point still stood.

Which was a stupid reason to let herself be lazy. She tugged the camera back. "It's fine," she said shortly. "If you guys could have some normal expressions in the pictures, that would help a lot."

Bear shrugged. "Okay. How about I pull my hat down lower?"

"Perfect."

Lark snapped dozens of pictures of her brothers pretending to work, the cows as they grazed, and several stunning shots of the mountains. Finally both Bear and Thorne insisted they were done playing and went back to work. They never had understood how important the social media side was to their sales. But Lark had stopped trying to convince them.

Now that she was done, she needed to upload all these images, clean them up, then schedule them to post to social media. It would be hours of work spent in front of a screen. Her head pulsed with pain at the thought.

She went to go take care of her chickens instead. Bozeman decided to stay with Bear, the both of them hopping up on the side-by-side to check cows. Lark let the dog go because she knew how much he enjoyed it.

Lark kept a flock of laying hens there at the ranch because the coop was nicer than anything she could build in her backyard and the hens had more space. Bear checked on them for her, but she tried to come at least every other day to see them for herself.

Dad had built the coop for her when she was nine and decided she wanted chickens. Every other animal on the ranch either belonged to someone else or to the business, and Lark wanted something for herself. What she really wanted was a pair of hamsters, but the rule was that every animal on the ranch had to be productive in some way. So chickens it was.

Those original hens had come from the feedstore. Lark still remembered picking them out from the brooder on the end of the aisle, which was unchanged after all these years. Ethel, Ansel's mom, had helped her pick out the friendliest ones.

Come to think of it, all her chickens through the years had come from the feedstore. She'd never been tempted to order from a hatchery or anything like that. She'd known the feedstore would always have whatever she might want and that the chicks would be healthy and happy too.

Her grown-up chickens greeted her with wild enthusiasm, knowing she'd toss them a handful of scratch. Which she did.

“You guys are easily bought with food.”

They just kept pecking.

Lark took the opportunity to check their nails and beaks in case they needed a trim, fluffed their feathers looking for mites, and checked them for bumblefoot. They'd all need regular Vaseline for their combs once the temperature dropped too. Some people thought you could just throw food at chickens and then collect the eggs, doing nothing else for them. But they needed care and attention the same as any other animal. Maybe more, because you had to know what you were doing.

She saved her oldest hen, Matilda, for last. Matilda was a stately Barred Plymouth Rock who'd stopped laying a few years ago but still had a home here among the flock. Matilda settled happily into Lark's lap, enjoying her spa treatment. Lark ran a hand over the smooth black-and-white feathers, feeling her headache lessen. There was nothing like some time with the chickens to soothe a soul.

Matilda made a soft noise in her throat. A happy, content chicken sound. Lark would make sure Matilda had many more years of making happy chicken sounds.

But eventually Lark got antsy, getting up to clean out the coop and the run and the nesting box, putting fresh bedding in the box and making sure that their dust bath was full and clean. When she was done, she felt almost like herself again.

Although she still needed a decent night's sleep. It'd been almost four days of insomnia now.

She had to think of something for the VP position. That's the only thing that would let her sleep. Community. She had to tie it back into community. And trust. Prime One needed that badly.

Prime One had just done a big campaign featuring small producers like the Fall West or else she might suggest something like that. People working their own land, giving back to their community. Being 4-H or FFA leaders. The kind of people an entire community revolved around.

When it hit her, she gasped. It was perfect.

And it would never work. Ansel might not even be talking to her at the moment.

But it would help both of them. Everyone wanted free advertising, and if she used him as a test case, he'd get plenty of that. It would definitely help when Tractor Supply came.

The campaign would focus on family-owned, local feedstores. The heart of the agricultural community in every town. The trusted people you went to when you needed help with your stock. They only sold products they believed in.

Trusted by the People You Trust: it implied community without screaming it. The feedstores would be charming, the owners friendly, good on camera. They'd be recommending Prime One Feeds to all ages of people for all breeds of livestock. Including pets.

It would address head-on their current weak point, remind people they'd been a trusted feed company for years before this. And they could be trusted again. The scandal would be completely forgotten.

She could possibly find another feedstore, but she knew Ansel. She'd been working with him for years. It had the exact feel she wanted for this campaign, a family-run store that was part of everyone else's families. And it was one way she could help him here since she wasn't supposed to tell him Tractor

Supply was coming. It would help soothe her guilty conscience.

She'd propose it to the company as a test campaign, get feedback and numbers from the testing groups, then present it as a triumph to the interview committee.

I can come up with big-concept ideas, and I have great contacts in the very communities we want to reach. In addition to the larger accounts I manage.

I'm the whole package.

Okay, she probably wouldn't say that last part, but the rest was great.

All she had to do was convince Ansel to be her test subject.

At her feet, Matilda scratched for the last of the treats, pecking whenever something caught her eye. She gave a low, rolling *brrawk*. It was a touch indignant and maybe even inquiring.

"I have to ask him." Lark rubbed her hands on her jeans. "He can't be that mad. Ansel doesn't get mad."

He'd seemed genuinely mad yesterday though.

"He'll get over it," she said assertively. "Once he thinks about it, considers our respective positions, he'll realize I'm right. And then he won't be angry."

Except that usually wasn't how it happened. People realized she was right and then they got even angrier.

"But not Ansel. He doesn't do that."

Still, her heart was pounding, her ears heating up with a blush. She didn't want to face him again even though she wasn't a coward. She didn't shy away from tough jobs.

"It'll be fine. We've both had a day to cool off. We'll talk like adults, and it will all be like it was."

Matilda brawked skeptically again. Lark's heart continued to lurch around her rib cage.

Lark gave herself a shake. This was silly. It would benefit both of them, and of course he'd see that. She'd simply have to explain it clearly to him, lay it all out.

If he was angry still, he wouldn't be once she told him about this. And maybe if she apologized again, that would help too. Although he hadn't been soothed when she'd done it last time.

She blew out a breath. There weren't many ways to make amends besides saying sorry. Besides, he had to regret the kiss as much as she had. It was regret keeping her up all last night, a heated, churning thing that kept replaying the kiss over and over again.

Well, she'd sleep on her plan tonight without that awful regret hopefully. And she'd go into the feedstore tomorrow and put her cards on the table.

Feeling better—a plan always made her feel better—Lark tossed the chickens one last handful of scratch. She then went to fetch Bozeman, who was helping Bear mix grain. The dog happily followed her, ready to get home.

Once she was in the garage, she gratefully toed off her boots, leaving her dirty work clothes by the back door—she'd toss those straight into the washing machine later—and changed into sweats.

She was fully intent on doing photo processing for the rest of the afternoon. But she caught a glimpse of herself in the big mirror and slowed.

Huh. She tilted her head, touched a hand to her brow. That little line between her eyes—had that always been that deep? And yet the faint lines by her eyes, those looked...

She peered again. They were gone? How? She pushed her fingertips into the skin around her eyes, watched her reflection do the same. Her skin didn't feel any different, but it definitely looked different. Except her skin cream wasn't *that* amazing.

Somehow she looked younger but more worried. Like she'd gone back in time. She couldn't even explain it.

“This mirror is so weird,” she muttered. At least that strange, scared, nightmare face wasn’t appearing again. But something was off. And it seemed like more than just the lighting.

Maybe it was the color of her sweatshirt. It was a sweet pinkish peach, the kind of color Lark wished her blushes looked like. Except she just turned tomato red when she was embarrassed.

Quickly she switched it for a deep blue T-shirt. That was probably it—with the color of her shirt and the light near the mirror, it was making her look different. She was a winter, not a spring, or however that color theory worked.

Except when she stared at her reflection this time, she looked just as young. Just as uncertain.

She had a flash of a memory from college, sitting in her room on the bed, staring at her phone, wondering if she should reach out to him. She’d wanted to. After their night together, it was all she could think about.

He hadn’t called or texted her though. Before that night, Lark would have said Ansel wasn’t interested in her at all. He was older, with a business to run, and Lark was just a girl he used to know. If she was honest, she hadn’t thought of him beyond a boy she used to know. A nice guy, a fixture of her childhood, but not more than that.

And then he’d walked naked into the creek with her and turned her world upside down.

Judging by his silence, his world was exactly the same. He was probably too busy being an adult to think about her.

Lark blinked as the memory faded. This time the face that looked back at her from the mirror was the one she was expecting. Older, lines around her eyes, but the ones in her forehead weren’t that bad. Certainly she didn’t look *worried* even though she felt that way.

So it had been the color of her sweatshirt then.

For a moment she considered covering the mirror. That was twice now that it had freaked her out. But she couldn’t

really blame the mirror since it was just a mirror. More likely it was her exhaustion, her anxiety about Ansel, the VP position, and everything to do with that. She couldn't blame the mirror when it was only her own brain playing tricks on her.

So for the first time in a long time, Lark decided she would take a nap. It was the only way to get her head right.

She'd sleep now and tackle everything else later.



Ansel rang the buzzer at the mail pickup window, sighing to himself. It was only Tuesday morning, and he was already tired.

From behind the door, he heard the cheeping, faint but insistent. Then came the shuffle of feet, followed by the creak of the door opening.

“Hey,” Rachel, the postal worker, said when she saw him. “They’re right here. Give me a second.” She came back and handed Ansel a box that was filled with furious, terrified cheeping. “They don’t sound happy.”

“They had a long, scary trip.” He couldn’t blame the chicks for being freaked out. They’d hatched less than twenty-four hours ago and been put in a cardboard box and then on a mail truck. “I’ll get them in the brooder as quick as I can. They’ll perk up then.”

These chicks would be new laying hens for the feedstore. Ansel had to order new chickens about every two weeks to replace the ones that had sold. He had to admit, each new batch of chicks made him smile even though he’d been getting them for years.

“I’m sure they will.” Rachel frowned at him. “You okay? You’re looking off.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that. He wasn’t sick, but he had been sleeping badly. Because of one Lark Westfall, not

that he could tell Rachel that. *Lark Westfall kissed me—again—and blew me off. Again.*

“I’m fine.” He forced a smile and held up the box. “Thanks.”

Rachel shrugged. “No problem.” She shut the door again with a decisive snap.

Ansel looked toward the exit. The post office was small, with the pickup window and one register and two banks of PO boxes. Nella Gunderson was at her box, fumbling with the key, but that was it for people.

Nella would stop him to ask about the cheeping in the box—everyone did no matter what—but he could handle a brief chat with just one person. Any more and he’d get antsy. His plan for today was to get these chicks settled in the brooder, then spend the rest of the day locked in his office, going over the books. Not his favorite thing to do, but it was a good excuse to stay away from people.

“Oh, you’ve got something in there!” Nella called as he passed. “I can hear them.”

“Yep. They want to get out of here.” He kept going for the door. “Poor things are all shook up.”

“Oh, Ansel, I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

He didn’t let himself groan. Instead, he stopped, turned around. Nella was a lovely person, very fond of her two dogs and the pair of Muscovy ducks she kept. She claimed the eggs were better for baking, and considering she’d picked up more than her fair share of ribbons at the fair awards the other night, she was probably right.

“Yeah?” He kept his tone light. “Is it about the duck feed? Is it not working out?” The floating duck feed she’d wanted had been a special order and a pain to track down. Apparently the factory that made it had burned down, and with the supply shortages and general chaos in the world, the company had no way to make more. In the end, he’d found a distributor in Minnesota with a horde of it and convinced them to send him

a few bags. That ought to tide her over until the company could produce the feed again. At least he hoped so.

“The feed is great, and Daisy and Dandy love it. No, I was thinking about adding more ducks.” She nodded toward the box. “Does your hatchery sell ducks too? There’re so many places to order from, and I want birds that will be healthy. I trust your recommendations.”

“They do, but their minimum order size is twenty birds. You don’t want twenty ducks, do you?” He could tell by her expression she didn’t. “Jackson Harper just put up a notice on the board at the store about ducklings. He’s got Cayugas, and I think they were a couple of weeks old. I’d get them from him if I were getting ducks.”

Nella’s face lit with pleasure. “He does? So many people have chickens, but so few have ducks—it’s nice to know there’s someone else up here with them.”

“I’ll send you a picture of the ad when I get back to the store.” Look at him, matchmaking for the duck lovers of Cabrillo. If he wasn’t in such a rain cloud of a mood, he might be more tickled.

“Thank you so much. I knew you could help me.”

He nodded a goodbye and turned for the door.

The electric chime sang out as it opened. And in walked Lark Westfall.

His rain cloud mood transformed into a thunderhead. He’d have to pretend everything between them was just fine with Nella looking on. At least the box of chicks gave him an excuse to get out as fast as he could. If he had to watch her pretend nothing had happened between them for more than five seconds, he wasn’t sure what he’d do. Probably lose his temper with her again, which would be a disaster.

“Lark,” he said as coolly as he could. “Hold the door for me?”

She looked beautiful and absolutely stricken to see him. Huh. As far as reactions went, it certainly wasn’t ignoring. “Um. I wasn’t supposed to see you yet.”

His brows pulled together. What did that mean? “Okay.”

He stood there staring at her. She stared back. The box in his arms continued to cheep.

“I have to talk to you.” Lark’s voice was low, urgent. It hummed through him. “This is really important. And about what happened at the awards, I have to tell you—”

Although it nearly killed him because he was desperate to hear what she’d been about to say, he cut her off. “Lark.” He put a hint of warning into his tone. “Can it wait? These chicks need out of this box.” He looked to the PO boxes meaningfully.

Nella poked her head out then. “Lark, don’t you look sweet today!”

That’s not how Ansel would have described her, but since Nella was madly in love with Mr. Gunderson, she wasn’t going to say Lark looked hot.

“Those nice girls your brother is seeing,” Nella went on, “had some beautiful yarn at the fair, and I wanted to know if she’s selling it.”

“I think he’s only seeing one girl,” Lark said carefully. “At least, I hope he is.”

“Lulu makes the yarn,” Ansel explained. “Pippa is the one dating Bear. I don’t think Lulu is selling it, but I can ask when I see her next.” Lulu had only just decided she was going to stay in Cabrillo, so she probably hadn’t thought much about her next yarn project yet.

“I thought she was moving?” There was an edge to Lark’s question that Ansel didn’t like.

“No, she’s staying.”

“Oh.” That was flat. Maybe a touch disdainful. Lark wasn’t exactly excited that his cousin wasn’t leaving.

He could understand if it had been her brother, Thorne—he was a real jerk—but why was Lark reacting like this? The legal fight was over, everything had been sorted out, her

brother was in love with Pippa for crying out loud; there was no need for hostility.

“We need more young people here,” Nella said decisively. “I’m so glad you two decided to come back home where you belong.”

Ansel didn’t bother to point out he’d never left.

“Of course.” Lark had finally gone into professional mode to match her Prime One shirt and her pristine, pressed jeans. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

Nella beamed at Lark like she’d answered a tough question correctly. “Well, now you just need to find someone and settle down.”

Although Lark didn’t move at all, something flickered behind her eyes. Was she mad that Nella had even suggested it? Or was she sad because it hadn’t happened yet?

He had no idea. If Lark did date, she was incredibly discreet about it. He tried to imagine her kissing someone else, showing off an engagement ring, watching someone else with a fond, intimate expression.

Suddenly he realized the sides of the box were collapsing under his fists. He cursed to himself and held it up so he could peer inside. The corners were only slightly dented, and the chicks were all fine.

“Someday,” Lark said in a way that very politely shut down the rest of the conversation.

“I’ll let you two get on with it,” Nella said. “Have a great rest of your day.”

Once Nella was gone, the atmosphere between Lark and Ansel went from tense to oppressive. He was too aware of her standing so close, Rachel possibly listening in, the chicks in the box, his own heartbeat.

She’d wanted to talk about what had happened at the awards ceremony. But she wasn’t saying anything.

“I really do need to get these guys into the brooder at some point.”

“Right.” She chewed on her lower lip. “I guess it can wait. I wasn’t supposed to talk to you here anyway—I have a PowerPoint and everything.”

His heart sank. If it involved an entire slideshow, it wasn’t going to be good. Nothing good *ever* started with that. “Just spit it out,” he said more roughly than he intended. “You don’t need PowerPoint.”

“But it’s a proposal. An ad campaign for Prime One Feeds featuring the store.”

He could hardly believe what he was hearing. “It’s... You want to talk about *marketing for your job*?”

And yet why should he be surprised? Lark lived and breathed her job. She’d forgotten their first night together so easily—why not their most recent kiss too?

She put a finger to her lips, warning him to quiet down, then pulled him into the row of PO boxes. “I had the idea yesterday. A marketing campaign centered around local, family-owned feedstores. Prime One Feeds is the brand trusted by the people you trust.” She pointed to him. “You being the one people trust. You—and the feedstore—would be the store featured in the test campaign.”

He stared down at her. What the heck was he supposed to say to that? Here he was losing sleep over their kiss, and she was coming up with ad plans.

“You’re unbelievable,” he said. And he meant it.

Her gaze dropped to the floor. “I wanted to apologize again for”—her voice faltered for a moment—“for what happened at the fair. It was completely out of line.”

Something in his chest splintered. He didn’t want to do this with her anymore. It wasn’t even her apology this time—it was the *years* of pretending that nothing had ever happened between them.

“No.”

Her surprised gaze snapped up to his. “What?”

“No,” he repeated, firmer this time, wanting to impress it on her. Hard. “I’m not doing this for you.”

The color drained from her face. “I see.” Her mouth barely moved.

God, he wished she wouldn’t look at him like that. Like he’d kicked her right in the heart. But there was no way this was hurting her as much as it was him.

And what was he supposed to say to her? *It’s not you, it’s me?* It was very much her—he’d had a few dates of course, but never had a woman haunted him like she had. Which might have been why all his dates were one and done.

He sighed. “You can find someone else. It doesn’t have to be me.”

Her expression hardened. “It does.” She pursed her lips like she was holding something in. “There’s a good reason... I’m not supposed to say...”

For a moment, unflappable Lark was at a loss for words.

“Fine,” she bit out even though he hadn’t said anything. “Clive is retiring. I’m going to try for his job, the VP position. This ad campaign will be part of my portfolio. And it will help you.”

His stomach dropped into his feet. It was even worse than he’d thought. This wasn’t just about her job—it was about her *ambition*, which she loved even more than her job. But then, her ambition was one of the things he most admired about her, so he couldn’t get too mad. He only wished she might have room for more in her life than just that. Like room for him.

“Clive is leaving?” It was the safest thing to say.

She nodded. The corners of her mouth turned down. “He wants to retire. I guess it’s time.”

Ansel knew she wasn’t acting—Clive was a mentor to her. She really would miss him, even as she drooled over the possibility of taking over his job. She wasn’t completely heartless, which made it that much harder to say no to her.

He sighed again. Rubbed a hand over his face. He wasn't going to give in. But he was tempted.

"I can't," he said through his fingers. "I just can't. How about Old Town Feed Supply down the hill? They—"

She stepped into him, putting a hand on his arm. Once more her expression went hard. "The Tractor Supply at the highway junction? It's definitely coming. Next summer."

He went cold with shock. People were always talking about it coming, but the way she said it— "When were you going to tell me?"

Lark stepped back, her hand falling away. "It's confidential. I shouldn't be telling you now."

He was still holding the box of chicks, which suddenly struck him as silly. She was telling him the biggest threat to his entire life was on its way, and he was cradling some chickens.

Tractor Supply sold chicks too. They sold everything he did and more. The cold crawled over his skin, under his scalp. *Son of a—*

"This is why you need this ad campaign too." Lark was relentless. "Yes, it will help me, but it will benefit both of us. Which is why we need to forget... Well, everything else between us."

"Christ," he bit off. "We're back to this again. You shouldn't be telling me any of this since I'm a *client*."

"No, I shouldn't," she snapped back. "But you're also my friend, so I want to help you. If I handed this account off to someone else and you weren't my client, this ad campaign—the one that can help your store for *free*—wouldn't be happening."

He wanted to scrub his hand through his hair, but he needed both of them to hold the box of chicks. She was right. With what was coming, his only advantage was being the smaller, family-owned store. The nostalgic choice. The one everyone trusted. It was the slimmest hope, but he had to use it.

But he wasn't going to pretend to be happy she'd caught him so neatly. Or that he once again had to pretend nothing but friendship was between them.

"Fine." He bit the word off. When she started to talk, he held up a hand. "Don't give me a song and dance. Just email me the details of what I need to do and when. The barest details," he emphasized. "I don't have time for any PowerPoints."

The expression of delight blooming on her face immediately died. He felt like he'd just drop-kicked a kitten.

But she wasn't a kitten. She was a full-grown, self-involved woman, always looking out for herself and Prime One Feeds.

He wasn't going to allow himself to forget that. Not this time.



The moment Lark stepped out of her truck, Pippa accosted her.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re here!” Pippa threw her arms around Lark. “I don’t know what to do and neither does Bear.”

Lark stood stiffly in the embrace. Of course Pippa was upset—her chickens were sick—but she really didn’t need to hug Lark. She really, *really* didn’t need to do that.

“Bear’s busy at the ranch,” Pippa went on, “and Sayer didn’t answer, and Ansel is at the feedstore and Thorne...”

She didn’t need to finish that. Thorne was Thorne. Lark would be surprised if Pippa even had his number. If she did, she certainly hadn’t tried to call him.

“Anyway,” Pippa went on, “Bear said you would know what to do.”

Right. Because Lark had chickens and actually knew what she was doing with them. “Let’s go see them,” she said. “Hopefully I can help.”

Pippa sprinted toward the coop, not even waiting for Lark to catch up. Lark tried to move faster, but she felt like she was swimming through molten lead.

She’d been like this all week. After she’d gotten Ansel’s grudging approval on the marketing campaign, she’d begun to set everything up, arranging for a production team and setting a schedule for shooting. That had gotten a few raised eyebrows in the office but not many—Clive had approved of her

working on an ad campaign of her own, so it wasn't like she was stepping too far out of her role. And really, she was stepping *up* not out.

Still, it wasn't as fulfilling as she'd expected. Everything was going fine and people seemed excited to be working on it... except for Ansel. She hadn't seen him since their surprise meeting in the post office Tuesday morning, keeping all their communication through email like he'd wanted. His replies to her emails had been one-word answers. Every single one.

It made her dread opening her email. Each blunt *yes, no, or fine* was like a spike to her heart. She'd apologized for the kiss—twice, actually—but clearly it wasn't enough for Ansel. If only she hadn't done it in the first place...

But she had, and she'd completely ruined their friendship in the process. For whatever reason, he couldn't seem to forget or forgive this kiss like he had their one night together.

So here she was on a Friday night, still depressed about Ansel and rushing to the Crivelli farm to save their chickens. She really hoped Pippa and Allie hadn't done something stupid to hurt them.

When she came to the chicken coop and saw the leftover bread and grass clippings littering the ground, she cursed under her breath. Lark could already guess what was wrong with the chickens—she just hoped it wasn't too advanced and some apple cider vinegar and yogurt would do the trick.

"They can't have this," she said curtly, gesturing to all the scraps.

"The bread?" Pippa blinked in surprise. "But Bear said it was okay. Lulu got what the coffee shop was tossing out. She didn't want it to go to waste."

"*Some* bread," Lark emphasized. "Not too much. It's full of yeast, and too much yeast is bad for their crop. And never grass clippings. Not ever."

"But they eat the regular grass," Allie said weakly. "I've seen them."

Lark wanted to pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration. See, this—*this*—was why she didn't want them to stay. They had no idea what they were doing. They thought they could just wing it and somehow become farmers. And their animals were suffering for it. "Grass that they break off themselves is fine," she said tightly. "Cut grass like this, long strands—it gets stuck in their crop."

Sure enough, when she picked up one of the sick hens, there was a sour smell coming out of her mouth and a thin dribble of yucky liquid. The hen didn't even protest when Lark grabbed her. She was too sick to care.

Definitely sour crop from the bread and grass clippings. Hopefully they weren't too far gone.

Lark's heart wrenched, and she had to swallow down her upset. Poor baby. This didn't have to happen. Carefully Lark tipped the hen upside down and gently massaged her crop.

"Check their crops each morning," Lark said to Pippa and Allie, her hands soft and careful on the chicken. "If they're full, that's a bad sign. The crops should empty each night. Empty in the morning, full in the evening, that's the rule."

The hen vomited at Lark's feet. Pippa and Allie jumped back.

"Chickens can throw up?" Pippa asked.

Lark would have laughed if the situation weren't so dire. "Good girl," she murmured to the hen. "Let's get more of that nastiness out." She looked up at the Crivellis. "Yes, chickens can throw up. It's horses that can't. When you fed them the bread and the grass clippings, they got sour crop. A yeast infection." She waved her hand at the yard. "Get rid of all this. And they'll need apple cider vinegar and yogurt. We have to kill the yeast and get the good bacteria back in there."

The hen vomited again. The poor, poor baby. Lark whispered to her, telling her how good she was being and how she'd feel so much better soon. She prayed she was telling the hen the truth. God, she hated this, seeing the sweet thing suffering. It made her want to throw up too.

The hen's heart beat fast under her palm, her feathers soft and silky. Her eyes were dull, and the look she gave Lark was almost beseeching. Lark pulled a tissue out of her pocket and wiped the hen's beak, wishing there was more she could do. But she'd done all she could.

When she set the hen down and went looking for the next one, she saw that Pippa was raking up all the bread and grass. Allie was nowhere in sight—hopefully she'd gone to get the ACV and yogurt.

Lark worked her way through the rest of the hens. They were all sick but not as bad as she'd feared. A few days of TLC and they should be just fine. They'd caught it in time.

Allie came running back with a plastic jar in each hand. "I've got it."

"Can we get them inside?" Lark asked. "Someplace warm and quiet?"

"The big shed," Pippa said. "The old brooder is still in there."

They got all the chickens gathered up and safely tucked into the old brooder. A few of them clucked with interest at their temporary home, which encouraged Lark.

"No regular food," she said. "At least not until they've perked up. Offer them plenty of fresh, clean water and put some of the ACV in it. Encourage them to eat the yogurt, but don't force it on them."

"I can do that," Allie said quickly. "Thank you so much for helping. We were so scared."

They both stared expectantly at Lark. This was the part where she was supposed to say it was no problem, that the hens would be all right, that it could have happened to anyone.

But she couldn't. Her politeness didn't stretch that far.

So she said nothing.

"You're mad at us," Pippa said baldly.

Lark saw no reason to deny it. “I hate seeing animals in pain.” Her fists clenched. “I *hate* it. Please, please be more careful with them.” She meant that from the bottom of her heart. If she never had to do this again, for any chicken, it would be too soon.

Allie looked ready to burst into tears, but then she squared her chin. She put a hand on Pippa’s arm. “She’s right. We should have known better.”

Pippa’s mouth turned down. “We never meant to hurt them. But now we know.” Her lips compressed. “Thank you,” she said to Lark. “We’ll be more careful.” She looked at her sister. “I guess we’ll have to stay here now.”

Allie shook her head. “No, no. We don’t need two of us watching them. And I didn’t want to go anyway. Sasha wants to see the town—you can’t disappoint her.”

Lark started backing toward the door. It looked like they were done with her and she could get back to her exciting evening of putting together her application for the VP job while Bozeman snored on her lap.

“Lark, you should come with us!” Pippa’s earlier distress was entirely gone. “My friend Sasha is up here visiting, and we’re taking her to the Stampede tonight. It’ll be fun.”

Dang. Didn’t get away fast enough. Lark was sure it wouldn’t be. Fun, that is. At least not for her. Her mood was way too down for strong drinks and hot cowboys right now. “Thank you for thinking of me, but...”

Pippa kept talking, dropping her voice as if sharing a secret. “I invited Ansel too. I think he and Sasha might hit it off. He really needs to find someone—he’s so nice, I’m surprised he hasn’t yet. Don’t you think he should date? And Sasha is so sweet she’d be perfect for him.”

A furious green dragon of jealousy roared through Lark, burning all her good intentions to ash. Ansel with one of Pippa’s friends? No. Absolutely not.

And yet she had no right to claim him. If he wanted to hook up with this Sasha...

Wow, was that *her* teeth grinding? Lark forced her jaw to unclench. “I’d love to come,” she said with deadly sweetness. “And I can’t wait to meet Sasha.”



Ansel fought his way to the bar, trying not to trample anyone smaller than he was. Since most people were, he was basically watching out for everyone.

“Another beer,” he said to the bartender once he was close enough. Quinn was tending bar tonight—she had a pair of lovebirds she doted on, always picking them up some millet treats when she came to get their seed. She’d married Jack, who ran the gas station, last year. Ansel had known it was true love when Jack started coming into the feedstore to buy treats for the birds, trying to win their affection. And it had worked: both the birds and Quinn were in love with him.

Quinn put a hand to her ear, which had silver studs running all the way up it. “What?”

“Another beer,” he roared.

The noise of the crowd dimmed for a second, shocked by his volume. Then a scattering of laughter burst out.

This was why he didn’t go to bars. He didn’t know what he was doing here. This plan to get out and socialize more was already doomed.

Bear Westfall slid into the empty space next to him. “Where are they?”

Ansel shrugged. He realized Bear was probably worried, which he usually was whenever Pippa wasn’t in his line of sight. It was understandable, given the kind of trouble Pippa could get into. After all, Pippa had literally had a house fall down on her. Ansel’s stomach twisted at the memory. That had been a terrible time—thank goodness she was okay now.

“They’ll be along,” Ansel said. Honestly, he wasn’t too eager to meet this Sasha that Pippa wouldn’t stop talking about. Pippa had tried to be sly, but Ansel could tell Pippa was

already planning their wedding. It should have been perfect: here he was, out at the bar, looking for someone to love, at least for the night, and Pippa was bringing her friend who was dying to meet him. And yet... he couldn't work up any excitement about it.

Well, he'd be polite, chat her up, dance with her a few times, then leave early so he could wake up early. That excuse always worked since he never took a day off from the feedstore. He wanted Sasha to have a good time, but he didn't want to get Pippa's hopes up. If she had dreams of Sasha falling for Ansel and moving up here, that wasn't going to happen.

And when Ansel got really honest, deep, deep down where he never let anyone else see, he knew it was because he wasn't over Lark. The worst part was that there wasn't much to be over. A kiss, a night together... and a years-long friendship.

"Oh, there they are." Bear waved toward the door.

Ansel turned. He could see Pippa's curls poking up above the crowd, just barely. A taller girl was next to her, practically clinging to Pippa's arm. But she was wearing a delighted grin.

To their left were Lulu and Javi, holding hands. Ansel smiled at the sight—both his cousins had found good guys to settle down with. He was happy for them.

Beyond those two was—

"Lark's here?" Ansel hadn't meant to shout that. But she looked... He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

He couldn't remember the last time he hadn't seen her in a button-down shirt, covered from her neck to her wrists. Tonight she was wearing a tank top, her shoulders and collarbones bared to everyone. And when he let his eyes travel down from there—

He already knew what she looked like naked, so his memory helpfully filled in all the details. Or maybe not so helpfully since he couldn't form a single thought at the moment. He might even be drooling.

“Yeah,” Bear said, not noticing that Ansel was losing his mind over his sister. “She went over to help them with the chickens. They must have invited her along. And here comes Thorne.”

Sure enough, Thorne was barreling toward them, a scowl on his face. “Where’s Allie?” he demanded. “Didn’t she come? Did they just leave her all alone out there?”

Unease rippled through Ansel. That was pretty bold of Thorne. And damned possessive. Javi was a great guy and perfect for Lulu. Bear being with Pippa he could handle because deep down, Bear had a good heart even if he could be surly.

Thorne was a different matter entirely. He’d flatten Allie if he got even within five feet of her, much less any closer. Not that Allie would let him—Ansel knew she didn’t like Thorne. And Thorne didn’t like anybody, so why was he even asking?

“She wouldn’t enjoy this kind of scene.” Ansel gestured to the noise and the crowd. He put a warning in his tone. “And she’s a grown woman. She can spend a night alone.”

Thorne’s scowl deepened. “I was only asking.”

Seriously, what was Thorne doing here? Shouldn’t he be spending his Friday nights scaring small kids?

“She’s fine.” That was from Pippa, who’d finally joined them and had overheard. She lifted her face to Bear’s for a kiss. “She wanted to take care of the chickens. And Sayer’s just up the road if she needs anything.”

“They okay?” Ansel asked. “I could have come out later to help. I just couldn’t leave right that second.”

“I handled it.” Lark met his gaze dead-on. She’d done something with her eyes and lashes, making them look so deep he could drown in them. Her hair curled around her shoulders, caressing the bare skin.

The blood drained from Ansel’s face to pool in a much more inconvenient place. He should just go home. Now.

“Lark helped so much,” Pippa said. “They’re much better now. And this”—she pulled forward the woman next to her—“is Sasha.” Pippa almost wriggled with delight. “Sasha, this is Ansel, my cousin.”

He felt like he should do a trick at that point. Something fascinating to make Pippa’s introduction of him seem worthy.

“Hey.” He stuck out his hand. “Good to meet you. How was the drive?”

Sasha gently took his hand and gave it a brief squeeze. “Long.” Her eyes widened. “That road is scary.”

“But you made it!” Pippa gave her a hug. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“It’s a real cowboy bar.” Sasha looked around like she was at the circus, lingering on Bear and Thorne, who were in full Western dress. Since they were identical twins, the effect was probably much more potent. “I didn’t think they existed.”

She might mean cowboy bars or just cowboys themselves. Ansel wasn’t sure.

“It’s all real.” Pippa sent Bear a swoony glance. “I could hardly believe it myself. Do you want a drink?”

That question was directed at Sasha, but Ansel got a quick speaking look. Right. He should pay for Sasha’s drinks.

“I’ll get it,” he said quickly. “What do you want?”

He was aware then of a sensation on the right side of his face. Like something was pressing on him.

Lark was staring at him. Her expression was angry, bleak. But when she caught him looking, she quickly arranged her face into something more neutral.

“What do you want?” he asked her.

“I’ll get something myself.” Her smile was brittle. “I see someone over there I need to talk to. I’ll be right back.”

He watched her walk away. Who was she going to see? They both knew everyone in this bar—if she was meeting up with someone, she would have said their name.

Unless she didn't want to say for other reasons.

"Can I get a glass of merlot?"

Sasha's question snapped him out of it. He wasn't here for Lark, he was here for Sasha. He needed to remember that.

"Of course. Anyone else?"

Pippa gave her order, and Bear and Thorne already had beers. Lulu and Javi had disappeared somewhere. Ansel fought his way back to the bartender, put in the order, then leaned against the bar to watch everything around him. And to look for Lark.

He found her by the dance floor, one elbow on a table, half turned toward him so he could see her profile—God, the sight of her neck and all that bare skin was scrambling his brains even from here—and she was laughing at something...

Vince? He did a double take. She was chatting up the lawyer who had represented the Crivellis in the lawsuit against the West Fall ranch? It was practically sleeping with the enemy, especially given how Vince felt about Thorne.

But... but Vince was only doing his job at the time. Maybe for ulterior motives, but now that everything had worked out, maybe he and Lark were connecting. Or reconnecting.

Vince was exactly the kind of guy she'd go for. Lawyer, went to Harvard, even more ambitious than she was. They could talk about... college or something. He wasn't a client, so if she kissed him, she'd never have to say sorry.

"Ansel!" Quinn screamed that in his ear. "I've been calling your name forever. You need your hearing checked."

"Thanks." He handed over his credit card. "Just start a tab."

He grabbed the drinks and went over to the booth they'd snagged. Pippa was on one side with Bear and Sasha on the other. And if that wasn't enough of a hint, Pippa looked significantly between Ansel and Sasha.

Yeah, she was already planning a wedding.

He slid in next to Sasha, determined to have a good time. She was pretty, and she seemed really nice. He couldn't waste this opportunity since he didn't get many. "Here you go. So this is your first time at a cowboy bar?"

She nodded. "Everyone is dancing. Like, really dancing, not just flailing around." She looked up at him. "Can you do that?"

"Dance? Yeah, my mom taught me."

Her eyes went wide. "Oh, that's so sweet."

"My mom taught me too," Bear said.

Pippa cooed at him. Bear said something low in her ear, and Pippa grabbed his hand.

"We're going to dance," she announced. "Ansel, can you tell Sasha about the feedstore?"

He really wasn't sure what to say about the feedstore. Yeah, he spent all day there and it had been his entire life since he'd been eighteen, but... "What do you want to know?"

"Do you really sell chickens there?"

"Yep. The hatchery ships the chicks through the mail. I pick them up at the post office, a big cardboard box filled with cheeping." He started to laugh and Sasha joined in. "I guess when you think about it, it's kind of strange. If you're not used to it."

A silence fell between them. Ansel realized he had no idea what to talk to her about. He was out of practice, sure, but also... there was no spark between them. He should be feeling something more toward her than this polite blandness.

All he wanted was to find Lark. Was she still talking to Vince? What were they talking about?

"What do you do for work?" That was always a safe thing to ask.

Sasha waved that off. "Work sucks. My job is boring. I wish I could work with chickens all day. Do you have any other animals in the store? Like, do you sell goats?"

He tried to imagine a pen of goats in the feedstore or even in the yard. The chaos would be legendary. “No, just chicks.” He tried to think of something else about the feedstore that might interest her. “Oh, I do have a pig. A pet pig.”

“You own a pig?” Sasha was giving him another wide-eyed look. So wide he worried her eyes were going to dry out. “Oh, how cute! I heard they’re like dogs. Or toddlers.”

“Um, they’re not really like either.” He rubbed the back of his neck. The urge to search out Lark was nearly overwhelming at this point. It would be too rude to do that while he was talking with Sasha though. “She’s like... like a pig. Her favorite thing to do is to root around the yard. And sleep. She’s housebroken, so she spends most of her day inside.”

“You can housebreak a pig?”

“Sure. Maybe while you’re up here, you can come meet her.” It would be the perfect opportunity to get to know Sasha better, without the noise and distraction of the bar. But he couldn’t get excited about that. She was nice, so nice, and pretty... and he couldn’t figure out why he wasn’t attracted to her. Even with his feelings for Lark, he ought to instinctively appreciate how pretty Sasha was. “Do you want to dance?”

Maybe that would help, a little bit of physical intimacy. If he held her in his arms, something had to happen. And he wouldn’t have to think of so many things to say.

“I’d love to.” She sounded a little relieved. Maybe she was having trouble coming up with stuff to talk about too.

He took her hand and led her to the dance floor. Trying not to be obvious about it, he searched for Lark.

She was with Pippa and Bear. Her back was to him, her hair a waterfall of soft curls. She lifted a hand, her shoulder shifting and the strap of her tank slipping a touch. Another few inches and it would be off her shoulder entirely.

Ansel’s mouth went dry. At least Vince was nowhere to be found and couldn’t take advantage of that strap.

It occurred to Ansel that Thorne was also gone, but he wasn't worried about him. He was a grown man who could take care of himself. But at least he knew where Lark was.

He tore his attention away from her. "Ready?" he asked Sasha.

"Just remember, I don't know what I'm doing."

Sasha turned out to be a natural though, following his lead easily and even doing a few spins. She started laughing halfway through and didn't stop. He had to smile because it was pretty darn charming.

They fit together well, were having a great time, and Ansel... didn't feel anything beyond friendship. No rush of heat he couldn't suppress, no need to get closer to her and closer still.

The person he did feel all those things for wasn't the woman in his arms, and that was a damn shame. But she was somewhere in this bar...

The music stopped. They slowed, stared at each other. Waited for the other to say it first.

"So." Sasha's smile was apologetic. "You're really nice..."

"But?" He supplied helpfully for her.

"But I think we both know this isn't going anywhere. Pippa..." Her mouth twisted.

"Pippa is Pippa," he said gently. "Trust me, I know. But she'll be happy too if we're just friends."

Sasha laughed. "Pippa was right—you really are a great guy. You're making this too easy for me. And yeah, we should totally be friends. I do want to meet your pig."

"Have Pippa bring you by tomorrow and you can." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash that might be Lark's hair. He didn't let himself turn around.

Sasha's eyes lit up. "You know, I read a lot of romance. A lot. And you and Lark..." She nudged him with her elbow and wagged her eyebrows. "There's like a secret romance there,

isn't there? Is it because of her brothers? You have to keep it secret from them? Or maybe you guys are still circling around each other, not ready to admit how attracted you are to each other? But you are, because you two were not looking at each other so hard I could feel it."

Wow. Ansel blinked at her. He'd thought he was being sly, but apparently she read him easier than a book. Literally. "Um... in those books, let's say someone was at the circling stage, what ought to happen next?"

He needed help here. They both did, him and Lark, because going on like this wasn't healthy. She was upset, he was upset—they needed to clear the air.

"It's too bad your name isn't Bear," she said musingly. "Because then it could be a shifter romance."

That made him choke. "I'm sorry, what? Shifter? Like a... shape-shifter?" He tried to imagine how that was romantic. Or how the sex would work. Every possibility left him even more confused.

"Yes." Sasha nodded decisively. "The hero can shift into animal form. Like a bear." She imitated the heavy, shoulders hunched, rolling walk of a bear. "And he uses that to protect his pack and the heroine. Sometimes she's his fated mate."

"I don't think bears have packs," he said, which was probably the smallest detail to fix on out of all that. "Is there some other romance thing that would work?"

"Uh, cowboy romance," she said as if that should have already occurred to him. "We're in a honky-tonk. The scene practically writes itself."

"So what should happen?"

"Well, the hero"—she pointed to him—"that's you, would ask the heroine to dance. And then after, they'd have a heart-to-heart about how they really felt." She shrugged. "Or they'd just act on their explosive attraction without saying anything. Either way."

They both sounded like good options to him. Although the last time they'd acted on their explosive attraction, it hadn't

ended well. “That’s, uh, that’s good advice.” Who knew so much good stuff was in romance novels? Except for the shifter stuff. He still wasn’t certain about that. But then he’d never shifted into a bear before. Maybe if he could, he’d be into it.

“You should go find her so you can act on it.” She winked at him. “Don’t worry about me—I’ll cover for you.”

He tried to think of the best way to tell her *thanks for letting me abandon you to chase another woman*. In the end he settled for “I hope you find your romance hero someday. Or heroine.”

Her expression fell for a brief moment. “Me too. But go!” She shooed him off. “Get!”

Ansel smothered his laugh. Then he surveyed the entire room, searching for Lark. She wasn’t with Bear and Pippa anymore. There was Vince, but he was alone at the bar, probably ordering another drink. No Lark in sight.

And then he saw her, near the door to the patio, her jaw stiff and her shoulders rigid.

Porter Greene was talking to her. And she looked upset. Son of a—

Ansel started to shoulder his way through the crowd to her.

Lark wouldn’t *need* saving, but he was going to do it anyway.



The trouble was, Lark reflected, Sasha was really nice. Like, perfectly nice. The kind of person who would make Ansel very happy.

She nursed a whiskey as she watched the two of them dance, feeling like the world’s biggest dog in the manger. Although she’d never quite understood that saying. A dog wouldn’t eat hay, so why would it keep a cow away from it?

Clive had said something at work—piss on someone else’s donut. It was gross, but it made more sense. You both wanted

the donut and it was ruined. No one could have it.

Lark held the glass to her forehead. No, that didn't make any more sense. Ansel wasn't a donut, and she wasn't going to pee on him. He and Sasha were laughing together now—they'd be very happy together. Lark would probably be invited to the wedding.

She should find someone to dance with. She always did better with a plan. She wasn't a moper. She was a woman of action.

"Hey, Lork." Porter oozed into her field of view, his posture crooked. He looked drunk as a skunk.

God, she absolutely did not want to deal with this creep right now. Or ever. But definitely not right now.

"Lark," she snapped. "But you already knew that."

He snorted out a laugh. "It's funny. It's a joke."

"No, you're a joke."

For a moment, his expression cleared. "What?"

"You heard me." She wasn't at work, and she wasn't in the mood for his crap. "Go away."

She resisted her instinct to add a *please* to that. It would only be wasted on Porter. And he needed to get out of the way—she could barely see Ansel and Sasha anymore. They'd stopped dancing and were talking and smiling at each other. Something thorny twisted near her heart.

"You're a bitch." Porter's face was curled into a snarl.

Lark took a step back, wanting space between them in case he did something. "Yeah," she said, lifting her chin. "I am. Now get away from me."

Porter's face screwed up in confusion. Clearly her admitting straight out she was a bitch was more than his poor brain could handle. "No, you don't understand." He leaned toward her. His breath stank of cheap beer. "You. Are. A. Bitch."

He stared her down, no doubt waiting for her to dissolve into tears. Or to show fear. That's what he really wanted—to feel bigger, better than her. Hard for him to do when he was swaying like a eucalyptus in a Santa Ana wind.

She put her index finger into his sternum. Just the one finger. And she pushed, gently.

Porter stumbled backward, tripping on his own feet. He was too drunk to sort his limbs out in time and landed on his backside. Hard enough to have several people in earshot wincing with sympathy.

“Oh my God.” Gina Thornbridge gasped. She was already snapping pictures on her phone. Great, now this would be on social media in about two seconds.

Ansel appeared out of the crowd then, looming over Porter with a scowl. His hands were curled into fists, and for a moment, Lark was worried Ansel was going to do something stupid.

“She shoved me.” Porter wailed like a kid who'd had his toys taken away.

Someone in the crowd snorted.

“No, she didn't,” Jackson Harper said. “I saw it all—she barely touched you.”

Someone else laughed at that, others joining in.

Lark almost felt bad for Porter. Except he had called her a bitch. Twice. Still, her heart beat with an anxious rhythm, wondering what he might try next. All she wanted was for him to leave her alone, but now that she'd humiliated him, he might be even worse.

Ansel grabbed a fistful of Porter's shirt and hauled him to his feet. “You're not welcome in my store anymore,” he said with deadly quiet. “I see you in there again or anywhere near Lark, you'll regret it.”

Everyone had gone silent. Lark was horribly aware of the crowd staring at them, watching to see what would happen next. The story of how she'd shoved Porter and how Ansel had

rushed in to save her would be told to everyone in this bar in a matter of minutes. The entire town would know by morning.

Gina probably already had pictures of every single moment. Or even worse, video.

“You don’t have to do that,” she told Ansel. “Give him some time to sober up—”

Ansel gave Porter a shake. “Yes,” he said grimly, “I do.” He pushed Porter toward the door. This time Porter didn’t fall. “Get out. Before Bear and Thorne hear about this. They aren’t as nice as I am.”

Ansel didn’t look anything like *nice* right now. He looked ready to tear something apart with his bare hands. It was kind of even scaring *her*.

And yet it was thrilling too. That he was this worked up over someone being rude to her. That he’d done all this to defend her.

Porter stumbled toward the exit, looking over his shoulder at Ansel the entire time. Lark couldn’t blame him.

Once the door swung shut behind Porter, Ansel turned to her.

She gasped at his expression, his black eyes fathomless. The last time he’d looked at her like that...

His heavy body moving over hers, his weight a delicious anchor. Her fist curled into the small of his back, urging him on.

A dizzying heat washed through her. He couldn’t look at her like that, not here. She was going to lose her mind if he kept doing that.

Ansel held out a hand to her. “Dance with me.”

Her toes curled in her boots. Her mouth went dry. He wasn’t really giving her a choice... or was he? All she had to do was turn away from the temptation of him. It was just that easy. She had a will of iron. She could do anything, even tell him no.

Her hand found his. She wasn't even surprised because it felt so *right*. Like all the pieces of herself, the ones she'd thought were already in place, truly settled where they belonged.

It's only a dance. And he's still off-limits.

Yes. She clung to that inner voice. She couldn't get off-balance here.

Dwight Yoakam started singing low and sad about knowing her like the back of his hand as Ansel pulled her into his arms. He smelled... familiar, she realized. Whatever soap and detergent he used melded with the scent of his skin, and she'd been exposed to it so often she knew it as well as she knew any other. Maybe even better.

He didn't say anything, his mouth still set in a firm line. He was still mad at her then. He must only be dancing with her to help her save face after the incident with Porter.

He felt *sorry* for her, which made her stomach turn.

"You didn't have to do that," she said shortly.

"I know. I saw you were doing just fine on your own." He didn't look at her.

"I didn't push him."

"Oh really? Then how did he end up on his ass?"

"Okay, I... I tapped him." Lark rolled her eyes because really, it had hardly been anything. "Right in the middle of his chest. He was already unsteady, and I just wanted him to get away from me."

"In the middle of his chest?" Ansel set their joined hands over his heart. "Right here?"

She felt the thump of his heart in her fingers, the vibrations moving up her arm. How was his heartbeat that strong?

"Yeah," she said faintly. "He wasn't supposed to fall over."

Finally Ansel looked at her, one corner of his mouth kicking up. The right side. "Don't know your own strength."

She'd bet he did. When he'd hauled Porter to his feet, sent him for the door, he'd applied exactly as much as force as needed. But he could have applied more. A lot more.

That should not turn her on. But it did, imagining all that power in him so carefully leashed. She wet her lips. This was a very bad thing to be thinking about when he was holding her so close.

"You're not really going to ban him from the feed and seed, are you?"

His gaze crackled. "Yes, I am. I see him in there, he's getting tossed out."

Her mouth dropped open. Ansel had never, ever done that to anyone. Even when sometimes customers got angry and caused a scene. "But... but where will he buy feed?"

"I don't know. Probably Tractor Supply." His tone was grim.

She kind of deserved that even though it hurt like pressing on a bruise. "You don't have to do that for me."

He didn't say anything to that. "What were you and Vince talking about?" He tucked her closer to him as they went into a turn. Their thighs brushed, and sensation burned through her.

"What?"

Oh God, she always knew what to say, prided herself on it, and she was babbling. He had an uncanny ability to make her babble. And just with a touch of his thighs.

"We were talking about..." She couldn't really remember right now. "About the house. How it's coming along. The Crivelli house." Vince had really only spoken to her to show there were no hard feelings. Their conversation was brief, polite, and nothing more. Which made Ansel commenting on it that much stranger. "Where's Sasha?"

Her pulse pounded as she waited for his answer. She prayed he couldn't feel it in her hands.

"With Bear and Pippa." He didn't sound too concerned. Although they had been laughing together a lot tonight.

Lark couldn't let it go even though she knew better. "Really? You can go find her—I'm fine. Wouldn't want to disappoint Pippa. She wants you and Sasha to hook up, you know."

He looked down at her, amusement sparking in his eyes. "You can be real catty sometimes."

She stiffened. "Well, I am a bitch."

"No, you're not. You're tough, you're ambitious—Porter is too stupid to tell the difference."

Implying that Ansel could though. *Always beautiful.*

Her lips tingled with the urge to kiss him again. His compliments did that to her, made her urges take over from her better sense. But the last time she'd done that, it had been a disaster.

"We need to stop now," she said woodenly. "This isn't appropriate."

"Because I'm a client?" he said mockingly. "Yeah, that excuse isn't going to work."

Her temper flared. "It's not an excuse."

"It is," he shot back. "You can't disappear like last time, so you need something else to hide behind."

The music had stopped and they had stopped too, although Lark hadn't really been aware of it. He was still holding her.

She pulled herself out of his grip. "I didn't disappear. You did." All those hours waiting by her phone, wanting him to think about her, notice her, while he just went on with his life. "When I came back, you looked right through me."

His jaw tightened. For a moment she thought he was going to argue with her. Then he said, "Do you want to step outside so we can finish this argument?"

She ought to tell him no. That there wasn't anything to say about it, not when she'd exposed herself, her vulnerability, so carelessly. Her lower lip trembled. She'd just admitted that she

wanted him to look at her—what a terrible mistake. Now was the time to run, as far and fast as she could.

“Lark.” He rubbed a thumb over her cheekbone, the way he’d wipe away a child’s tears.

But she wasn’t crying. And it was the pity in his tone that decided for her.

He wanted an argument? She’d give him one, and it’d be much safer than giving him her deepest, darkest secrets.

She grabbed his hand and dragged him outside.



“Let’s get some things straight.”

Lark rounded on Ansel as soon as they were out on the patio and out of earshot of everyone. The noise and music helped. The parking lot was bright from the lights, the night sky with its stars seeming to be far away. With the sounds from the bar, it didn’t really feel like night but some strange, in-between time.

She wanted to be on the offense here, to never give him another chance to feel sorry for her. The best way to do that was to come out swinging.

He crossed his arms. “We slept together. You never called after. Then you kissed me and apologized for it. What am I missing?”

Her cheeks heated. Okay, that didn’t sound great. “Oh, how about how rude and angry you were with me because I didn’t apologize properly for that?” She threw up her hands. “I don’t know what you want from me. I said I was sorry. Do I need to say it some particular way to appease you?”

“I’m not mad about the kiss.” He shook his head. “You know, for someone so smart, you can be real thick.”

That was... “That is the rudest thing you’ve ever said to me.” She stabbed a finger toward him. “And you’ve been really, really rude to me lately.”

“You’re using me to get a promotion.” He sounded incredibly angry about that. Like, actually furious.

“And you’re getting something out of that too!” The kind of free advertising she was giving him, most stores would kill for. He could at least be a tiny bit grateful for it.

“Wait.” His hand slashed through the air. “We’re not going to talk about your job or my store here. And nothing about being a client. This is just about *us*.”

Her pulse went thready. There was no *us*. Except of course for all those things he’d listed. Oh God, he was going to bring up her awful confession, she just knew. Why had she said that?

“I didn’t mean to look through you,” he said, softer now. “I just... We had that one amazing night together. I thought... But then you never reached out. So I didn’t know how to look at you. Or if you even wanted me to.”

She wanted to clap her hands over her ears, it hurt so much to hear. He’d wanted her to call him? He’d thought their night together was amazing? “*You* never reached out. Not once.”

“I didn’t think you wanted me to.”

She pinned him with a glare. “I went skinny-dipping with you! How could you think that?” Could she have screamed her intentions any louder?

“Easily.” He glared right back. “You’ve never hesitated to go after what you want. Not even once. So what was I supposed to think when you didn’t call, didn’t text, not even an email?” When she said nothing, he grimaced. “Yeah, I got the message real quick.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. Her emotions felt battered, too tender for even her to look at. Was it wrong that just that once, she’d wanted him to want her enough to come after her? She always had to be in charge, to arrange everything and... and she kind of wanted him to do it that once. To be so head over heels for her he’d call the next morning. And that night. And all the rest of the days after that.

But he couldn’t read her mind. And that wasn’t what had happened. He’d hung back for whatever reason. If he’d reached out then... but he hadn’t. Things were different

between them now, and while he said this wasn't about her job, she couldn't just forget it.

If she slept with him now, she could be fired. And she could forget about the promotion. She wanted him. But she wanted the VP position too. That didn't make her a bad person to want both.

But she couldn't have both. There were always choices to make. She'd always made the ones that got her further ahead in her career. All those choices had been easy to make.

Until now. Until him.

She looked him up and down, the length and bulk of him she remembered so well, even after only one night. The curve of his smile. The way his eyes could be so kind even when they were laughing. How dark and devouring they could be when he looked at her.

Yes, she wanted him. Admitting it finally was both relief and agony. Because even if they did start something, it would have to be a secret. She tried to imagine suggesting that to him, and her stomach cramped. He would hate it and it would be an awful thing to do to him. He was too kind, too open for that. She was ashamed of herself for even thinking about it.

"That wasn't what I meant to say." Finally she forced herself to speak. "You were... you were this older guy, already running a business. You had a whole adult life up here, everything figured out. And I was still finding myself. I thought if you were serious, you'd reach out. And when you didn't..." She bit her lip, hard. "I thought you'd completely forgotten about it."

"I didn't." He spoke that like a vow. "I couldn't."

A heated thrill ran through her, and then she recalled how he'd reacted when she'd seen him next. Cool, unconcerned. It had hurt.

"You didn't say anything when we met again." Her throat was closing up as she remembered, but she forced herself to talk past it. "So I figured it wasn't anything to you."

“You didn’t say anything either.” His voice was soft, but his expression wasn’t. “And then you kissed me a few days ago and said it was all a mistake.”

His angry reaction made sense now. He wasn’t angry that she’d kissed him—he was mad that she regretted it.

Did she still regret it though? Now that she knew how he really felt?

She didn’t know. And that frightened her, to not know herself.

“I don’t know if it was a mistake,” she said rawly.

His face went bleak. “Jesus, Lark. I’m not a toy you can pick up and put down whenever you want. When you want to kiss me, when you want my help with a promotion...” A muscle worked in his jaw.

“I never...” She started to protest that as being unfair... but she kind of had, hadn’t she? At least the second time, when they’d kissed at the fair. “I don’t think you’re a toy. I’ll never stop wishing I’d called you after that night.” She raised her chin because she wasn’t the only one at fault here. “Or that you’d called me. We both could have done something.”

“Fair enough,” he allowed. “So now you know I want you.”

The world tipped when he said that. Just three little words to make her dizzy with need. She fought to breathe past her response.

“So what do you want?” he asked. “Now that we’ve made all these deep, dark confessions to each other.”

You.

That rose out of pure instinct in her thoughts. But her better sense shoved it back down. She couldn’t just reach out and take him. It would jeopardize her job, and she’d worked too damn hard for that.

There had to be some way she could make it work though. That was her specialty, making plans. “We could—”

He shook his head and stepped away. “I know you. Don’t make any decisions now, because you don’t do quick decisions. Take this weekend to think about it, about what you want.” His mouth crooked. The left side this time. “Maybe even make a PowerPoint.”

He was right, damn him. If she blurted out something tonight, she’d always regret it. She’d always wonder *what if?* It was just how she was built. She didn’t do spontaneous. Might actually be allergic to it. “What about you? What do you want?”

His smile spread over his entire mouth. She could only blink at the sight.

“What do I want?” he drawled. “Oh, I already know that. The same thing I’ve wanted since you asked me to go skinny-dipping with you.” He tipped his hat to her and started walking away. “See you Monday.”



Lark left the Stampede without saying goodbye to anyone. Once Ansel was gone, she realized there was no one else there she wanted to talk to.

She raced home, her brain whirring. All this time Ansel had wanted her. That night hadn’t been forgettable to him. And she’d never once suspected.

It made her worry about her own instincts. How had she gotten it all so wrong? Probably because her emotions about the situation were incredibly tangled. It wasn’t that Lark was cold and unemotional—rather the opposite. She felt things so deeply it was hard for her to handle it sometimes.

Which was why she’d taken her feelings for Ansel, her *real* feelings, and buried them so deep she couldn’t even remember where she’d put them. Until he’d told her she was always beautiful and they burst free.

As soon as she opened her front door, Bozeman jumped up on her, frantic to say hello. She cuddled him close because

she'd missed him too. It was hard to be apart from him even for a few hours.

"I'm in deep trouble," she told him. "I've been so blind about Ansel. But now that I know, I have no idea what to do."

Bozeman very helpfully licked her face. It didn't make deciding what to do any easier, but it did make her feel better.

"Thanks, buddy," she whispered to him.

As she walked to her bedroom, she wondered what Ansel was doing right now. Was he lying in bed, thinking of her?

Did he wear pajamas in bed? Or nothing at all?

That thought brought her to a standstill, her hand braced on the doorframe. Oh, she really, really hoped it was nothing at all.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror. The moonlight fell across her face, painting her in shades of silvery gray. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted. Maybe it was the moonlight, but she looked like she was glowing. Inside and out.

Lark licked her lips. In the mirror, the movement was slow, sensual. Like someone was watching her and she wanted him to know how turned on she was. She could see her pulse fluttering in her throat. Her fingers found it, caressed it.

She'd kissed Ansel there that first time. Licked him really. She could still easily remember the taste of him.

The woman in the mirror looked like she knew what she wanted. She was hungry for it, her hand curled around her throat and her mouth tasting him.

Lark let her hand fall. Again she had that strange sense the mirror wasn't showing her what was real. She certainly didn't feel like the woman she saw there, as determined and decided as she was. Lark felt only uncertain. Off-balance.

She had no idea what to do.

Bozeman came trotting in then. Immediately he started barking at the mirror, bouncing on stiff legs.

Lark's heart beat with a queasy rhythm. "We should get rid of this thing. I don't like it either."

But that's you, a voice deep inside her said. *Are you afraid of yourself?*

"I'm not afraid," she said loudly. Bozeman kept barking. She shushed him before he woke up the neighbors.

With quick steps, she marched to the bathroom and opened the linen closet, searching for what she needed.

When she found the sheet, she snapped it up and over the mirror. It settled over the mirror with a sigh.

Satisfied, Lark got ready for bed and climbed in with a clear head. It was her mirror, and she could do whatever she wanted with it. After all, it was only a mirror.

But when she slept, she dreamed of her and Ansel entwined, naked. Except it wasn't *her*—it was her from the mirror. The woman who knew exactly what she wanted and wasn't afraid to go after it.

9



Ansel had told Lark she needed time to come to a decision, but the truth was, he needed some time too.

Time to think about what had happened between them, how he could have done things differently, and what he was going to do differently this time. Assuming she said yes.

He didn't have any good answers yet though.

So when he saw her the next day, he wasn't ready.

He was out at his cousins' place, helping to set up a goat playground. The head doe, Hecate, watched them with a jaundiced eye, clearly unimpressed with the fort, slide, and teeter-totter going up. She was a hard one to please.

Artemis and Athena were right there next to him, trying to eat his pants, his tools, and the scrap wood lying around. He was more entertaining to them than the playground he was trying to build.

"Shoo," Allie said. "Come on, guys. Let Ansel work."

The goats ignored her.

"It's okay," Ansel said as he pulled his power drill out of Artemis's mouth.

"They're just so curious." Allie led both the goats away, then dropped a kiss on Athena's head. "And they don't listen at all."

Allie looked better than she had in a long time. Her expression was happy, her eyes were bright, and she'd wound a pretty scarf through her curls instead of wearing her usual

ponytail. After she'd lost her job, she'd seemed to be in a downward spiral. She'd lived on her wealthy employers' compound, and when they'd gotten in trouble with the IRS, Allie had lost her job and her home.

So she'd come up to Cabrillo to join her sisters. Allie had looked hollowed out those first few weeks, hardly speaking a word to anyone. They'd all been worried about her.

Maybe things were starting to improve for her. Ansel suspected she'd still have her bad days—recovering from something like she'd suffered wasn't a steady, forward-only thing—but maybe she'd have more good days than bad ones from now on.

“You've really taken to them.” He gestured to the goats with his hammer. “I think they were lonely without Esme.”

“I love them,” Allie admitted as she stroked Artemis's neck. “Even this one.” She reached over and scratched Hecate's poll. Hecate accepted the affection with a sigh.

“She likes you. I've never seen Hecate let anyone pet her.”

“That was a scratch,” Allie said. “Hecate will let you scratch her. She doesn't want to be petted though.”

Ansel reached over to scratch Hecate behind the ears. Hecate pulled her head out of reach, then got up to walk over to the other side of the pen.

“I think it's just you she likes,” Ansel said.

Allie shrugged. “We let people have all different kinds of moods and be grouchy or touchy. Why not goats?”

“Fair enough.” He picked up the slide, which had been modified with footholds along its length, the better for the goats to climb up. “We missed you last night. Thorne thought we'd left you abandoned all alone at home.”

Heat climbed up his neck as he remembered what else had happened last night. God, but he'd been an idiot not to call Lark right after their night together. He'd held back from her for too long, waiting for a sign. Maybe he'd waited too long.

If it came to him versus her job, he really didn't like his chances no matter what he'd said last night.

"Thorne?" Allie lifted her head and grimaced. "Why would he care? Why would he even go out? He's allergic to fun."

"He's broody, that's for sure. You don't like him?"

If she didn't, she'd be no different than the rest of the town. Except after her spiel about letting goats and people have their moods, he was a bit surprised.

"He doesn't like me," she said vehemently. "Every time he sees me, he looks like he ate something poisonous. And that's when he actually looks at me, which most of the time he doesn't. It's like I'm... I'm... Like I've been awful to him when he's the one who's been awful to me."

That was more spirit than she'd shown in... ever. Huh. Maybe hating Thorne was helping to get her out of her funk.

"Don't take it personal." Ansel screwed in the top of the slide, the drill screaming in his hand. "Thorne is that way with everyone," he yelled over the noise.

Allie didn't say anything, just kept stroking Athena's neck.

Pippa appeared from behind the chicken coop then. She squealed with delight when she saw the goat playground. "Oh my goodness, it's amazing! Thank you so much for doing this."

"No problem." He grabbed hold of the slide and tried to shake it. But it was solid. "I'm happy to help."

"Are you going to the feedstore after this?"

He shook his head. "Already went in."

Allie squinted up at him. "When's the last time you took a day off?"

He didn't want to answer that, partly because he didn't know and because even if he did know, it would be such a long time it would shock even him. "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life," he said lightly.

Both Pippa and Allie exchanged looks. Probably because their last jobs had been awful.

“Allie,” Pippa said, “your timer is going off.”

“Oh!” Allie shot up. “My cheese.”

She took off toward the trailer in a run.

“She’s making cheese?” Ansel asked. “In that little kitchen?”

Pippa nodded. “Her first batch was actually pretty good. She’s gotten really into it. And now that Lulu’s moving out, Allie will have her own space.”

Ansel started to gather up his tools. “She looks and sounds better. Not cured,” he added, “but like she’s stopped sliding further and further down.”

“I just hope she’s turned a corner,” Pippa said, “and this is the start of something better for her. It was bad.” Her voice splintered before she got it back under control. “We were so, so worried. Still are.”

Ansel put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “You guys are taking good care of her. Sometimes a person just needs time and love to work through things.”

Pippa pulled in a shaky breath. “God, I hope so.” She ran her hands over her cheeks, wiping away her sad expression. “I’m really glad you came out last night. But where did you disappear to? Sasha said you had something to take care of. What did you think of her? Isn’t she nice?”

Ansel hesitated, trying to think up a plausible answer. “Yeah, she’s very nice. But it’s not going to work between us.”

Pippa’s face fell. “That’s what Sasha said. I’d hoped you guys might hit it off. That’s disappointing.” She brightened. “Sasha’s still here. We can come over to your place tonight and maybe then...”

What was he supposed to say to that? *I’ve actually got it bad for Lark and have for a long time.* “She did want to meet Porkina.”

“See?” Pippa pounced on that as if it proved they were meant to be together. “We’ll come over tonight then. I’ll bring the food. Sasha will be so excited.”

Apparently Sasha had kept her promise not to say anything about Lark and him. But that meant Pippa still had hopes for him and Sasha.

It was nice having family around again, but this was one part he could have done without.

“Oh,” Pippa called over her shoulder as she walked back to the RV, “Lark was here just a few minutes ago. I told her she should come say hi to you. I guess she left though.”

His stomach went for his feet even as his heart jumped into his throat. He’d seen Lark pretty much every week for years now, but he felt like a high school kid seeing his crush after a long summer break.

Lark had been here. He could’ve seen her if he’d been lucky enough.

He made himself finish picking up his tools. Then he walked back to his truck with a steady gait. No sign of Lark. He didn’t let himself be disappointed she hadn’t come to say hi. After all, he’d told her to leave him alone until Monday. He’d practically given her an ultimatum.

When he went back for the scrap wood, he nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw her by the goat pen. Her back was to him, her long hair spilling down. His hand itched to touch it, to wrap that silken length around his fist as he pulled her in for a kiss.

There was no tank top today. Instead, she was in a T-shirt with the Fall West logo on it. When she wasn’t representing Prime One, she was representing the ranch. She never took a day off either.

Look at the two of them, workaholics together. At least Lark wouldn’t complain he spent too much time at the feedstore. Assuming she was thinking of accepting his offer.

“The new part looks impressive.” She turned to face him. Her eyes were the kind of warm brown that made him think of

long autumn afternoons. “I came to check on their chickens.”

“Thanks.” His throat was dry. “How are the hens?”

“Better. I made an informational packet about chicken health to give to Pippa.” She looked a touch embarrassed by the admission. “I’d put together one for the 4-H poultry project way back when. I added a few new things.”

“Good. That’ll help them. They mean well, you know.” His heart wouldn’t calm down no matter how many times he told it to. She was just too close. And he knew now that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

She shrugged. “Lots of people mean well. But the important part is that the hens will be okay.”

“Thank you for coming over yesterday to help.”

“No problem.”

The conversation felt both surreal and completely natural. Like one they’d had a million times before. Except this time he was vitally aware of her, and from the way her gaze roamed over him, she was just as aware of him. The way her chest rose and fell, the tiny movements of her fingers on her thighs, the stir of her hair in the breeze—it was so vivid it almost hurt him to notice.

“Why didn’t you ever become a vet?” he asked. It was something he’d wondered about her for a while. “You’re good at this. And you’ve got the brains for vet school.”

She grabbed her lower lip between her teeth. “You can’t tell my brothers.”

That caught his interest. Something her brothers wouldn’t know?

But he, Ansel, would. She trusted him enough to tell him. “I would never say anything.”

She tossed him an amused glance. “I know you wouldn’t. It’s just that, well, sick animals? I can’t stand it. I can doctor them if I have to, but when they’re hurt—I couldn’t be around that all the time. It’s too much for me. That’s part of why I

don't live on the ranch. Not that we have a ton of sick animals, but..."

"But it happens," Ansel supplied. "And you want to avoid it if you can."

"If I was out there all the time, I'd feel like I'd have to go help all the time. With every animal." She wrapped her arms around herself. "It would wear me down too fast. So there. That's why. My stomach's too weak for it."

He knew she was vulnerable, but he'd never had any idea just how vulnerable she could truly be. He'd seen her a few times with animals that were sick or hurt, and he never would have guessed it tore her up inside.

"It's not weak," he said quietly. "You really ought to be nicer to yourself."

She laughed humorlessly, her arms tightening around her torso. "Didn't you hear though? I'm a bitch."

His jaw tightened. "You're not. Porter was being an ass last night."

"It wasn't even that part that upset me the most." She angrily dashed her hand over her eyes. "It's that he called me Lork. Rhymes with dork," she said bitterly.

"Wait," Ansel said slowly, "he's still calling you that?"

She nodded. "It's a stupid high school thing, and I'm still getting upset about it. So dumb." She rubbed her eyes again.

"Oh, Lark." Ansel put an arm over her shoulders. Seeing her like this was like someone tearing out his guts, then stomping on them in clogging shoes. He'd never seen her cry before. He'd say he never wanted to see it again, but also, she trusted him enough now to let him see her like this. She'd never done that before. "He's an asshole. Always was."

Okay, now it was settled—Ansel was going to have to go to jail over what he was planning to do to Porter Greene. But it would be worth it.

Lark turned her face into his chest. Ansel put his other arm around her, enfolding her in his body. His heart kicked at her

nearness and how upset she was.

“I shouldn’t let it bother me.” Her voice was muffled by his chest.

“Of course you should.” He ran his hand up and down her back. “He was a jerk to you. It’s not weak to be hurt by that.” He swallowed hard. “But I won’t tell anyone. You can let it all out with me.”

“I know.” Her voice was steadier now. “I know. Thank you for tossing him out.”

“You didn’t need saving.” His hand made slow circles in the small of her back. God, but she felt good pressed against him. Even though she was upset. “But I wanted to try anyway.”

She turned her head so that her cheek rested on his chest. Her hair was caught in the stubble on his chin. “You’re a really good hugger.” She said it with supreme satisfaction.

He smiled because it was one of the nicer compliments he’d ever gotten. “Thanks. I’ve gotten a lot of practice now that Pippa’s here.”

“She gets to hug you whenever she wants.” Lark actually sounded jealous.

Ansel was tempted to tell her *she* could hug him whenever she wanted, but they both knew that wasn’t something that could happen. Not when he was a *client*.

He forced his jaw to relax. No point dwelling on that right now. Not when he could savor the feeling of Lark in his arms again.

She tipped her face up to his. Her hands slid up his chest. He gritted his teeth, because the feeling of her palms gliding over him... She had to feel how that affected him. He couldn’t hide it if he tried.

She gripped his shoulders, her lips parting. Bare inches separated their mouths.

“Do you want my answer now?” she asked breathlessly.

His hands found her hips, gripped her hard. God, yes. Yes, he wanted her answer, because when she asked liked that, it had to be yes.

Except... She was fragile, a rare state for Lark to be in. She'd been fragile last night too. And if she made a decision in this state...

He forced his hands to open although he didn't quite let her go. "I meant it. You need time to think about it. All weekend."

There had better be a reward waiting for him in heaven, because this was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

"I dreamed about you last night."

He groaned because that was the worst thing she could have said. "Lark, I'm trying to be a gentleman here." He could imagine her dreams though. They probably matched his.

"I know." Her hips rolled into his. "I know how hard that is for you."

Oh, she'd done that on purpose. Everything in him turned into coiled need. He exhaled heavily. "I'm going to let you go now."

"Would you kiss me first?" She asked it openly, simply. Just laid it out there between them. "No regrets. No commitments. Just a kiss."

His head lowered before he caught himself. "My cousins might come out." It was a weak protest, and they both knew it.

"I asked a simple question."

But it wasn't simple at all. Nothing about her or his feelings for her was.

He couldn't resist that one little request though. Just a kiss. "Yes," he breathed.

When their mouths met, it was infinitely slow. *Look how slow a kiss can be. No need to rush. It's only a kiss.*

But it was also more, a hook burrowing into his heart and snagging deep. It wasn't coming out after this, not without

killing him.

She licked into his mouth almost lazily. *I can go slow too.*

He caught her lower lip between his, sucked on it gently. “So sweet.”

She pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth in response. His entire body lit up. “I’m going to figure out your smiles,” she said against his mouth.

“My smiles?”

Lark pulled back and set her finger right where his cheek met his mouth. “You only ever smile on one side of your mouth. Sometimes the right.” Her finger trailed over his smile line. “Sometimes the left.” She repeated it on the other side. “I can’t figure out what it means.”

He didn’t think it meant anything. He hadn’t even known he did that.

And yet she’d figured it out. His breath rattled in his chest. He’d thought she hadn’t even noticed him for all those years. But she’d been working out his *smiles*.

“There’s no meaning.” But he wasn’t certain about that.

She rolled up on her toes and kissed the spot she’d touched. Out of everything she’d done, that hit him hardest, driving the breath from his lungs.

“Yes, there is.” She sounded very certain. “And I’ll figure it out. See you Monday.”

He couldn’t find anything to say, not after what she’d just said and done. If she was thinking about his smiles, there was hope. If she could kiss him like that, soft and sweet, there was more than hope.

She left him standing there then, his thoughts and emotions a complete muddle while three goats bawled behind him.

10



“So,” Lark said, bringing her presentation to a close, “that’s our vision for the new ad campaign. Any questions?”

It was *her* vision really, but she didn’t need to tell Clive that. She clicked out of the slide show and waited for Clive’s comments. Deep in her temples, a drumbeat of faint pain throbbed. She didn’t let it show on her face. This was possibly the worst Monday ever.

She’d woken up feeling off, but today was too important for her to call in sick. Not that she was anywhere near sick enough for that. But she was giving Clive the final details of the ad campaign here in his office, and shooting started later today at the feedstore.

She also had to give Ansel his answer. She still wasn’t sure what it would be.

Yes was what she wanted to say. *Yes* and *yes* and *yes* again. It wasn’t even the kiss that made her want to say that, as hot as it had been—it was the hug.

Crying was not something she did, at least not in front of other people. And Ansel had just pulled her right into his arms and let her cry it all out. It had been the tenderest thing anyone had done for her in forever.

But tenderness wasn’t everything. And neither were incredibly hot kisses. Scorchingly hot kisses actually. There was also her career, which was at a very delicate crossroads.

Luckily she had a plan to very vaguely feel Clive out about the situation and see if she could have both Ansel and the promotion without risking her job. After all, she had a stake in the Fall West, which was technically a conflict of interest.

Although she did have to be very careful about not letting any part of the Fall West business into her work at Prime One. And with the tainted-feed scandal, things had been strained around here, with employees being more careful about what they did and said. Her family ranch hadn't come up in conversations, but Lark had been especially careful not to let it.

Clive would know for sure though. She'd talk to him, get a clear answer.

Ansel had been right—she'd needed time to think about it, to come up with a strategy to figure out what to do. If she'd answered him right then, it would have been *yes*. An enthusiastic yes.

But she would have regretted it today. She didn't do spur-of-the-moment decisions.

"Very nice," Clive said, leaning back in his chair with satisfaction. His office was filled with memorabilia of his decades at the company. Young Clive smiling at the opening of a mill. Middle-aged Clive shaking hands with the president of the company. Older Clive presenting a scholarship check to a smiling high schooler. "It hits that trust theme we'll need for this year. After the feed thing..."

She nodded. "This will erase that completely from our customers' minds."

"I hope so." He gave her a sharp look. "And how's the rest of your portfolio coming along?"

Lark pulled it up and ran through it with him, jotting down the notes he gave her. She knew none of the other candidates were getting this kind of advice, which maybe made this... a touch unethical. But then Clive wouldn't be doing it if it crossed a line. After all, they both knew she was the best person for the job.

Speaking of crossing lines... She cleared her throat while Clive was in the middle of looking through her contributions to last year's marketing plan.

"What?" He stared up at her from under his thick brows. "What's on your mind? Something's bothering you."

"I have a hypothetical situation here."

He snorted. "Which means it's really happening, but you don't want to give details. Go on."

That was true, but she wasn't going to admit it. "What would happen if there was a relationship between one of our marketing reps and... a client?"

She'd practiced saying that over and over in the big mirror until she could say it naturally. But with a hint of concern. Not for herself but for the hypothetical employee. The mirror hadn't done anything wonky while she'd practiced either.

Clive sat back, his mouth flat. "That's a problem. We don't need any more scandals right now. Who is it?"

Her heart was sinking so fast Lark worried it might fall out of her feet. Clive sounded pretty firm there. This wasn't quite how she'd imagined this would go. "It's hypothetical."

Clive wasn't fooled. "You need to tell me who it is. I understand you want to protect them, but it's not something that can go on."

Lark swallowed hard. "I can't. But it's not... developed."

Developing possibly, but not developed. Kisses didn't count as developed. And that night by the creek didn't count either.

His eyebrows shot up. "It's developed enough for you to know about it. If you don't want to give me their name, at least tell them this needs to end. Prime One is a respectable company. Our representatives need to be above reproach." He steepled his fingers. "This person could lose their job."

Her mouth was bone dry, her pulse drumming in her ears. Okay, that was pretty explicit. She definitely had her answer.

Except it wasn't the one she wanted. And definitely not the one she expected—lose her *job*? That was scaring her. And in fact, it was kind of breaking her heart.

“I'll let them know,” she managed to get out. “I don't think they realize.” Except this was supposed to be all hypothetical, and she'd just admitted that it wasn't. “I mean, if this situation ever comes up. I'll let the employee know it's wrong if it happens.”

“Good. We want to run a tight ship here.”

But did they? Clive was giving her all this help with her presentation. She already had an interest in the Fall West, which was a client. Maybe not her client but the company still took money from them.

She and Ansel were the line but not the rest of that?

She shook herself. Okay, maybe she didn't quite understand, but Clive wasn't lying to her. If he said it was a problem, it was a problem. Simple as.

“And it's good you're thinking of these things already,” he went on. “This is the kind of stuff you'll need to manage when you get to this chair.”

Right. She would have to stop people from banging clients, not start doing it herself. Right.

“Is there anything else I should change in my presentation?” That didn't come as brisk as she wanted, but Clive didn't seem to notice.

Lark dutifully took notes as he went through the rest of her slides, but inside, her emotions churned. She felt confused, conflicted, and more than a touch angry. She wanted Ansel and she wanted this job. All right, maybe she had skirted a few lines herself with him—telling him about Tractor Supply, doing the ad campaign—but none of them seemed so bad.

Being with him couldn't be that wrong. Could it?

But it didn't matter what she thought or how hurt she was. Clive had said it wouldn't work, so the issue was dead. Dead and done.

She had the answer she needed to give to Ansel. But she didn't want to do it.



Lark watched as the production team tried to crowd into Ansel's office. They were supposed to be doing a background interview—they'd use the clips of him telling the story of the feedstore to cut between soft-focus scenes of him helping customers—but there wasn't much space for the equipment. Or people.

He'd cleaned up the place a little bit. All the handwritten notes from his dad were gone off the walls along with some of the family pictures. What was left was a calendar and some old pictures of the feedstore. The calendar was from the feed and seed—this year's theme was baby farm animals. Every year's theme was baby farm animals. Lark wondered who had started that—Herb or Ethel—and if Ansel had ever considered changing it or was happy with how things were. Judging by how the office had been before, Lark guessed he was happy with how things were. Didn't want to change anything.

She found she missed all that stuff, although she could see why it had to go. At least for the filming.

Ansel shifted in his chair, already looking uncomfortable. And really attractive. He'd combed his hair, although a few strands fell over his forehead. His sage-green button-down shirt made his eyes and hair look that much darker.

It was hard to look at him, knowing what her answer had to be. When they'd greeted each other this afternoon, it had been impersonal. Appropriate since the production crew was watching them. But deep in Ansel's black eyes, heat had flared.

Every inch of Lark had tightened at the sight. But she'd put that away, focused on her job.

Or at least she'd tried. Her new awareness of Ansel was like some phantom thread brushing against her skin. Every

time she moved, she felt him, but there was nothing to brush off, no string to catch and pull free.

“Did you want to ask the questions,” Dale, the head of the team, asked her, “or should I?”

Sitting across from Ansel and asking him to tell stories about growing up was probably a recipe for disaster. “I can do it.” She pulled the list of questions from Dale’s hands.

She settled herself into a chair, crossed her legs, and pretended to read over the questions. Pretended, because she knew Ansel was watching her and she couldn’t concentrate. She’d won platinum at the state 4-H presentation day four years in a row for goodness’ sake—she could do this without getting flustered.

“Are we ready?” she asked the room in general. When she got a chorus of yeses, she finally turned to Ansel.

He was smiling at her, a small one, on the right side. His expression was way too fond—people were going to suspect.

It was the kind of expression she wished he would have given her after their night by the creek. But it was too late for it now. Way, way too late. And dangerous.

“So.” She rapped the papers in her hand on the edge of the desk even though they were already nice and tidy. “Could you tell us about the first feedstore? And how your dad bought it?”

“Well, my parents bought it. Mom and Dad together.”

That made Lark’s heart squeeze, that he remembered to include his mom. “That’s right. Ethel helped me pick out my first laying hens.”

This time the left side of his mouth kicked up. “She liked doing that. I think the chicks were her favorite.” He reached up like he was going to tip his cap off, then seemed to remember he wasn’t wearing one. “She was always so happy when people came back and told her how her hens were doing.”

“I realized the other day that I’ve gotten all my laying hens from you. Even the ones I have now.” She tilted her head. “Although I can pick them out myself now.”

“I’m still happy to help. Not that you need it.”

The moment pulsed between them. Then Dale cut through it by saying, “We should get some shots of the chickens.”

Lark wondered if using her chickens was okay or if that skirted an ethical line.

“What about Owen Warner’s chickens?” Ansel suggested. “He’s got them real tame. And they’re pretty.”

“Is that his picture on the wall out there?” Dale asked.

She and Ansel nodded in unison. “That’s his show chicken,” Ansel explained. “But he’s got some layers—from here—that are just as cute.”

Dale’s eyes twinkled. “I saw a bunch of pictures of Lark up on that wall too.”

For a moment Lark puffed up with pride. Then she stiffened, waiting for the joke. Waiting for Dale to take her down a peg. With humor of course. But still.

Instead, Ansel spoke up. “Yeah, Lark was a champion. President of the 4-H.” His smile was warm, pleased. Like he was as proud of her as she was of herself. “I never could beat her. No one could. Because she worked harder and better than everyone else.”

It was true. She’d been the one to put in all those hours, so of course she knew. But hearing Ansel say it in that tone...

“Sounds about right,” Dale said. “She’s still like that at work.”

Ansel’s expression flickered. He must have not wanted to hear he was competing with something she was devoted to like that.

“So,” Dale went on, “you two grew up together then?”

“I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know Lark.”

A shudder ran through her. He made it sound like she was... necessary to him or something.

And she was going to tell him no, that her job came before him.

The room seemed to swirl around her, the floor dipping up sickeningly. Suddenly she wanted to be home, cuddling with Bozeman, crying her eyes out because Ansel could possibly be the best thing that would ever happen to her... but she couldn't throw away her career. There was no having her cake and eating it too.

And then a burst of heat flashed over her like she'd opened an oven door. The AC was running, but sweat trickled down her back.

"You okay?" Ansel was getting up out of his chair. He looked ready to run her to the ER.

She put the back of her hand to her cheek. Ooh, that was warm. Was she blushing? "I'm fine," she said automatically.

"If you're sure." Ansel wasn't sitting back down.

The rest of the room looked at him in confusion. Apparently she didn't appear as close to death as Ansel thought. But she didn't exactly feel okay.

"I am." She sat up straighter, which didn't help. "Let's continue." She looked down at her notes, trying to remember where they'd been.

"You were telling us about how your parents bought this place." Dale cut in when she didn't say anything.

"They built this particular place." Ansel rapped his knuckles on the desk. His dad used to do the same thing, Lark remembered. Or the sales counter once someone's order was rung up. "The original store was built in the 1890s. They bought it but had to tear it down—it wasn't safe any longer. Then they built this."

He looked around the office, but Lark could tell he was thinking about the entire feedstore.

"I've tried to keep it like they wanted," he said, "but things change too."

"Like the wagon out front," Lark said.

“I tried so hard to save that.” Ansel shook his head. “But I just couldn’t in the end. I hated getting rid of it.”

“The wagon?” Dale asked.

“We had an old horse-drawn wagon out front,” Ansel said. “Sort of our trademark.”

“They had Santa come in for Christmas pictures each year,” Lark said. “We’ve got ones with me and my brothers going back years.”

“Oh, we’ll need some of those pictures.” Dale scribbled down a note. “Do you often do things like that for the community?”

“We just did an awards ceremony at the fair. A chance for everyone in town to show off what they’d won. But that was mostly Lark.”

“No, it wasn’t.” She said it automatically. Heat was crawling up her neck, but goose bumps were breaking out all over her arms. What was going on?

Dale looked between them. “I’m sure it was both of you. You both have deep roots in the community, don’t you? Tell me about that.”

That got them talking about going to high school together, being in 4-H, and working together once Lark was at Prime One. Then they got started on planning the event at the fair, figuring out tricky feed issues for customers, and seeing everyone in town almost once a week, asking about their animals, telling them about theirs. Ansel told some cute stories about Porkina, and Lark had to add some stories about Bozeman just so he didn’t hog the limelight. After all, Bozeman had survived an actual coyote attack. Although Porkina’s story about being surrendered was pretty sad. They’d both landed in safe, loving homes though.

It was when she and Ansel were both laughing about Jackson Harper’s dairy cow, which had somehow learned how to open the gate and always ended up right at their back door, that Lark realized she wasn’t running the show anymore. At some point Dale had taken over the interview—and she and

Ansel were being questioned together, her answering almost as many times as he was. She ought to wrestle this back—it was about Ansel, not her, and they weren't a team, this wasn't *their* feedstore—but she felt like she was swimming in a too-hot pool, her thoughts muddy and faint. Even as she laughed over Ansel's description of the cow licking at the back door window like it was trying to knock on the door.

Except there was someone knocking at the office door. Or not. Lark felt like she was moving in slow motion as she turned. But everyone else was looking too, so she must not have imagined it. It felt unreal though.

Pippa was standing in the doorway, her fist on the frame. So someone had knocked. Everything still felt kind of dreamy though.

Lark swallowed down that feeling. She was fine. She was fine.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Pippa said. “But Sayer's here about the protein tubs.”

Ansel rose. “This here is my cousin,” he said to everyone else. “Since you're interested in the family aspect.”

Lark kept her mouth shut about the fact that Pippa wasn't really his cousin, wasn't even that close of a relative, because everyone else was oohing and aahing.

“Wow, that's so cool,” Dale said. “We definitely have to work that in. And isn't Sayer your brother?”

Lark only nodded because the room was spinning again.

“I need to go deal with this,” Ansel said. “Excuse me.”

“Can we film it?” Dale asked. “This would be great, all the family together.”

“If it's okay with Sayer.” Ansel was watching Lark, his brows drawn together. Did he think she would disapprove?

She kind of did. After Clive's lecture about ethics and keeping the company name clean, having her brother in the ad was probably too much. She wasn't supposed to let these two parts of her life mix.

But Dale and the crew were already heading out. Well, she could always ask for that footage to be cut.

Ansel paused to lean over her in the chair. “You’re not fine.” He spoke it low enough only she could hear. And he wasn’t happy.

Well, she wasn’t either. Anger surged in her, both at him for making a big deal out of it and at herself for her body’s stupid weakness. This was the worst possible day for it to do this to her.

“You don’t know anything,” she said back. When his face fell, she felt bad. And sick. And way too hot.

Lark grabbed her interview notes and stood. Immediately she wobbled. Or the room did, she wasn’t sure which. Or maybe both.

Ansel reached for her, grasped her upper arms. “I know you’re ill. Let me take you home.”

He didn’t mean it that way, but her belly still fluttered.

And then like a wave, the spinning nausea receded, leaving her shaky and sweaty. She ran a hand over her forehead. Okay. She felt... not great but able to finish the day.

She pulled her arms free. “I’m better now.”

“So you were sick before?” His tone hit an interesting register of gravelly.

“Everyone’s already left. We have to hurry.” She swept past him and was only slightly disappointed he didn’t try to stop her.

Once she got to the feed yard, they were already filming Sayer, who looked incredibly uncomfortable. If Bear and Thorne were awkward in front of a camera, Sayer was positively allergic.

She still didn’t know how to act around Sayer. He’d broken with the family about a year ago, mostly over a fight with Thorne, but he’d cut all of them off. Gone and built his own place just across the road, right in view of the Fall West. Lark had understood that Sayer wanted to do his own thing—

she didn't want to live on the ranch either—but to just stop talking to all of them like that? No, that she didn't understand.

They'd technically made up, thanks to some strong-arming from Bear and some humility from Thorne, but Lark was still uncertain. If Sayer could turn his back on them like that once, he could do it again.

Right now he was squinting into the sun, trying to stand the way the cameraperson was asking him to.

“That's your brother?” Dale asked her. “He's hot.”

Her stomach rolled. Either because thinking of her own brother as hot was gross or because she was sick. Really, really sick.

“I don't think it's appropriate to use my brother for this campaign,” she said stiffly. “It crosses a line.”

Dale gave her an incredulous look. “But you know Ansel. And Pippa. And everyone else who comes into this store. Your picture is all over the walls. If you didn't want to cross a line, you shouldn't have picked this place for the campaign.” He looked over at Ansel, who was talking to Sayer now. “But it's all fine. And this was a great choice. Everyone's related. It really hits the themes of family and trust.” With that, he jogged over to her brother and Ansel.

Lark closed her eyes, forgotten for the moment. Lord, but she felt terrible.

Instead of giving in, she forced her eyes open, put a smile on her face. And then she went off to go drag herself through the rest of the day.

II



About an hour before the production team actually left, Ansel was ready to toss them out.

He hadn't let on he was more than done with being interviewed and filmed, but his patience was worn to nothing by the time they loaded up the van and took off.

Telling the story of the feedstore didn't bother him. In fact, he was proud of what his parents had built. But doing it in front of the cameras felt fake. Kind of dirty.

Maybe Dale really was that interested. Maybe he did care that much. But even if he hadn't, he would have asked all those questions in the exact same tone of bright wonder.

Whatever. This ad stuff would help once Tractor Supply came roaring in like a monster truck, flattening all the smaller feedstores in its path. He had to remember that when they stuck a camera in his face next time. Hopefully that would be it though. A few more sessions of this and even his patience would snap.

He waved goodbye as the van trundled down the road. Pippa stood next to him, waving too.

"That was interesting," she said. "I don't think I'm going to be able to watch myself in it when it comes out."

"Me either." The thought of having to watch himself on some screen put him in a cold sweat. And speaking of sweating... "Can you and Kelsey close up tonight? I think I'm going to have to head out."

“Sure.” Pippa shaded her eyes as she looked down the road. “You can sleep in tomorrow too, and we can open.”

He laughed humorlessly. “Right. Not that you’re not capable,” he said quickly. “But I just... I can’t.”

“You could,” Pippa said easily. “You won’t let yourself.”

That was true. He supposed he could understand how devoted Lark was to her job when he looked at it like he did him and the feedstore. Something he couldn’t let go of, even for a day.

He touched her shoulder. “Just close up. Don’t worry about the rest.”

Pippa gave him an understanding smile. “All right. But if you ever want...”

He nodded even though he had no plans to take that much time off. And then he went to go find Lark.

She was in his office, packing up her things. Or least she was trying to—she was staring at her open laptop like she couldn’t figure out what it did.

“Lark.”

She jumped at the sound of her name. Sweat stood out on her brow. Her cheeks were red flags of color, her eyes bleary.

He put a hand to her forehead. It was like touching a furnace. “You’re burning up!”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine. I don’t get sick.”

“And you don’t cry either.”

Her glare was as fierce as her fever. “That was low.”

It was, and he felt bad. But mostly he was worried. “Let me drive you home. Or call your brothers.”

“No.” She straightened her shoulders, but she immediately wobbled.

Lord, but she was bad off. And too stubborn to admit it. Instead of going home when she should have, she’d stayed here and just made herself worse.

He wasn't going to get an answer to his question from Saturday from her, at least not today. Not one that she would mean and wasn't shaped by fever and illness.

"I'm taking you home." He grabbed her bag, shoved her laptop inside. If there was anything else, she'd just have to get it later. "And I'm calling your brothers. No arguing."

"No." This time she swayed so alarmingly his heart stopped.

He scooped her up before she could hit the floor, dropping her bag in the process. If her laptop was damaged, he'd just buy her a new one. Better that got broken than her.

She moaned as he gathered her close. She was flushed red from her forehead to her collarbones. His gut twisted painfully. Damn, he should have made her go home hours ago instead of letting her convince him she was fine.

"I've got you," he told her, hustling for his truck. "I'll get you home."

She muttered something he didn't catch.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"Everyone will see."

It was too late for that. He was already out in the main part of the store, everyone inside staring straight at them. Pippa gasped when she saw them.

"Lark's sick," he explained. "I'm taking her home."

"Bad," Lark muttered.

He couldn't tell if she meant that she felt bad or that everyone seeing her like this was bad. Like it or not, her pride was going to take a hit from this. But if Porter Greene dared say anything to her, Ansel would sort that asshole out.

"Is she okay?" Pippa asked. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Ansel tried to imagine Lark's reaction to Pippa fussing over her. It wouldn't be pleasant for either of them. "No, I've got her. I'll call Bear on the way to her house."

“He’s up at Wether’s Ridge today and tomorrow, out of cell range, with Thorne. Are you sure you don’t want my help?”

Damn, that meant neither of them could come stay with her. As for Sayer... there had been a coolness between them today, one that hadn’t been there before. Ansel guessed that even though the siblings weren’t technically feuding anymore, things weren’t one hundred percent repaired.

That left nobody to come help her. Nobody but him.

“It’s fine.” He started for the door again, not wanting to waste any more time. As he passed Nella by the chicken feed, he saw her typing furiously on her phone. No doubt she was texting everyone she knew. “If you have any questions about closing, call me.”

Kelsey held open the door for him, an odd smile on her face. Like she found this amusing but didn’t want to show it.

Lark was burning up in his arms, her eyes closed and her expression pained. There was nothing funny about this.

He tried to drive close to the speed limit on the way to her place, but the speedometer kept creeping up, ten, twenty miles over the limit until he forced his foot off the accelerator to ease up.

Lark had propped herself against the car door, one hand clinging tightly to the seat belt like it was a life raft.

As he passed the turnoff to the road down the hill where the ER was, he slowed, considering his options. Cabrillo only had a tiny urgent care that was open from nine till six, nothing like a proper ER. If she needed emergency care, he needed to head down the hill now.

“Lark?”

She opened her eyes. “What?” She put an elbow in the seat and worked her way to an upright position. “Seriously, I’m fine.”

“You’re not, so stop saying that.” He forced his voice to be gentle. “When did this start? What are your symptoms?”

Where's the pain?"

She looked at the landscape outside the truck. "Oh no. No, I don't need to go to the hospital. Just take me home."

"Lark." He growled her name.

"Okay, it started yesterday. No pain, just nausea. And sweats." She put a hand to her forehead. "I guess I have a fever. Bridie Keller had this same thing last week. I must have caught it from her."

Bridie must be one of her coworkers because Ansel didn't recognize the name. "You're sure? This came on pretty sudden."

She nodded desperately. "This is always how I get sick. It comes on quick. Please, please let's just go home."

The way she said that, like home belonged to both of them... He couldn't dwell on that now. "All right. But I'm not leaving until you feel better. Or until I can get ahold of your brothers and they can come help."

"I don't get sick," she said mulishly. "But don't call Sayer. Or Pippa or any of them."

"I won't." So he'd been right about the awkwardness between her and Sayer. "We'll be there soon. Do you want any soup or Gatorade or Sprite or...?" He tried to think of what Mom had used to give him when he was sick. It had been so long ago.

"Just leave me at home." She'd closed her eyes again, her head resting against the back of the seat.

"I just said I'm not leaving you alone." Thinking of her like this all by herself, tossing and turning in bed, no one to help her... it broke his heart. And a few bones in his chest, just cracked them right open. "What do you have at home?"

"No food," she mumbled without opening her eyes. "It's too hard to cook for one."

"Yeah." He knew all about that. "I hate to eat the same thing for a week, but I hate to throw stuff out."

She smiled faintly. And then it dropped off her face. “Don’t talk about food. My stomach...”

“Sorry.”

He kept his mouth shut for the rest of the drive. Once they parked at her place, he hurried around to her side before she could try to get out. Even so, she had her hand on the door handle by the time he got there.

Without asking permission, he gathered her up in his arms again, shutting the truck door with his heel. He didn’t even bother to lock up as he jogged up to her front door.

“Back’s unlocked,” she said, slurring her words.

He got there as quick as he could and let them in.

Bozeman was waiting, bouncing up and down on his short legs and barking a welcome. When he saw Lark in Ansel’s arms, he set up a low, worried whine.

“She’ll be okay.”

“Buddy.” Lark let her arm flop down, tried to reach for the dog.

Ansel had been in her house only a few times before and never for very long. Definitely never in her bedroom. So he had to guess which was hers as he wandered down the hallway.

When he caught sight of the mirror in the corner, he knew he had the right room.

It was done in a shade of blue he didn’t have a name for, but it was the blue right at the edge of the horizon at sunset. Not a spectacular sunset blazing with reds and golds and purples, the kind that made you stop and stare. This blue was from a quieter kind of sunset, the ones that made you look at the sky and think “It’ll be dark soon.”

The color suited her completely. He laid her down on the bed, careful not to jar her. She didn’t look quite as flushed as she had before, but when he put his hand to her cheek, it burned.

Right. She needed medicine first, then comfortable clothes. Then under the covers to sleep.

Bozeman hopped up on the bed, curling up next to Lark. She found him with her hand, setting it on his furry head.

“Hold tight,” Ansel told her. “I’ll get you taken care of.”

Her medicine cabinet was meticulously organized, just as he’d expected. He found the thermometer and the probe covers right away. Even so, his hand shook a bit as he took them. If her fever was really high, he’d have to race her down the hill. No time to wait for an ambulance.

He’d heard of people getting brain damage from fevers that were too high. Having seizures.

The thermometer was slick in his grasp. He fumbled with the cover, his heart pounding.

When he came back in, Lark was still on the bed, her eyes closed. Bozeman looked up at him from under his brows.

“I need to take your temperature.”

She cracked one eye open. “Okay.” That was weak. Like she’d finally surrendered.

That worried him more than anything. Maybe he should have just gone straight for the ER.

“Open up.” He gently put the thermometer under her tongue, then helped her close her mouth around it.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled around it.

“I’m not.” He realized he was clenching his jaw. But there was no point getting upset, because this was Lark. Expecting her to be different would be like expecting the sun to rise an hour later just so you could sleep in. The sun wasn’t going to do that for you, so you’d better get up on time. “I mean, I am sorry you’re sick. But I’m not sorry I can be here to help you. I’m glad.”

He reached up and pushed some hair away from her brow. She watched him from wide, soft brown eyes. He didn’t think

he'd ever seen her so vulnerable, not even that one night they'd spent together.

The thermometer beeped. The digital screen read 102.7. Not great, but not terrible either.

Ansel let himself exhale. He didn't think she was in any danger from a fever like that, but she was clearly uncomfortable.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"It's 102.7. I'll get you some ibuprofen. Unless you want something else?"

"That's fine. It's..." She closed her eyes as if she was too tired to go on. "You'll find it."

He did, quite easily. And she had a pitcher of water by her bed, made of glass and with the lid to the pitcher also serving as the cup. It was a handy thing to have, and Ansel thought he might like to have one for himself.

He filled up the pitcher, filled the cup, and handed that to her along with the pills. She lifted herself to one elbow and took them with quivering hands.

"Want some help?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. As soon as she was done, she flopped back down with a groan. Her color was rising again.

"You'll feel better once that kicks in," he said, praying it would be true. She looked so miserable it was killing him. If he could somehow take this sickness on himself... But he couldn't. He could only watch helplessly as she suffered. "Where do you keep your pajamas? Or sweatpants or T-shirts?"

There was no way the starchy shirt and jeans she was wearing were comfortable. She needed sleep, and she couldn't get comfortable wearing that.

She made a noncommittal noise. "I'll be fine. Thank you."

Trying to dismiss him, huh? Yeah, he wasn't letting her do that. "You're too sick to be alone. So tell me where the

comfortable stuff is.”

He wouldn't let himself dwell on the thought of undressing her. She was sick, and he was taking care of her. Nothing sexual about that. Still, his body tightened, unwilling to listen to his conscience.

She was vulnerable. He wouldn't take advantage, not even in the privacy of his own thoughts.

“Mmm.” She hummed deep in her throat before throwing an arm out toward the dresser. “There. Somewhere.”

All right, it seemed that was all the instruction he was going to get. He reached for one of the bigger drawers in the middle, praying it wasn't her underwear or bra drawer. Seeing that would short-circuit all his good intentions.

Luckily, it was a drawer full of workout clothes. The fabric was soft, stretchy, and the first pair of pants he pulled out seemed good to sleep in. The shirt he grabbed was a tank top with fussy straps—he didn't even know how she would get it on—so he rummaged around for another one. His fingers brushed something that felt like another shirt strap, so he hauled it out.

At the end of his fist was a bra. It had thick, heavy straps, multiple hooks, and cups that looked like they'd been molded of steel. Honestly, it looked more like a medieval torture device. It was probably like that to keep her breasts from jiggling while she worked out. But maybe it didn't work entirely and they jiggled some—

Ansel cursed under his breath. He was hard as a nail now and just from thinking about her working out. Yeah, he had it bad for her.

He dropped the bra like it was made out of lava, then went back into the drawer and found a shirt that would cover her shoulders and her stomach.

If she needed help with these, he didn't know what he was going to do. Obviously he'd help her and keep his touch impersonal, but it was going to haunt him after.

He arranged his face into something neutral and prayed she wouldn't look at his lower body as he carried the clothes over to her. "Do you want help?" That came out gruffer than he wanted. Way gruffer.

She was staring at something in the corner, at least as best she could without lifting her head. He looked over, but all he saw was the mirror. Was there a spider? He doubted she allowed anything like that in her tidy house.

"Do you think that mirror is weird?" she asked breathlessly.

He studied it. There was a sheet crumpled on the floor next to it, as if it had been covering the mirror but the mirror had decided to toss it off. Actually, what was that doing there? Lark was too neat to leave it on the floor. She must have already been sick this morning when she'd left it there. Although... was the sheet from the bed? Or had she been covering up the mirror? Why would she do that?

Because Pippa had given it to her?

That thought was uncomfortable. He knew Lark and Pippa weren't exactly friendly, but he wouldn't expect something like this. Lark wasn't petty like that.

Wait, what had she asked him? Right, was the mirror weird.

"No," he said, "it looks normal. Weird how?"

"It shows me things." She'd rolled over while he was studying the mirror and said that into the pillow.

He shook his head. Clearly the fever was making her say things she wouldn't normally. "Can you change on your own?"

She didn't say anything. His heart sank. She was breathing fine, slow and deep, her limbs sprawled carelessly. She looked more like she was sleeping off a bender instead of fighting a fever.

Strangely, that made him feel better. She couldn't sleep like that if she was dying.

But she still needed out of those clothes.

“Lark.”

She didn't stir.

“I'm going to help you change.”

She lifted one hand. He assumed that was a yes. Then she rolled over and tried to sit up. It didn't go well.

He rushed over, catching her under the shoulders with one arm. She smelled faintly of her soap—something flowery—but mostly like warm skin. Her hair caught on his stubble, and the sensation made him shiver.

“I'm sorry,” she said softly. Rawly. “I need help.”

His heart felt swollen, too tender to fit comfortably in his chest. “That's why I'm here. I found you some new clothes.”

“Thank you.” She went to unbutton her shirt, her fingers fumbling. Even that seemed to exhaust her.

“I'll get it.” When her hands fell away, he reached for the buttons, doing his best to touch only her shirt and not her. Still, his pulse raced. “Are you feeling worse? Or just exhausted?” A suspicion crept up on him. “When did you start feeling bad?”

“Yesterday.” She sighed guiltily. “I thought it would go away.”

He wanted to shake his head at her, but he'd worked too many days with a headache or backache or stomachache himself. Also, her shirt had fallen open, revealing a slice of bare skin and a lace-trimmed bra.

There was no way he could get her bra off without losing his mind. Already his hands were shaking. She'd just have to sleep in it.

“Here,” he said gruffly, lifting her up a few more inches. Her head settled against his shoulder, her face in the crook of his neck. Her mouth was temptingly close to the exact spot where she'd licked him that night.

And yet there was more than desire running through him right now. There was concern, worry, and something deeper.

Hot like the core of the earth, the kind of fire that never went out. Not the fast-burning flame of something only physical.

“Let’s get your shirt changed.” He kept his tone neutral this time.

She did her best to help, wriggling and lifting her arms when asked, but still he made contact with her bare skin way too many times. And she was breathing into his neck—warm, soft puffs that hit him right in the gut each time.

Finally he got the new shirt over her head, her arms in the sleeves, and eventually, sadly, all that sweet skin covered by fabric.

She’d gone even more slumped by the time they were done, sweat breaking out on her forehead.

“Hang on,” he whispered to her. He went to the bathroom, wet a washcloth, then came back to wipe her forehead.

“Mmm.” She smiled weakly. “That’s so nice.”

Even her weak smiles hit him hard. “I should have thought of that before.” He set the washcloth on top of her old shirt. “Ready for your pants?”

He wasn’t. But there was nothing else he could do.

She nodded, her nose brushing against his collarbone. Okay. Time to do this.

Carefully he laid her back on the pillows. He took a steadying breath, then reached for the button on her jeans.

It took too long and too much wriggling to get her pants open. Stupid jeans and their too-secure buttons. The backs of his fingers were trapped between the fabric and her skin, and all too often he brushed the soft cotton of her panties.

She lifted her hips, trying to help him. His hand, still under the waistband, slipped under the boundary of her underwear when she did.

He snatched it back. “Sorry. Sorry. Didn’t mean to.”

Lark didn’t seem to notice. Instead, she started to move her legs like she was trying to kick her jeans off. Except they were

still clinging to her hips.

He was going to have to slide them off. God help him, because reminding himself that she was ill and he was the worst kind of ass for being this worked up over touching her had stopped working about five minutes ago. If it ever had.

“Help me, honey,” he whispered as he reached for her waistband. He slid his hand under, between her jeans and her panties, hooking his thumbs over the waistband.

She slung an arm over his neck and lifted her hips. Her jeans slid off her long legs in what had to have been under two seconds, but it felt like an agonizing lifetime to Ansel.

But it was done, and all that was left was to put on her new pants. And then he'd be safe. At least as safe as he ever was around her, which wasn't very.

Her arm was still around his neck, and she turned her head, her nose brushing against his. They were practically sharing breath, their mouths were so close.

It wasn't lust that moved through him. It was that deep, slow heat. The kind that didn't go out.

Her eyes were the color of the mountains in a dry spell, with all the fissures and facets the mountains had too. He felt like he could study the depths of her eyes forever and still keep coming up with new shades of brown in them.

“Your eyes are so pretty.” Not what he'd meant to say, but it was hard to think with her this close.

“Yours too.” She sounded one hundred percent there. Like the fever had broken for a moment. Then she did a long, slow blink and shivered.

Crap, he'd forgotten about her pants. “Hang on. Almost done.”

The new pants went on easier than the old ones had come off. But he couldn't help but notice her legs—she had a scar on the back of her left knee that he wanted to ask her about—as he covered them again.

Finally he helped her under the covers and tucked her in tight. Bozeman whined next to him, licking his lips.

“She’ll be okay,” Ansel told him. “She just needs sleep.”

And sure enough, her eyes were already closed tight, her lips parted and a strand of hair across her cheek fluttering with each slow, deep breath. A whole night of this kind of sleep and she’d be recovered in no time.

Still, he wasn’t leaving her. Not until the fever broke. Not until he was sure she’d be fine.

Gently he smoothed her hair back. Ran his hand from her forehead all the way to the back of her neck. Even tangled, her hair was soft, silken. He liked the feel of it under his hand.

She pursed her lips in her sleep, dreamily. Like she was kissing someone. Hopefully him.

He wondered briefly what answer she’d been going to give him today. Yes or no. He wanted it to be yes so bad his teeth hurt.

But he supposed it didn’t matter right now, not when she was sick.

He’d waited this long for her. He could wait some more.



Lark woke up in a furnace.

Heat blasted her face and sweat dripped off her skin. The sheets—she kicked at them in a fury—were stuck to her. Ugh. *Get off, get off.* She hated how they felt on her, hated them, hated the heat—

“Hold up.” A hand on her forehead, so cool. She moaned at how good it felt. “It’s okay.”

Ansel. She more than recognized his voice. It was like her entire body unraveled when she heard it. *Safe.*

Yes, of course she was safe with him. Even though she was sick.

His arm came around her shoulders, and he helped her sit up. His big hand pushed her lank hair out of her face. And then there was a glass at her lips. Cool and wet when her lips were dry and burning.

“Slow,” he told her gently. When she reached for the cup, he moved it away. “I’ve got it.”

When he brought it back, she drank as deeply as she could. Oh, it was so cold and good. He held the cup at just the right angle so she could keep gulping down water without choking on it or having it spill down her chin.

Finally she lay back, exhaling with relief. That was better. But she was still too hot.

“You’re a good nurse,” she said absently. If she’d tried to drink that water on her own, it would have gotten everywhere.

“Thanks.” He set the glass on the table. “But I’ve never really done anything like this before.”

Not even for a girlfriend? Who were his girlfriends before? He must have had some. She didn’t like thinking about it—made her chest feel too tight—but she was also wildly curious. She wanted to find these women and then be better than them.

“Your girlfriends.” Oh wow, her words weren’t coming out right. “You did this for them.”

He shook his head. “Only you.”

The pressure in her chest eased. “Who were they?”

“My girlfriends?”

She nodded, then clutched his arm as sudden dread seized her. “You’re going to stay, right? You won’t leave me?”

To be abandoned, alone, feeling so awful, fever burning her up from the inside out... She sniffled.

“Hey.” He kissed her forehead even though her skin had to be hot and sweaty. “I’m not going anywhere. It’s okay.”

“I cry too much around you.” She didn’t like it. Although sometimes it did kind of feel good. Like when he hugged her after.

His arm was around her now, under her shoulders. It should be uncomfortable, her head not hitting the pillow right because of it, but it wasn’t.

“I’d be hurt by that,” he said, “if I didn’t know it was because I’m the only person you feel comfortable crying in front of.”

Yeah. That was true. She turned her head so that her face was against his biceps. He smelled good, like clean laundry and warm skin under that. He was wearing his shirt, but if he took it off, she could push her nose into his bare skin...

When she woke up again, it was dark out.

Ansel wasn’t there.

For a moment she panicked. He'd said he wasn't going to leave, but he was gone and she was alone.

She didn't want to be alone.

With a wriggle, she sat up. Her hair was stuck to the back of her neck. She still felt too hot, but not as bad as before. Her mouth was dry as dirt, and her headache was marching back into her skull.

The mirror in the corner caught her reflection. Wide eyes, flushed skin, fear. That was all she could make out in the low light coming from the hallway. The woman in the glass looked like she'd been abandoned.

Was that really what she looked like? Lark was too muddled to figure out what was real and what was her imagination.

"You're awake."

She turned, found Ansel standing in the doorway. Dark circles were under his eyes, and his hair stuck out every which way like he'd been nervously running his hands through it, but he was smiling.

The relief that rushed through her was staggering. He hadn't left. He was still here with her. Thank goodness.

"Yeah." Lord, she was practically croaking. Her throat was so dry it hurt. "I still feel awful."

Ansel came over and put a hand to her forehead. His touch didn't feel as cool on her skin as last time. "Your fever's come down. Want more water?"

She swallowed and winced. It was like razors in her throat. "Could I... Could I have tea? There's—"

He was already moving out the door. "I know where it is. Be right back."

Lark fell back against the pillows. He must have been going through the kitchen. Strangely, she liked the idea. Ansel's big body in the middle of her kitchen, his arms flexing as he reached up to open a cabinet. If he already knew where

the tea was, he must have searched specifically for it, probably figuring she'd want some eventually.

She'd fallen asleep by the time he came back, jerking awake when he set the mug on her bedside table. She hated this kind of exhaustion where she was wrenched in and out of sleep completely uncontrollably. It was just awful, like all the rest of this.

Except for Ansel. He was definitely not awful. He helped her sit up, held the mug to her lips. The tea was the perfect temperature, warm enough to soothe her throat but not hot enough to burn. By the time she finished, her eyes were already drooping.

"More sleep," Ansel said as he lowered her back to the bed. "Best thing for you."

She didn't even hear him leave.

The next time she woke up, it was still dark. But now she felt kind of better. Tired, headachy, hot, but not like she was never going to feel well again.

And she was hungry.

Ansel was in the chair across from the mirror, the one she called her reading chair even though she didn't do much reading in it. She was always too busy to sit down and relax like she wanted to.

He had an ankle propped on his knee, a book on his lap, angled so he could catch the light from the hallway. He had socks on his feet, white ones.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly. He closed the book, marking his spot with his finger.

"Better. You never told me about your girlfriends."

Looked like she wasn't well enough to have her filter back. But honestly, she was curious. More than curious actually.

He sighed. "There's not much to tell. But before I do, are you up to eating something? I want you to keep your strength up."

“Something light.” Although her stomach was grumbly, it was still rolling like they were stuck on a ship. “There’s some soup in the pantry. I think.”

“I’ll take care of it.” He tapped the spine of the book against his thigh. “I dated Gina for a while. Maybe a month?” He shrugged. “She hated that I had to wake up early every day.”

Lark was starting to regret this. Her chest hurt as he’d said that—not that she was about to stop him—and he didn’t seem any easier about it.

Besides, Gina wasn’t even his type. She liked to spend her weekend nights at the Stampede, taking note of what everyone else was doing.

“Oh” was all she said though.

“And then I went on two dates with Bella. Bella Smith. She didn’t like Porkina. Said she was too loud.”

Lark snorted. “Porkina’s not that loud.” At least not if you were used to pigs. Besides, Porkina made up for it by being so darn charming.

“I can’t remember anyone else now.” He sounded suddenly very tired. “Whoever it was, it wasn’t more than one date. Or one night.” He stopped tapping the book on his leg. Stared at her from under lowered brows. “Your turn.”

Oh. Oh, she hadn’t planned on... But it was only fair. “There was Greg, freshman year. For like two months while we both took O-chem. Once that was over, the relationship was too. I only ever took one guy home. He was... Mark.” His name suddenly came to her. “He met another girl at a concert, fell completely in love with her. None of the rest of them... None of them stuck with me.”

Not like Ansel had. She never remembered their times together at inconvenient moments. Never waited by the phone for them to call.

And when she’d come back home and started seeing Ansel almost every day again, she’d never really dated anyone else

after that. She'd thought it was because she was too busy, but... But maybe not.

"And Vince?" Ansel practically growled that.

"Vince?" It took her a second to realize who he meant. "Oh, that Vince. No, I was just talking to him about... I can't even remember. He's... he's kind of full of himself. And I'm kind of full of myself. The two of us in a relationship..." She shook her head. "It would be a black hole of ambition and pride."

Ansel didn't say anything about that. "So none of them ever took care of you when you got sick?"

"I don't get sick," she said automatically.

He smiled on the left side of his mouth. "Sure." He sounded supremely satisfied, like she'd just proven a point for him. "Let me get some dinner for you. Do you want to sleep some more? Do you want your phone? Something to read?"

"What are you reading?"

He held up the book. "*Small Ruminant Nutrition.*"

"I've already read that one. Can you hand me the other book over there? The one that isn't about ruminant nutrition."

He found it and handed her the cozy mystery she wanted. As he did, he kissed her forehead. He was doing that a lot. And she liked it.

"Be right back."

Except he wasn't. He was gone for almost half an hour, and her book wasn't quite enough to hold her attention. Where was he? What was he doing? She'd told him there was soup in the pantry.

When the front door slammed, Bozeman leaped off the bed, barking furiously. And Lark realized that Ansel had actually gone out. She'd never heard the door or his truck starting.

"Hush," he told Bozeman as he walked in, holding a bowl of soup. He sat on the side of bed, making it dip around him.

Lark felt her body wanting to fall into that space. The bowl of soup in his hands smelled delicious.

“You made soup?” Had he run to the grocery store for it? She didn’t understand.

“Ordered it from the diner.” He stirred it with the spoon. “I picked it up while I was out.”

When the smell hit her nose, she realized what it was. “Beef barley.”

“I know you don’t like chicken noodle. And you do like this.” He lifted the spoon. “Do you feel up to feeding yourself? I ordered the Hawaiian rolls you like too.”

It took her a moment to process that. Not mentally but emotionally. He’d gone to the diner and ordered her exactly what she loved. No soup from a can, no spongy, sticky rolls from a plastic bag. Fresh-made food from a restaurant. Just for her. Because she was sick.

She could only look helplessly at the bowl in his big hands. Could she feed herself?

Of course she could. But... but she also kind of wanted him to feed her. Just to know what it felt like.

“I might spill.” She said it weakly as she reached for the spoon.

He smiled as he pulled it out of her reach. “You don’t want to ruin your bedspread. I can do it.” Something throbbed under the words.

“Okay.” She wet her dry lips, then pushed herself up to sit against the pillows.

He shifted to face her, his thigh pressing against hers. Her entire body seemed to flutter at the contact. And his eyes, so dark but warm at the same time.

Slowly he brought the spoon to her mouth. As she closed her lips around it, she felt both silly and pleased. Silly because she could feed herself just fine even if she was sick. But pleased because right now she didn’t even have to worry about that—Ansel was taking care of everything for her.

It was nice. And he even knew to get beef barley and not chicken noodle.

“Did you get something for yourself?” she asked between bites.

He nodded. “I’ll eat later.”

By the time Ansel handed her a bread roll, Lark’s eyelids were heavy. She wanted to sleep again.

She took a bite, then closed her eyes. She felt like time was crawling to a stop.

“Okay.” Ansel took the roll from her. “You’re falling asleep as you eat. I don’t want you to choke.”

She swallowed. “Me either,” she mumbled. “Don’t throw it away.” She slid down under the blankets, yawning widely. Eating had never been so tiring before.

“I’ll save it for you.” Ansel tucked the blankets tenderly around her. “It’ll be here when you wake up.”

She wanted to ask if he would be too. But sleep claimed her before she could.



Lark woke up to the sounds of birds singing. The sun was pouring through her bedroom window, and the sounds of traffic from Main Street were in full swing.

She must have slept through the rest of the night. She felt... not quite one hundred percent but more like she was going to see it again sometime in the next few hours.

As she shifted in the bed, she realized the blanket was pinned down. By something bigger than Bozeman.

Ansel.

She came fully, achingly awake, her eyes wide. Everything from yesterday came flooding back. How he’d cared for her so tenderly, all through the night.

How she'd felt about it. And still did.

Her heart pounding, she rolled over.

Ansel was lying on top of the blanket, wearing only an undershirt, the top button of his jeans undone. His bare feet were crossed at the ankles. His arm was tossed over his eyes, and the thin fabric of his shirt strained against his muscles. She could see a bare hint of hair peeping out from his underarm. It made her shiver.

This was what he looked like asleep. Lark had known him half her life and never seen it.

With his lips parted like that, his mouth looked plush. Soft. So very kissable.

Lark licked her own lips. And realized they were dry, cracked. The skin on her face was tight, and she could feel an entire day's worth of gunk sitting on it. *Her makeup*—oh God, it had been caked into her face all night.

Her hair wasn't even worth thinking about. She'd only be more horrified. A shower was what she needed, and right now.

Before she did that though, she put Bozeman out in the backyard. The neighbor's tabby cat was perched on the fence, and Bozeman tore after it, barking like mad. The cat merely watched him, flicking her tail as she did, knowing she was perfectly safe up there. She lived to torment Bozeman.

Lark left him to yell at the cat and get his wriggles out, rushing back to her bedroom.

As she grabbed clean clothes from her drawers as quietly as she could, she realized Ansel had changed her clothes at some point. She vaguely remembered him undressing her, although a lot of yesterday was a blur. They'd filmed the interviews and footage of a typical day at the feedstore. And then the rest was hazy.

He'd brought her soup last night though. She definitely remembered that. And he'd kissed her forehead. A lot.

She ducked into the bathroom, feeling like she was running away from him. And her feelings for him. She did

remember that yesterday she'd meant to tell him no, they couldn't be together. Not if she wanted to keep her job.

Today... Today felt different.

She scrubbed yesterday and the last of her illness off in a steaming-hot shower. It must have been her lack of sleep that had let her catch whatever it was that had laid her out yesterday because she was already feeling mostly normal. She hadn't been running on so few hours of sleep since college. Of course it was going to hit her.

As she toweled off, she resolved to put sleep on her to-do list. Maybe listen to some of those sleep meditations or take some herbs.

But when she came out in fresh clothes and her hair wrapped in a towel and saw Ansel still asleep on her bed, she realized that none of that would help. Her insomnia would last as long as she was tied up in knots over him.

He blinked awake as she watched from the bathroom doorway. He was deliciously ruffled, his lashes brushing his cheeks, his muscles flexing as he stretched, his white T-shirt riding up and his unbuttoned jeans riding low. She caught a glimpse of dark, curling hair in the gap and shivered.

"Sorry." His voice was rough with sleep. He scrubbed a hand over his face, smiling sheepishly. "I only meant to close my eyes for a second." His hand dropped, and her heart did a somersault at his too-familiar face. "How are you feeling?"

"Better." She cleared her throat. "Fine." She hardly knew what to say to him. *Thanks for taking care of me* seemed like not enough. He'd made her feel... She ducked her head, cleared her throat again. "Do you need to get to the feedstore?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I asked Kelsey and Pippa to open. I think this might be the longest I've been away from the store in... I don't even know how long."

Oh, he shouldn't have said that. It made her feel even more of that emotion she couldn't name. An expansive, blooming thing that made her almost want to cry.

“I should call in to work.” She didn’t know what to focus on, so she focused on that. Nice, safe work, which she was actually good at. Emotions, not so much.

“I already called Clive.” Ansel’s brows drew together. “Maybe I shouldn’t have, but I figured he would want to know. I told him you’d gotten sick at the store—he has no idea I’m here.”

“No, that was good. Thank you.” She put her hand to her forehead. This shakiness in her had nothing to do with her illness. “I...”

She had to tell him. It wasn’t fair. *I’ve never not seen you go after what you want.*

There was a first for everything.

“Lark?” His tone throbbed with concern.

She let her hand fall, forced herself to meet his eyes. “Clive said if I had a relationship with you, I could lose my job.”

He jackknifed up, all the color leaving his face. “Jesus... You told him about this?”

“No! It was all hypothetical. He doesn’t think it’s me.”

“Right,” he said skeptically. He sighed, scrubbed both his hands over his face. “Jesus. I guess that’s my answer.”

Lark didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t really an answer—she was only telling him what the consequences would be if she were caught. If they kept it secret.

Before, just the idea of asking him to keep it under wraps had made her stomach turn. Her stomach was turning now too, but there was want there. Deep, desperate want. The kind that didn’t care who got hurt as long as it was appeased.

He thought she was saying no. And Lark had no idea if that’s what she was really saying. Her heart was trying to climb into her throat, and her fingers were trembling. But she couldn’t open her mouth.

He turned so that one leg hung off the bed. His hands were braced on the edge, and he stared off at nothing with a stony expression. “I appreciate your being honest with me.” He barked out a laugh. “I *should* appreciate your being honest with me. But that’s not what I’m feeling right now.”

She didn’t think she’d ever seen Ansel this raw. He was split right open, and it hurt to look at him. Hurt to know that she was responsible.

“I didn’t say no,” she said quietly.

He lifted his head, went stock-still. One ear cocked toward her. “I know you’re not choosing me over your job.” He said it matter-of-factly. “But if you’re not saying no... You’re also not saying yes. Not all the way.” Finally he faced her. “You want it to be a secret.”

“I do, but I know you won’t—”

“Okay.”

His matter-of-fact tone brought her up short. “Wait. I might want that, but I’m not asking you to do it.”

Still, greedy anticipation pulsed through her. Maybe she could have everything and risk nothing.

“I know you’re not asking,” he said with a heavy tone, “but if that’s all you’re offering, I’ll take it. After yesterday...” His jaw was tense as steel. “I realized I’ll have you any way I can.”

Ansel wouldn’t look at her as he said it. Her heart leaped anyway. *Any way I can*. Even when he said it like that, a thrill went through her.

And then came the unease. Because he might want her, but he didn’t look happy about it. She didn’t want to hurt him, and the expression on his face definitely said hurt.

“You...” She took two steps toward him. “You mean a lot to me. And I don’t want you to be hurt by any of this. So maybe we shouldn’t. Maybe we should just stay friends.”

If he couldn’t be her friend even... She couldn’t catch her breath when she imagined that. *Any way I can*—it turned out

that she felt the same. She wanted Ansel in her life, any way she could. Even just as friends.

His smile was wry. “I’m a big boy. I’m not going to shatter if I have to keep my mouth shut about sleeping with you. I’d rather shout it to the world, but I’ll survive.”

Shout it to the world— Even if he only wanted to shout it to most of Cabrillo, she’d still be touched. He sounded like he’d be proud to have her on his arm.

And here she was, shameful enough to be willing to settle for something secret.

“Maybe once I have the promotion, or I could get moved to another area,” she babbled, “something where I’m not working directly with you... then maybe we can be out in the open.”

He wasn’t appeased by that, one sardonic eyebrow popping up. “So we can be openly together when Prime One Feeds says it’s okay?”

She hated it when he talked about the company like that. “Since you were eighteen, you gave your entire life to the feedstore. You chose it over Gina; you told me that last night. So you don’t have much room to criticize.”

He sighed. “No, I don’t.” He looked her up and down, his gaze turning heated. “But I’m here now. And you’re feeling better.”

Her mouth went dry. Right, they were in her bedroom, and neither of them had anywhere else to be. And his jeans were already unbuttoned.

“You are,” she said slowly as she stalked toward him. “And oh so helpfully in my bed.”

The look he gave her could have melted titanium. “Come over here and join me.”

She pulled the towel out of her hair and tossed it aside. A hand on his shoulder had him easily falling back on the bed. And then she was climbing over him, straddling him, looking down at the man she’d so neatly captured.

He stared up at her worshipfully, like she was the culmination of all his dreams. Like he could hardly believe they were there. His hands clamped down on her thighs, but she wasn't going anywhere. Still, his grip was tight enough to almost bruise.

She loved it. Loved how he just took hold of her, wasn't at all afraid of breaking her.

"Take your shirt off," he pleaded huskily. "I want to see you in the daylight. I've dreamed about it."

"Me too." She gripped the hem of her sleep shirt and shucked it off. Her wet hair was cold against her bare back, and she shivered.

The grip on her thighs became punishing.

"Jesus. Jesus."

Lark had left off her bra after her shower, and the way he gazed up at her... Her pulse was loud in her ears, her nipples drawing to tight points. And all that just from a look. When he finally touched her, really touched her, she was going to go up in flames. She hardly even noticed her hair any longer.

"I want to go slow." His voice was tormented. "But I don't know if I can. I'm..."

His fingers dug into her thighs, and heat flowed to her core. She liked that he was losing control. Ansel, who never, ever even raised his voice, was going out of his mind. Over her.

"I want fast." Her voice trembled. Her fingers scrabbled for the hem of his undershirt. "I want fast, and I want both of us naked. Now."

He reared up, tossing off his shirt as he did. He only barely missed knocking his head against hers, but she didn't care because his shirt was off. Acres and acres of hot, smooth skin, slabs of muscle, a scattering of coarse, dark hair—she didn't know where to touch first. So she tried to touch everything at once, greedy hands skimming over the plane of his stomach, digging into the curve of his shoulder, climbing up the muscles laddering his back.

Ansel made a strange, muffled noise against her hair, his hands back to her thighs. When his chest started to shake, she realized he was laughing.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “You’re touching me like I’m going to disappear any moment.”

Maybe... maybe she was a touch worried about that. They’d had that one amazing night and then nothing. “I’m not letting go of you again.”

His already dark eyes went pitch-black. “I never want you to.” His fingers kneaded her thighs. The urgency in his touch sizzled right through the fabric.

Wait, why was she still wearing her pants? And why was he?

She jumped aside just long enough to tear off her pants and panties and to let him do the same. His erection bobbed thick and hard, and she clenched inside on a wet rush.

This time when she straddled him, he held her more gently. His thumbs made slow, teasing circles on her inner thighs, lazy patterns that made her quiver. But his thighs under hers were spread wide, opening her to him. A small reminder that even though she was on top, she was still vulnerable to him.

And oh, his expression as he took her in. His jaw was tight, sweat beaded his forehead, and he looked as if just the sight of her was utter torment.

“Lark.” He made her name rough, gravelly. “I can’t look at you. It’s too much. I’m not going to last. It’s been too long.”

Did that mean...? Surely he hadn’t been celibate this entire time. Before she could process that thought completely, he was dragging her up his body, sliding down the bed.

And then his head was between her legs. He kissed her there with utter abandon, sending a sweet agony stitching through her. He was so eager, so uninhibited, pushing her harder, faster, until her entire body tightened almost beyond endurance.

She fisted her hand in his hair because if she didn't have some kind of anchor, she was going to die. Die and become a ghost and float away because her body absolutely could not endure this level of sensation. It could not build anymore, except it did, and she was making these noises, noises of whimpering greed and animal lust, noises that didn't even seem human.

Still, Ansel kept on, his mouth without mercy. She stretched on the rack of that pleasure until suddenly...

It snapped. Waves of sensation rolled over her, so thick she had to clench her teeth. The noises slipped out anyway.

She went boneless. He pushed himself up just in time to catch her, his arms holding her close. She breathed into his neck, his familiar scent making her smile like a drunk.

But while she was as loose as seaweed, he was drawn as tight as a steel cable, though his arms around her were gentle. But his breath sawed in and out of his lungs, the tendons of his neck were taut under her forehead, and his stomach was clenched, all the muscles standing out like they were carved.

He looked ready to explode. And she'd barely even touched him.

"I was wrong," he murmured into her ear. "I thought not being able to see you would help. But the sounds you made... the way you taste..."

Her mouth went dry. Suddenly she was as tense and taut as he was. And only from those few words.

"I don't mind fast." Her voice shook with her arousal, and she'd climaxed not even one minute ago. He might actually be the death of her here. But what a way to go. "We've got all day."

Holding her close, he flipped them so that he was above her. "We'll do you on top next," he said, amusement glimmering under his rough tone. "But this way I'll be able to slow down. Some."

He kissed her then, slow and restrained, even though he shook under her hand. He reached between them and stroked

her gently, delicately. She was so ready from earlier he absolutely didn't need to, but of course this was Ansel and of course he was going to.

“Can I touch you?” She already was, but she meant lower. If he was trying to keep himself under control, he might not want that.

She was going to get out-of-control Ansel later though. She was resolved on that.

He took a deep breath like he was steeling himself, but he nodded. Her fingers brushed over him—hard and hot and silken—and he grunted and jerked. She might be under him, but it was clear he was entirely in her power.

That might have made her smug or greedy before—Lark wasn't ashamed to admit she liked to be in control even in the bedroom—but this time she felt humbled. There was an odd sweetness in her, like he was giving her a gift.

Here I am. You've got all of me.

Her fingers moved tentatively—somehow she knew she had to be careful with him.

Finally he caught her hand. “Condom,” he got out. “Where are they?”

She reached out for the bedside drawer, hoping there were some in there. It had been a very long time since she'd had anyone else in her room. But thankfully there were some and they weren't expired.

He took the packet from her with an apologetic smile. “I've got to do it. If you touch me, I'll embarrass myself.”

Which didn't prevent her from watching. He rolled it on like he did everything else, with a steady grace that spoke volumes about who he was. Strong but careful. Steady but sweet.

The sweetness in her cracked alarmingly. She breathed evenly through her nose until the feeling passed.

And then he was pushing forward and there was nothing but him. He went slow, but the sensation of fullness, of being

stretched to her limits, was almost overwhelming. And yet it was exactly what she needed, her entire being concentrated on where they were joined, her need surging and surging.

He didn't move at first. He simply put his forehead to hers and breathed, sharp and desperate, like even this much was more than he could bear. She ran her fingers along his jaw, the beginnings of his beard sharp on her skin, not knowing if she was trying to soothe him or herself. Or maybe both of them.

He brushed a kiss over her cheek in response. She clenched so tightly around him she gasped. His hips gave the smallest jerk.

She made a noise like she was being torn apart from the inside. His groan sounded the same. And then there was no more restraint, no more slowness. Only urgency and straining to be even closer, both of them moving as one toward their end.

Ansel dropped to one elbow, letting half his weight fall on her. His breath came hot and fast against her cheek. Her breath probably felt the same against his cheek.

“That was...” He swallowed hard like he was trying to choke down what air he could. He shook his head like finding any other words was too much.

Lark ran her hands down his back. His skin was burning now. She couldn't find any words herself, so she simply stroked him, savored him so close to her, the after pulses shaking them both.

That odd sweetness was filling her again—soft, warm, but so, so big. It felt like it was pushing its way outside her skin.

When Ansel dipped his head to brush kisses over her cheeks, jaw, and nose, the sweetness didn't crack. It lingered.

It seemed stuck good and tight in her. Like not even a hammer and chisel would break it out. But Lark decided to worry about that later. Because right now she had everything she could ever want.



When Ansel saw Lark's truck sitting in the trees behind his backyard, the knot inside him unraveled.

They'd been seeing each other in secret for a week now, mostly meeting at his house because Lark was too afraid to have his truck sitting in her driveway too often. So she came to his place once she got off work and parked back behind his place. She always left before dawn too.

Ansel found all the secrecy irritating. But he needed her too and was always afraid that one of these days they'd be caught or Clive would find out or Lark would simply decide she was done sneaking around. And on that day, he knew he wouldn't find her truck here.

Today wasn't that day though. So the knot he'd carried with him all day could slip loose.

He pulled into his carport, reflecting on his day. Pippa had made another joke about him nursing Lark—apparently the entire town thought it funny he'd done that. But no one had connected all the dots yet and figured out it went deeper. It was still a cute story about how Lark didn't know how to take a day off, and Ansel of all people had been the one to take care of her. And then he'd had to take a day off too because of it, and didn't that make the story just that much funnier.

It was hard for him to fake laugh along, partly because she'd been genuinely ill and it had terrified him and partly because he had to pretend she was only a friend still. Pippa at least had seemed concerned for Lark afterward, and Bear and

Thorne had come to visit Lark once they were back, but no one else seemed to care much. It was as if Lark getting sick was something they'd never imagined happening, so they focused on the funny parts.

He couldn't betray any of that to anyone though. He had to pretend he felt the same, that it was nothing more to him than a humorous story.

But he was home now, and Lark was waiting for him inside. He didn't have to pretend about anything anymore. It felt like the weight of the world was lifting off him, like he could take a full breath again. Just the promise of seeing her did that to him.

When he opened the truck door, he heard Porkina in the backyard. Lark must have let her out. The moment he walked through the gate, Porkina ran to him, squealing with delight, her tail whisking back and forth.

"Hey." He bent down to scratch her back. "What a welcome. I guess you missed me."

She snuffled and snorted her agreement, leaning into his scratches.

"Were you a good girl today?"

The question was rhetorical since she was always good. But this was their hello ritual, and Ansel figured if he didn't ask the question, Porkina would miss it.

"You really love that pig."

He turned to find Lark standing in the doorway, arms crossed. She'd changed out of her work clothes into a soft T-shirt and yoga pants. Seeing her in the feedstore today in her usual getup—she'd come in to talk about the ad campaign—had been a trip, especially now that he knew in exquisite detail what she looked like underneath.

They'd pretended everything was the same between them. Just two friends and business associates discussing boring business stuff. But underneath, everything simmered, threatened to boil over. Thank God they hadn't met alone in

his office, or he might have been tempted to do something really stupid.

“She’s the world’s greatest pig.”

Lark half smiled. Something about the expression made his insides twist.

Behind her, Bozeman came hopping up, barking once at Porkina. She squealed so high and loud Ansel winced. Then she took off toward the dog, her hooves scrabbling on the concrete.

Bozeman spun faster than a spooked horse and took off, his claws screaming over the linoleum of the mudroom. Porkina went after him, still squealing like... Well, like a stuck pig.

Ansel tipped back his cap and scratched his head, trying to make sense of what he’d just seen. “Is she chasing him?”

Lark nodded. “I think she’s trying to play. She’s been doing it since we’ve gotten here. Bozeman won’t let her get near him, but that doesn’t stop her.” Lark looked up at him from under her lashes. “Your pig is a bit of a bully.”

Well, that was just uncalled for. He snorted. “She just wants to play. Your dog is a bit of a scaredy-cat.”

Lark’s eyes flashed. “No, he’s smart. Have you seen her teeth?”

“She’s never used them on anything but tree roots.”

“Mmm, that explains the yard.”

He shrugged. “I can have a lawn or I can have a happy pig. I choose the pig.”

She laughed out loud at that, catching herself around the waist. Her expression was pure light, happiness, and Ansel wanted to capture the moment forever. Take it out when he was feeling lonely.

Or better yet, convince her that someday they should make this public, permanent. Not now, not when she was so close to getting the promotion she craved. But in a few months when it

would be safer. Heck, maybe he'd even make a PowerPoint with all the reasons why. She'd get a kick out of that.

He crossed the porch, cupped her jaw, and kissed her. She tasted like mint and sweetness, and touching her made everything make sense. He felt like his heart finally, finally clicked into place.

“Hi.” Lark sounded delightfully dazed.

So he kissed her again. On the corner of her mouth, her temple, her cheekbone, and ending again on her plush lower lip.

“I missed you,” he murmured against her mouth.

“But you saw me today.” Her tone was dreamy.

“Not like this.” He kissed her again to prove his point.

A crash came from the house, the tinkling kind that signaled broken glass.

“Your pig is destroying your house.” She looped her arms around his neck, pulling herself against him.

“Your dog is the one causing all the trouble.” He cupped her ass and spread his legs, the better to make room for her. She fit him like they were made for each other, her every curve notching right into his hollows. “Porkina is perfectly behaved.”

She nipped at his lower lip. His pulse surged in response. “Stop slandering my dog.” Her tone was sultry.

He sank his fingers into her ass and kneaded. “Stop insulting my pig.”

She laughed into a ticklish spot on his throat. “Tell your pig to stop bullying my dog.”

He lifted her then, and she wrapped her legs around him. God, all the times he'd dreamed about doing this—coming home to her, kissing her hello, having her wrapped around him—and it was finally happening.

He carried her into the house, kissing her every other step. She kissed him back on the steps he missed, so that they were

barely coming up for air. Dimly he heard the animals chasing each other still, but he could not care less, not when Lark was practically glued to him.

Lark pulled back for a moment and looked over his shoulder. “I think they broke your mom’s lamp.”

He gave a frustrated sigh and let his head fall back. That had been one of his mom’s favorite pieces of furniture—he’d never been fond of it himself, but he’d kept it for her sake. “How bad is it broken?”

“Um, there’re a lot of small pieces.” Lark chewed on her lower lip. “But maybe you could fix it?”

Probably not. His mom would have been horrified it was broken, but maybe it was good she wasn’t here to see this. He ought to be more upset—he’d been keeping it for years now—but with Lark in his arms, it didn’t seem to matter. It was only a lamp.

Bozeman came tearing around a corner then. Porkina followed several feet behind, trying to keep up. She wasn’t built for speed, but she wasn’t giving up.

Ansel sighed. “They’re like little kids.”

Lark went stiff in his arms. She stared at a point beyond his ear. “I always did wonder,” she said in a too-casual tone, “why you never had kids. You like them—I’ve seen you at 4-H meetings.”

He couldn’t respond for a second, he was so surprised by that. “I could say the same about you,” he got out.

This wasn’t at all where he’d expected this to go. If they were keeping this secret, then marriage and kids were definitely not in the picture.

And yet... “Yeah,” he said gruffly, “I want kids. It just...” He was about to say *never happened*, then switched to “It just hasn’t happened yet.”

As he said it, he realized something, something that must have been true forever but he was only seeing now—he wasn’t just waiting for the right woman.

He'd been waiting for *her*. Ever since that night, he'd been stuck in a holding pattern. Content to drown himself in the feedstore and never reaching for anything more.

But she was back in his arms again, and he knew he was done waiting. Not that he could tell her that. Not yet.

Heck, the emotions slamming into him were so vast he probably couldn't even form the words if he wanted to. A man had to grapple with these things before he could just blurt them out.

Thank God she still wasn't looking at him. But she'd softened a bit.

"I want kids too," she said, so softly she almost sounded ashamed. "People think I don't, but I do."

Ah jeez, that made the emotions in him swell and shake. He was imagining too much—Lark holding a baby, smiling up at him, him holding the both of them just like this. His arms were wide enough for it. It suddenly seemed the world's worst shame he hadn't used his arms for anything like that. Just a complete waste of them.

"Just because I'm committed to my job," she went on fiercely, "doesn't mean I don't want a family. I wish people would understand that."

Ansel wondered who had made her feel that way. Clive? Her brothers? Everyone else in Cabrillo?

Or maybe she was talking about herself. He got the sense she wanted him to understand something. Something beyond what she was saying.

"I know," he said. "Just because I put so much into the store doesn't mean I don't want more. I'm not working so hard to keep it going just for myself."

As he said it, he realized how true it was. And why he felt like he'd been stuck in a holding pattern for so long. He needed something beyond the store. And someone to someday hand it off to. Same as his parents had. Which probably explained how they'd managed keeping up the store and having a family.

Him. They'd had him.

Lark wrapped her arms around his waist. "Your parents would be so proud of you. You're... This will sound cheesy, but you're a pillar of the community. Literally. Nothing can take the place of what you've built."

She meant the Tractor Supply that was coming. His usual anxiety about that didn't appear, probably because she was helping him with the ad campaign and definitely because she was in his arms. It was impossible to be anything but content when she was pressed against him.

"Not to be cheesy back," he said, "but you're also a pillar of the community. Those 4-H kids love you. The awards ceremony was genius."

She shook her head, her hair catching on his shirt. "I did that to promote the company."

"Not just to promote the company," he said. "Yeah, Prime One got some advertising, but more importantly, everyone got a moment to shine. To show off."

When he remembered his own unfair thoughts about the ceremony, which had been close to those same lines, guilt stitched through him. He was glad he hadn't said anything.

"No." She shook her head again. "I'm greedy." She fisted her hands into his shirt, her knuckles hard against the small of his back. "I want it all. To do good but to also feed my ambition. To have my career and—"

There was another crash, this time from his bedroom. It sounded like a piece of furniture had fallen over.

Bozeman streaked past them, his tail between his legs, and dug himself under the couch. Porkina followed a moment later, looking about as guilty as a pig could. Even the clip-clop of her hooves seemed muted.

"That sounded bad." Lark's hands released his shirt. "Worse than the lamp."

She pulled back, and he knew she was doing it so he could go see what had happened. But he didn't want to. He wanted

her to finish what she'd been saying.

But the moment was gone. He sighed as he worked his jaw. "I'll grab the broom and the dustpan."

His mother's lamp was done for. The crash down the hall had turned out to be a set of tools he'd left on the bathroom shelf when he'd fixed the pipes under the sink. The tools were fine even if the lamp wasn't.

They cleaned up together, Bozeman and Porkina sitting on opposite sides of the living room. It seemed they'd finally declared a truce.

When Lark turned to him after, a hot spark in her eyes, Ansel's body reacted as it always did, coming alive and alert. The way his body always had responded to her, even when he'd had to suppress it.

He reached for her, and she came to him as easy as anything. They passed the rest of the night in a tangle of need and sweat and urgency. It was everything he'd ever dreamed of having with her, physically. And when she left before midnight, he didn't try to keep her with him.

But he did find himself wishing their moment from earlier hadn't been interrupted. That whatever she'd been about to say had come out and he could know what had been about to happen in that moment.

Because as he lay in bed, unable to sleep and missing her, it felt like that moment might have changed everything.



The sound of Ansel's truck door slamming in her driveway made Lark flinch like she'd grabbed a hot wire.

She'd been on edge all day, trying to put last night out of her mind. Well, not all of it. Not the parts where they'd been together in Ansel's bed. That made her shivery and hot to remember.

And not the parts where their pets had chased each other round the room. That still made her laugh.

The part where Ansel had started talking about kids and she'd felt a terrible panic claw at her. It was like she was seeing something precious teeter on the edge of a cliff and if she didn't grab it in time, she'd never see it again.

Ansel with his kids. That's what she'd seen hanging over some imaginary edge. And being a selfish, greedy person, she'd wanted to snatch that vision and claim it for herself. *Mine. I want that for me.*

So she'd said all that stuff about wanting kids and a family and a career. None of it had been a lie. But it was too soon to say it. She couldn't even admit she was sleeping with him for heaven's sake.

Although she thought Bear might suspect something was up. He'd asked her the other day about talking to Ansel about an order of loose minerals, and he'd done it in a weird way. Like he wasn't sure if Lark would ask as a customer... or as Ansel's lover.

Lulu had been watching her strangely the other day too, but Lark had no idea how Lulu might have guessed anything. It wasn't like Lulu came by her or Ansel's place and would see their trucks parked where they shouldn't be. But still, something had been off.

Or maybe Lark was just being paranoid. She was so keyed up she could be hallucinating all these things. Seeing reactions that weren't there.

But the one reaction she couldn't explain away was her own. She'd wanted to stay with Ansel last night. When she'd risen from his bed, she'd been crushed he hadn't reached out for her.

You could have asked to stay. He would have said yes.

If she wanted it, she had only to ask for it. That had been her mistake with him last time. And here she was, possibly screwing up the same way all over again.

A knock at the door. She jumped out of her skin. Bozeman barked from the backyard, warning her that someone was there.

“Come in.” Her voice was husky, breathless. Her pulse was already careening around her body, and he hadn’t even come in yet.

When he did, his smile heated, his gaze roaming over her possessively. She wanted to launch herself at him. To wrap herself around him, seal her mouth to his, and never come up for air. Not once.

But that was only simple lust. Beneath it was that painful sweetness, the kind that made her heart feel as if it were splitting open. And only he could catch the pieces and make them whole.

Her breath came in shaky pants. Her heart thudded in the same shuddering way. She had to touch him, or she’d break apart.

He met her halfway, scooping her up as she cupped his face and kissed him. Had they even said anything to each other? Did they even need to after all this time?

“I missed you,” she confessed as he carried her into the bedroom. Apparently she did have something she needed to say to him.

He nipped at her lower lip, sending heat streaming through her. “Missed you too. So much.”

That sweetness swelled and cracked, the edges cutting up her insides. She would have given anything to hear him say that after their night together by the swimming hole. Why hadn’t she called him? Why hadn’t she asked to stay last night?

“Lark.” Ansel was watching her, his brows drawn together. “What happened?”

He must have sensed how twisted up she was feeling. Without thinking, she looked away from him and over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror.

Ansel's reflection filled the mirror, broad shoulders, long legs, feet planted. And her in his arms, cradled and protected. He looked the way he always did. Almost too handsome to bear.

She looked different. This time though, there was nothing in her reflection to frighten her, although she knew instinctively there was no earthly way she appeared like that.

Lark was glowing. Softly, gently, but glowing all the same. Like the sun was rising under her skin, reaching out with tender fingers of light.

She looked blessed. Otherworldly.

In love.

"Lark." This time Ansel meant to get an answer. "What's wrong?"

With an effort, she tore her gaze from the mirror, panic spiking in her. The mirror was showing her things she didn't want to see. Things she longed for.

"What do you see there?" she asked in a harsh whisper.

"The mirror?" He frowned at it. "I just see you." He looked down at her. "I don't understand."

Lark took a slow, deep breath, then another, forcing herself to calm down. He didn't see anything in the mirror. It was fine. She was imagining things. Again.

Still, she was going to have to get rid of that mirror and tell Pippa some plausible lie. She was tired of it not reflecting back what it should.

"It's nothing." She pulled his mouth down to hers, hungry for him in a way she'd never been before. Chasing something. Or running away from it.

Ansel sensed the change in her immediately. His grip went rough, his kisses demanding. She welcomed it and more, fisting her hand in his hair, taking his lip between her teeth and pulling.

"Christ." His voice was a low growl. "*Lark.*"

He practically tore off her clothes. She did the same for him, her pulse pounding as if someone were chasing her.

When he dragged her to the bed, she knew his hands would leave marks behind. It gave her an electric thrill to imagine seeing them tomorrow, knowing she'd carry them with her all day. *He's caught me*, she would think.

They came together with the same fierce urgency, as if they thought if they let up for even a moment, they'd slip away from each other. At least that was how it felt to Lark. But as Ansel moved in her and she climbed to a shattering climax, the moment slowed. Then stopped.

And as she came down, wrapped in his strong arms, his breath hot in the hollow of her neck, she realized it didn't matter how fast or how slow she went—he was always there.

He's caught me.

“You all right?” he rumbled into her ear. He seemed to be having trouble keeping himself braced up on his arms, but he wouldn't allow himself to collapse on her.

Emotion threatened to suffocate her. Even after that wild... *mating*, he was still so considerate. So tender with her. She would always be safe with him. Always.

She scooted over so he would finally let himself come down. He was hot, sticky with sweat, and breathing as hard as she was, but nothing had ever felt better than when he pulled her close to him. Not even the climax they'd shared moments before.

“I'm fine,” she said, pushing his hair off his damp brow. She kissed him, soft and sweet, because she couldn't seem to do anything else. Helpless kisses was what they were.

She was in trouble. Her plan, everything so carefully worked out—keeping their affair a secret until it was safe, until she had the promotion and she'd saved the feedstore with her ad campaign—was in serious threat of toppling. She wanted to never leave this bed or his side. She wanted to shout in the middle of Main Street how she felt when she was with him.

But she couldn't. Her jaw hurt she was clenching it so hard against all that. She was going to crack a tooth at this rate.

And she was still kissing him, featherlight over his nose, his cheekbones. His smile was small, tender. He liked this, her helpless kisses, cuddling after their wild coming together.

She liked it too. Too much to make herself stop and get ahold of herself.

"Lark." His voice was gentle. She could hear the smile in it. "Lark," he said again when she kept brushing her mouth over his skin.

He caught a strand of her hair and tugged. Her scalp tingled under the pressure.

"I have something to tell you," he said, "although I know you're not ready to hear it."

She stiffened instinctively. "Then don't say it."

Her heart was thundering, her mouth dry as sand. She wasn't ready for this. He couldn't mean it.

If he told her this, there was no way she could keep this a secret, no way she could hold back.

If he said the words, she'd shout it to the entire town. She had to make him stop, to remind him of why she wasn't... *lovable*.

"You don't want to do this. I'm bossy," she said softly, trying to warn him off. Her voice threatened to break. "I'm a know-it-all. I make too many plans and get upset when they don't work out. Or when people don't stick to them. I don't let people help—I have to do it myself."

He started smiling halfway through. It got bigger and bigger as she went along.

What was he doing? She was telling him all the awful parts about herself, things he already knew but should really think about before he said *that*.

If he said *that*, she knew her carefully laid-out plan would be annihilated, wiped away by the enormity of her feelings. If

he didn't say it, she could hold back.

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Why are you smiling?"

"Because, Lark"—he twined a strand of her hair around his finger, his tone patient—"I don't love you in spite of your faults. I love you because of them." He released her hair, stroked his fingers along her shoulder. "Yes, you're bossy. You take charge. You're ambitious. You know everything about everything or least try to learn it. But when you're doing all that, you're always making sure to do it to help others."

That was so good to hear, so much what she craved that it *hurt*.

So she pulled out her final weapon. "I'm a bitch."

He caught her chin. "No. Don't say that. Don't ever say that. Never again."

Good, he was starting to get upset. Certainly that smile was wiped off his face. She wasn't going to allow herself to miss it.

"It's true." Yeah, it hurt to hear and to say, but some deep part of her feared it was true. That she'd gone past being smart and prepared and pulled together into something worse. Into something bad.

Ansel couldn't see it because he was blind to her faults.

"It's not." He sighed heavily, the sound almost like defeat. "You don't have to say it back—I know you won't—but I had to tell you how I feel. That I love you."

She gasped, half pain, half piercing pleasure. *He'd said it.* She'd told him all the worst about herself and he said it—again.

She scrambled upright, the sheet falling away from her. Her pulse hammered so hard against her ears it felt like they might burst. And yet she found herself pulled toward him. Lark only wanted to lie back down next to him, to tell him—

The mirror showed her back to herself. The glow was even stronger, although inside she was in turmoil. In the mirror, she looked happy. Excited.

And she was those things and frightened as well, the brighter emotions rubbing raw along the darker ones.

Ansel raised himself up and reached for her arm. In the mirror, he looked exactly the same. No tricks, no illusions, nothing that wasn't already written on his face. His kind, beloved face.

"I'm sorry," he said as he rubbed her arm. "I shouldn't have sprung that on you." His touch was gentle although his voice was tight. "I know you want to keep this... *quiet*."

The word twisted as it left his lips. Her glow in the mirror dimmed.

He was upset. He'd offered her this wonderful gift, and she was hurting him by not taking it. And that hurt her.

Maybe... maybe she was wrong. Maybe everything would be fine if they were open about this.

Maybe it was time for her take a chance with him. She'd been too afraid before. What if she was brave this time?

"No," she said, never looking away from their reflections. Her glow intensified. "No. I've been—"

A phone rang from the floor. Loud enough to have her flinching.

Ansel's hand tightened on her arm. "Is that yours or mine?"

She didn't know. She wanted to ignore it, but it was so loud, so insistent. The moment was entirely ruined. She'd have to fight to get it back.

"I think it's mine." Ansel was already climbing out of bed. "Who's calling now?"

When she looked at the mirror, everything was normal again. No glow on her, just bare skin and tousled hair.

Ansel was looking through his jeans pockets. "It's mine," he said as he closed his hand around his phone. "Hello?"

Although he was entirely naked, he looked completely at ease. Lark could only stare for several moments because he

was so damn luscious. He scrubbed his hand through his hair, his biceps swelling, and her mouth watered. A line of thin red marks crossed his upper back, and she winced. She must have done that without realizing it.

“What’s happened? Pippa, I don’t understand.”

Lark suddenly realized he was talking to his cousin. Of course Pippa would interrupt right now. Of course. Lark barely kept from rolling her eyes.

“No, I don’t know anything about the feed.” Ansel turned and met her gaze. His brows were drawn tight together, his mouth flat. “Okay, well, what did the vet say?”

Lark strained to listen, trying to figure out what was going on. Something had gone wrong with their animals—again—and it sounded like Pippa was trying to blame it on the feed. More likely it was her own ignorance that had harmed her animals. Again.

She released a quiet huff of breath. Bear was probably already there, talking Pippa down. She didn’t see why Ansel had to be dragged into it too.

“Okay.” Ansel pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. Tell Lulu everything will be okay.” He hit the End Call button.

“What did they do now?” Lark didn’t mean to be so tart, but she was annoyed his cousin had interrupted them.

Ansel gave her a searching look. “Lulu’s sheep are sick. I mean, they were originally Javi’s, but I guess they’re hers now too. A few of the bred ewes are down and won’t get up.”

That sounded really bad—her stomach twisted imagining—but Lark didn’t see what that had to do with Ansel. “Did they get Penny out? What did she say?” The vet was the person they should be calling. Didn’t they know that?

“Penny thinks it might be copper toxicity. From the feed.”

Lark’s eyes went wide. “Sheep can’t have copper, everyone knows that! What did she feed them?”

“Lulu knows that too,” Ansel said grimly. “They think maybe the feed got mixed up. I have to go over to Javi’s, see if I can help.”

“I’ll come with you,” Lark said, already moving toward her clothes. “I’ve seen it before, in college. Penny might not have.” The symptoms were already running through her head. She wished she could have talked to Pippa before she hung up, asked what they were seeing.

But maybe it was better to talk to Penny. Yeah, it was definitely better—Penny would be able to accurately describe their symptoms. As for treatment...

Lark really hoped they’d caught whatever it was early. Copper toxicity could be treated as long as the sheep hadn’t ingested too much, but it was still tricky.

As she buttoned up her shirt, she realized Ansel was watching her with a hard look on his face. “What?”

He pressed his lips together. “Are you sure you want to go?”

His expression was odd. She couldn’t figure it out. He sounded like *he* didn’t want her to go. Because...

Because he thought the feed was tainted? She stiffened, her shoulders going rigid. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, because...” He spread his hands out as if that explained it. Then he shook his head. “Never mind. Let’s just go.”

Lark let it drop as she finished getting ready, but inside, she couldn’t stop thinking about it. Did he mean the feed might be tainted? Because it wasn’t. If anything, his cousins mixed up the feed. Assuming it was the feed and Lulu hadn’t turned the ewes out in a field of hemlock or something.

She remembered their poor chickens and shuddered. Whatever was going on with the sheep, it wouldn’t be as easy to fix as that.

Her hands slowed on her buttons. Wait, was that what Ansel had meant? That there would be sick animals there and

he knew it was tough for her? He might have just said so.

Or was he thinking about them being seen together? They could come up with an excuse for that. Maybe not a great one but one his cousins would believe.

His back was to her, so there weren't any answers there. And clearly he was in a hurry to get there, so she wasn't going to push it right now.

Still, their ride over to Javi's was quiet, the atmosphere between them heavy with something Lark couldn't name.



The scene at Javi's was absolutely gutting.

Ansel had to take a moment when he walked into the barn. Three of the ewes were propped up sternally between straw bales to keep them from flopping over. Lying flat on their sides was bad for them, but clearly the ewes were too sick to stay upright on their own. Their eyes were closed, and they were breathing hard.

Worst was Lulu though. She'd stopped crying at some point, likely because she'd run out of tears. Her eyes were puffy, tear tracks running down her dusty cheeks, and straw was caught in her curls. She was staring off at nothing, her expression wrecked.

She blamed herself.

"All the signs point to copper toxicity," Penny was saying as she packed up her supplies. "I'll send off these samples, and we'll know for sure. With the chelation, they should start to improve in a few days."

"And if they don't?" Pippa asked.

Bear had his arm around her, holding her close.

Javi was at Lulu's back. He seemed to be keeping her upright the same way the straw was the sheep. He looked only slightly less wrecked than his girlfriend. Allie was in another corner of the barn, her brow knit. Thorne, of all people, was on the other side. He was watching Allie.

“If they don’t...” Penny looked over at Lulu and lifted one shoulder.

If they didn’t, that was it. Ansel sucked in a breath, trying to imagine how Lulu would take that. She’d be devastated.

“I thought I had the right feed,” she said to herself.

“You did,” Javi said fiercely. “You wouldn’t mess something like that up.”

She shook her head dully. “But I bought goat feed and sheep feed at the same time. I must have mixed them up. That’s the only explanation.”

Penny looked like she wanted to reassure Lulu but couldn’t.

“Did you save the bag?” Lark asked.

Pippa and Lulu both stiffened at her words. Ansel himself felt unease skate down his spine. The way Lark had said *What did they do now?* was still stuck in his brain. Yeah, maybe Lulu had mixed up the feed, but Lark didn’t have to be so accusing.

Little things tumbled through his memory. Lark covering up the mirror Pippa had given her. Lark sneering about the chickens getting sick. The way her expression shifted each time she looked at Pippa or Lulu, her lip curling ever so slightly.

She didn’t like his cousins, and she wasn’t exactly good about hiding it. Whereas Ansel loved his cousins even if they weren’t experts at taking care of chickens and sheep.

He loved Lark too. He’d told her so not more than two hours ago. But he didn’t have to like the way she was around his cousins.

“I threw it away,” Lulu said faintly. “I put it in the sealed bin and then I tossed the bag. It’s safer in the bin.” Her voice caught on a sob.

“It is,” Javi said as he pulled her into his chest. “It is safer.”

“How would we know if it did get mixed up?” Pippa asked. “This pellet feed, it all looks exactly the same.” She stared at Lark as if she ought to have an answer.

Which of course Lark should. This was her specialty.

“Just looking at it, no,” Lark said. “You have to get it tested.” She didn’t elaborate on how to do that, although she knew how.

Something about this wasn’t right. Lulu mixing up the feed was the most obvious explanation, but she really was careful. She loved those sheep more than anything. And she knew how dangerous it was to give them goat feed. Lulu would double-and triple-check the feed.

He tried to remember what had happened the last time the Prime One feed had been tainted. The protein in the feed had been switched with a toxic substitute, so it had been in almost all their different animal feeds—goat, cow, chicken, etc. The first sign that something was wrong was that animals started dying.

Ansel made his way over to Thorne since Lark was peppering Penny with questions. With Lulu and Pippa being so quiet, it seemed like Lark was taking over, asking about treatments, tests, and what to watch for in the other sheep.

It was what she did, take command of chaotic situations, but Ansel was still uneasy. Lulu had to have already asked Penny about all this. There was no way she wouldn’t have. Lark didn’t have to charge in like this.

“How many ewes are down?” he asked Thorne, just between the two of them.

“Just these three. They were only giving grain to the bred ewes.” Thorne finally tore his gaze away from Allie. “I guess these three are always first to the feeder. That’s how they got the biggest dose. The rest need watching but probably got caught in time.”

Ansel rubbed his jaw. If Lulu had switched the feed accidentally, then that made sense. “She’s pretty careful about things,” he said, testing Thorne’s opinion on the whole thing.

Thorne made a noise that could have meant anything. At the sound, Allie looked over at them. When she saw Thorne, she scowled, her mouth trembling.

The other man studiously looked at nothing. Her scowl bounced right off him.

Ansel sighed. This wasn't getting them anywhere. "Where's the grain bin?"

Thorne shrugged.

Why was Thorne even here? These weren't his sheep, wasn't his girlfriend—he liked Ansel's cousins even less than Lark did. He was only watching Allie to glare at her, which was kind of shitty now that Ansel thought about it.

And Lark was still talking Penny's ear off. Pippa watched with a slightly sour expression while Lulu looked as if she wasn't even aware anyone else was in the barn.

Ansel motioned Allie over. She gave Thorne a glance—he was still staring at nothing—then shook her head. So Ansel went to her.

"Where's the feed bin?" he asked.

"In that room there." Allie motioned with her chin. She wrapped her arms around herself. "Lulu is so upset. She's been crying for hours. She was almost screaming before that."

"I can imagine." Those images weighed on him. "It might not have been the feed."

Allie looked up at him. "What else would it be?"

"Well"—he tipped his cap, scratched his head—"it might be the feed but not Lulu's fault. I want to test what she's got here, what she thinks is sheep feed. And what you guys have at home, the stuff labeled goat feed."

Her eyes went wide. "If it's sheep feed, will it hurt the goats?"

Ansel shook his head. "No, no, goats can have sheep feed. It's fine."

They went together into the feed room, everything snugly closed up and labeled and the floor swept clean. There were some calculations and dates on a whiteboard—Lulu had been figuring out how to increase the ewes’ feed as their due date approached.

Ansel would have called this the feed room of someone obsessed with details. Someone who would never make a mistake.

But it happened to everyone eventually.

Allie found him an empty yogurt tub with a lid, and he scooped some of the feed into it. The pellets were small, flecked green, and smelled mostly like hay. Lark was right—you couldn’t tell the difference.

But the lab Ansel was going to send this to could.

“Will the sheep be okay?” Allie asked. “Lulu loves them. Maybe even more than she loves Javi.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Ansel said dryly. “She caught it quickly it looks like, so there’s a really good chance they will.”

“Good.” Allie pointed to the yogurt tub. “What if Lulu did mix up the feed?”

“Everyone makes mistakes.” A small comfort, but it was true.

Allie’s gaze was solemn. “She’ll never forgive herself. Could there be... Could something else have happened?”

For a moment he considered telling Allie about the tainted feed. She wouldn’t have heard the story. She hadn’t even known what a feedstore was a few months ago. But then he heard Lark’s voice carry through the open door.

This wasn’t at all like the tainted-feed case. Totally different. It wasn’t right to bring it up, to try to blame this on that.

Most likely, Lulu had messed up. That’s what the tests from the lab would say.

“Maybe,” he said slowly. “We’ll know more in a day or two.”

Allie reached out and squeezed his arm. “Thank you. You help us too much.”

His throat closed up. “Can’t help too much. You guys are family.”

Then Allie did something she never had before—she wrapped her arms around him and hugged tight.

Pippa hugged him all the time, and even Lulu did occasionally. But Allie had never seemed comfortable enough to touch him.

Now she was.

He patted her shoulder. “It’ll be okay. No matter what.”

“I know,” she said into his shoulder. “Sometimes you hug even when things will be okay.”

He had to close his eyes for a moment. And he swore that if the samples came back showing that Lulu was at fault, he’d never tell her.

When they came back out, Penny was taking her last load back to her vet truck. Thorne had disappeared, Lark was examining one of the sheep, and Lulu was kneeling next to another, whispering, “I’m so sorry, Celia. So sorry.” Javi was with her, his arm over her shoulder.

Bear and Pippa came toward them. “There’s nothing more to do,” Bear said. “I’ll take Pippa and Allie home.”

Ansel nodded. “I’ll take Lark. If you need anything...” His eyes widened as he realized what he’d said.

Bear gave him a hard stare. Pippa and Allie didn’t seem to have noticed.

“We’ll call you.” Pippa caught at Bear’s arm, pulling him toward the door. He gave Ansel another glance, then followed. “See you tomorrow.”

Allie waved and then they were gone.

Lark got up from beside the sheep, dusting her hands off. There might have been a sheen of tears in her eyes, but the low light in the barn made it hard to tell.

“Penny thinks the prognosis is decent.” Lark was talking fast, her hands twisting together. “It’s a shame this had to happen.”

Ansel silently shook his head at her. Lulu was right there and didn’t need to hear that.

He went to his cousin and set a hand on her arm. She didn’t look away from the ewe.

“We’re going to take off,” Ansel said quietly. “If you need anything, let us know.”

Lulu nodded. Ansel wondered if she’d even really heard him.

Javi, though, twisted around to shake Ansel’s hand. “Thanks for coming,” he said solemnly.

“I only wish there was something we could do.” Ansel thought of the feed he’d taken and decided not to mention it. No point getting either of their hopes up.

“Just coming is more than enough.” Javi looked to Lulu, his expression falling. “Really, we appreciate it.”

Lulu still seemed lost in her own world.

“Of course. Anything for you guys.” Ansel briefly considered telling them everything would be okay but decided against it. Lulu wasn’t going to be fooled by his empty words. Only the sheep getting through this would make her feel better.

Lark said nothing to them. Her hands were still clasped together, and he could tell from the white of her knuckles she was squeezing them hard.

“I’ll call later,” he told Javi. Hopefully he’d have some good news from the feed analysis.

But if it was good news for Lulu, meaning that she hadn’t switched the feeds... that would be bad news for Lark. Because that meant Prime One was at fault.

As they walked out together to his truck, Ansel couldn't push that conflict out of his head. No matter what, someone he loved was going to get hurt. Heck, Lulu was already looking entirely broken. Not to mention what the ewes were suffering.

The silence between them on the drive back to her house was thick, heavy. It seemed neither of them wanted to be the first to break it.

Finally, when he couldn't take it anymore, Ansel said, "Lulu's usually pretty careful."

"Not careful enough," Lark snapped, like she'd been dying for him to say something. "First their chickens, now their sheep."

Ansel felt his mood sink like a lead balloon. "They didn't know about the chickens. Lulu definitely knows not to give sheep feed meant for goats."

"And yet she still mixed them up." Lark's hands curled and uncurled. "Those poor ewes. It was awful, and who knows if they caught it in time."

Ansel didn't say anything. Yes, it probably had been hard for Lark to see that, but clearly it was even worse for Lulu.

Lark swung her gaze over to him. "What? You don't think she mixed up the feed? It's the only explanation. She was careless. Again. And her animals are suffering. Again."

"It's not the only explanation."

She stiffened. "What... You can't possibly think... This is not Prime One's fault!"

He stared grimly out the windshield. "It's just that it's not like Lulu to make a mistake like that."

Lark snorted. "Oh, isn't it? Fine, I'll admit, we had some problems with tainted feed in the past. This isn't anything like that. None of this fits with what happened before."

"All right, maybe it's not exactly the same," he admitted, "but something still feels off to me."

“Yeah, the off thing is that your cousins have animals in the first place. They clearly don’t know what they’re doing.”

That hit him like a slap. “Everyone has to start somewhere.”

“I guess,” Lark said with a sneer. “But most of us manage to not kill our animals through ignorance.”

He’d like to say that he didn’t recognize Lark like this. That her arrogance and superiority weren’t things he’d ever seen from her before.

But that would be wrong. Most of the time Lark used everything she’d learned to help others. But sometimes... Sometimes she lorded it over people. Like his cousins. Whatever mistakes they’d made—and he’d be the first to admit they had—they didn’t deserve to be looked down on.

“You know,” he said before he could think about it, “you’re kind of a snob.”

She immediately and completely shut down, her shoulders going rigid and her expression turning to stone.

“If you’d rather believe that,” she said stiffly, “than the truth about your cousin screwing up, fine.”

For a moment he was tempted to apologize. And yet... “What if Lulu didn’t screw up? You can’t even admit the possibility.”

“Because it makes no sense.”

“No, because it threatens your precious company. That thing you put above everything else.”

They were speeding down Main Street now, only blocks away from Lark’s house. If anyone bothered to look into the truck, they’d see the two of them having a ferocious fight. That would get the gossip mill going full speed.

Ansel found he didn’t care much. Keeping this a secret didn’t seem important anymore. He might love Lark for her faults, but that didn’t mean she could insult his cousins. Or always assume things were their fault.

“My precious company?” she spat out. “And what about your feedstore? You haven’t left that place for a single day since you inherited it. You’re one to talk.”

“I did when you were sick!”

“I didn’t ask you to!”

Now it was his turn to go rigid. She sounded pretty ungrateful there. Not that he’d taken care of her just to hear her say thank you... but hearing that pissed him off.

“If I wait for you to ask for anything,” he said, “I’d be waiting forever.”

He pulled into her driveway and killed the engine. He couldn’t believe they were having their first fight about this.

Lark pinched her nose. “I’m sorry. I really am grateful you helped me. Maybe we should just drop this. We’re never going to agree.”

It was a grudgingly offered peace branch, and he ought to take it. And yet... “They’re my cousins. One of them is dating your brother. Why do you resent them so much?”

Her hand fell from her face. “I don’t.” She didn’t seem to believe it herself.

“You definitely don’t like them. I saw the mirror—why would you cover it otherwise?”

“The mirror...” She shook her head. “It has nothing to do with that.” She looked out the window, leaving only her cheek and the corner of her mouth in view. “Okay, maybe I am still upset with them. But Esme didn’t leave that house to them, and you know it. But they just claimed it anyway even though our ranch bought it fair and square. And then, when he was supposed to be getting them out of the house that we owned, Bear went and helped them. Sayer, who wouldn’t talk to any of us for a whole year because of his stupid fight with Thorne, went and helped them. They decided they wanted to play farmer without any experience or knowledge, and everyone fell over themselves to help them, even you.”

She crossed her arms and sighed.

Ansel didn't know what to say to that. The best he could do was "They've all been through a lot."

"I know that. But this life"—Lark gestured at their surroundings—"I've worked really hard at it since I was old enough to walk. Raising livestock isn't a hobby for me. It's everything. And I don't think they feel the same way. At least not judging by how their animals are faring."

She set her jaw, so rigid he swore he heard her teeth grinding. And Ansel realized that was as far as they could get in resolving this. She wasn't going to be swayed.

But what did he expect? He'd just told her he loved her and she hadn't said it back. She'd freaked out instead. Getting her to even admit she still wanted him as badly as he wanted her had taken years. Years.

She wasn't even going to entertain the possibility she might be wrong. Trying to get her to would be like beating his head against a wall.

Well, he wasn't going to be swayed either. He loved her, more than anything... but he also loved his cousins. And Lark wasn't being fair to them. It sounded like she knew it, but she wasn't going to change that.

"Well then," he said slowly, finally.

She uncrossed her arms, looked toward her lap. "Thank you for bringing me home," she said stiffly. "I probably won't see you tomorrow—I have to make a run to the mill."

So that was that then. Their first fight—maybe their last one too—was done. She was leaving mad, and he wasn't inclined to call her back to fix things.

They both needed to cool off at least.

But as he drove away, Ansel couldn't shake the feeling that something permanent had been broken.



Lark marched into her house in a fine fury, her nerves strung tighter than baling wire.

Ansel was entirely wrong. Of course Lulu had mixed up the feed. There was no other explanation. Just because he wanted to push the blame somewhere else—like on Prime One—didn't make it true. It wasn't like Lark thought Lulu was malicious or anything. But she was inexperienced. Even Ansel had to admit that.

She let Bozeman back in the house, scooping him up into her arms. Seeing those poor sheep had shaken her badly. They were all so innocent, with their soft eyes and gentle nature, and they were suffering because of a dumb mistake. She'd felt like her chest was cracking open seeing them. So she'd talked with Penny to distract herself from that before she broke down completely.

Bozeman pushed his fuzzy head into her chin, looked up and tried to lick her face. Lark was suddenly aware tears were rolling down her cheeks. She'd held it together for so long, but now she was falling apart. Cracking apart.

You're kind of a snob.

She gasped out a sob. Lord, that had *hurt* to hear from Ansel.

You're a bitch, Lork. Rhymes with dork. Okay, Ansel was nowhere near as mean as Porter and probably hadn't even meant to trigger that memory, but he had. He'd just said he loved her because of her faults; then he went and said that.

Another sob ripped out of her. Bozeman whined and licked a tear off her jaw.

"I'm not a snob," she whispered to him. "It's not my fault I grew up with animals and they didn't."

And yet some deep, dark part of her, the part that believed Porter's cruel words along with everyone else's criticisms of how she just had to show off all the time—even though she wasn't—was afraid that she was. That every bad thing ever said about her was true. That no matter what she intended

when she opened her mouth, the only thing that counted was how people perceived her.

Ansel had said he loved her because of her flaws. And she couldn't even say she loved him back. Instead, she had to start a fight about his cousins, his family, because she just couldn't let it go.

Bozeman wriggled in her arms, frantic to reassure her. Lark was crying with an open mouth, she realized, gulping down air between sobs.

"It's okay," she said to him, holding him close. "It's okay."

But it wasn't. Why hadn't she just agreed with him that maybe Lulu hadn't messed up? He only wanted some hope that Lulu hadn't hurt the sheep. It wasn't like Lark would be admitting that Prime One was at fault. One simple little *maybe* probably could have been enough for him.

She'd held too tight to her pride instead. Even now it kicked against the idea of calling him, making things right.

You're right, it insisted, not caring how badly her heart was breaking. *Don't give in. When you give in, they win.*

But Ansel wasn't any of the people who'd hurt her before, the ones who assumed she was something she wasn't. He loved her.

And she'd chosen her pride instead of him.

Or had she? Maybe, maybe he was being unreasonable. Yes, he loved and cared about Lulu, but the most likely explanation was staring him in the face—she'd mixed up the feeds. And while Lark could admit she wasn't exactly happy the Crivelli sisters were here in all their lives, she tried her hardest not to let it show. Yes, Ansel had seen it, but then he knew her better than anyone. The Crivellis didn't seem to realize it, which meant she'd been successful. She was allowed to not like people, for heaven's sake, especially with the history between their families.

"I'm not a bad person," she said to Bozeman. He licked her chin in agreement, but Lark wasn't entirely certain that wasn't her ego talking right now.

But there was one thing that would tell her the truth. The things she was afraid to admit.

She set Bozeman down and marched toward her room, her pulse thundering. She didn't know exactly what the mirror would tell her—maybe her reflection would mouth *Apologize to Ansel*—but it was certain to have something to show her.

Although her legs wanted to slow down, to stop, she forced herself to walk right up to the mirror. She glared at her reflection, daring the mirror to do something.

The Lark in the glass looked... like her. Hair messy, face puffy and red, dark circles under her eyes, but exactly what she was expecting to see.

Bozeman bounced around her ankles, barking up a storm.

“Shh,” she said absently. “You’ll wake up the neighbors.”

The Lark in the mirror repeated the words back to her.

She sighed. Stupid mirror, scaring the crap out of her all those times and then just being normal when she really needed it. Was she supposed to say something to wake it up? Some incantation? That was how it worked in fairy tales.

But this wasn't a fairy tale. This was her life.

As if the mirror had heard her thoughts, the surface rippled. Lark held her breath.

When it stilled again, her reflection stared back at her... changed now.

This Lark looked grief-stricken. Like her heart was breaking, her life was falling apart. There was zero pride in her face. This Lark didn't look like she knew anything.

Somehow the sight didn't terrify her, the real Lark. She lifted a hand to her cheek, touched her face. Her reflection did the same.

Maybe it wasn't so cut and dry. Maybe she should give Lulu the benefit of the doubt. And by doing that, she could make amends with Ansel.

She didn't always have to be right.

In the mirror, her reflection shifted and shimmied until the real Lark was looking back at her.

For a moment she considered calling Ansel right away. But something niggled at the back of her mind, an itch that she had to scratch.

What if something really was going on with the feed? She hadn't wanted to admit it before, but Ansel was right—Prime One'd had issues in the past.

She could find out pretty easily if something was up. In fact, she was the only person involved who could.

In a few minutes, she had her laptop out on the kitchen table and fired up. First she called up the inventory software, looking to see which lots of goat and sheep feed had gone to Cabrillo Feed and Seed the past few weeks. Then she went searching for those lots in the shipping warehouses.

Sure enough, they were sitting in a warehouse a few hours away, waiting to get sent to other stores. If she went tonight, she could have samples of the feed ready to go to a lab for analysis in the morning. In a day or two, she'd know exactly how much copper was in each feed.

And she'd know if Lulu had mixed up the feeds... or if Prime One had.

That made her pause. Because she wasn't doing this to prove she was right. She was doing this to fix what she'd broken between her and Ansel. If Lulu had mixed up the feed, then Lark would never tell him what she'd found. She'd simply apologize for being mean about his cousins, hope and pray the sheep got better, and do whatever he wanted to get them back together.

If Prime One had mixed up the feed... then she had a big problem on her hands. Telling Ansel would be the easy part. But she was slowly realizing she had an obligation to investigate this beyond her own personal reasons. If the feed was bad, it could hurt other animals.

She couldn't let that happen.

So even though it was eleven at night, she grabbed her truck keys and raced out to start the long drive to the warehouse.



“Pippa, Kelsey,” Ansel snapped the moment they appeared in the feedstore an hour before opening.

The two of them jumped, probably because he never snapped. Not even when things were going to hell.

Ansel felt like he was in hell. Or hell was inside him, tearing him apart. No way to run from what was inside you, clawing up your ribs and tearing at your heart.

He’d told her he loved her... and she’d rejected him again. What was that, three times now? When was he going to learn not to risk himself with her? To stop slamming his hand in that gate over and over again?

Work wasn’t even helping to distract him. It only made things worse. But he had no choice. This potential issue with the feed had to be dealt with. And if he snapped at his employees, well, they could take it. Wasn’t even a sliver of the agony he felt inside showing in his voice.

“What?” Kelsey said mulishly. “Everything was fine when we closed last night.”

Pippa didn’t say anything, merely stared at him wide-eyed.

“You’re not in trouble.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair, feeling suddenly guilty on top of everything else. “I didn’t sleep much last night.”

He hadn’t slept at all, actually. Just sat dry-eyed, staring at the wall.

“Me either,” Pippa said. “The sheep are still hanging in there. I talked to Lulu this morning. They’re not quite up yet, but she said they look better.”

Crap, the sheep. He should have asked about them straight away instead of worrying about his own problems. He hadn’t been poisoned with copper. Just by Lark’s rejection. “Good. Hopefully they keep improving. And speaking of that, we need to take all the Prime One sheep pellets off the shelves. Don’t sell any more of it. Go through the sales receipts and make a list of anyone who bought it in the past few weeks. I’ll call them and tell them to bring it back in and we’ll refund the cost.”

That was going to be a hell of a chore on top of everything else, but it couldn’t be avoided.

Kelsey’s mouth dropped open, but Pippa’s expression brightened.

“What happened?” Kelsey asked. “Did they send out a recall? They *just* had all that tainted feed.”

“There’s no recall,” Ansel said. “Not yet. But Lulu’s sheep have come down with a copper overdose, and it might be from the feed.”

Kelsey frowned. “Did she give them goat feed instead?”

“Possibly,” Ansel said slowly. He shook his head at Pippa, who was ready to defend her sister. “I’m getting it tested today to see what’s going on. If it’s fine, then good, we can sell the feed again. If not, we’re being proactive.”

He’d stopped by Pippa’s place and taken a sample of what they thought was goat feed. Then he’d been at the analysis lab right when they opened at six, thankful they kept farmer hours. It meant he could drop off the samples he had, ask for a rush analysis, then get back before the feedstore had to open. The tech had promised that tomorrow he’d get the results.

If Lulu had swapped bags, then her feed would come up as goat and Pippa’s feed would come up as sheep. But if something had gone wrong at Prime One, both would come up as goat, with copper levels that were too high.

In the meantime, he wasn't selling any of that sheep feed until he knew for sure. People trusted him here, and he meant to keep that trust. If he was wrong, well, he'd be out some money for the feed returns, but it would be worth it to him.

And while he'd sat and waited for the lab to open, he'd thought about Lark. He really wished he hadn't said she was being a snob. Yeah, she knew a lot about livestock, but that information hadn't fallen into her lap. She'd worked really hard for it. So maybe it wasn't unreasonable that she got upset when people couldn't keep up with her.

She was right about animals getting hurt when their owners didn't know what they were doing. Ansel had seen it himself many times before. Lulu, for all that she adored her sheep, wasn't that experienced with them. And Lark had been upset by the sheep's condition too. It was there in her expression, the way she kept wringing her hands together. Ansel had been too focused on his cousins to notice it at first.

What still stuck in him was her reaction to him telling her he loved her. She'd panicked, pure and simple. If she felt the same way about him, she wouldn't have done that. She'd have said it back.

And she hadn't.

He'd have to call her at some point, if only to properly discuss this feed situation. Maybe if they both cooled off some, they could talk about their own relationship. And how long they could go on with him loving her and her wanting to keep him a secret from everyone.

He clenched his jaw and rubbed his forehead. With how he was feeling right now, he didn't want to go on like that.

Calling her would have to wait though. He had to get all the Prime One sheep feed off his shelves, call anyone who'd bought some from him, and then deal with everything else on his plate today. She'd said she was busy today, and so was he.

Upset as he was, he still missed her, which was a hell of a thing to deal with too right now.

And before he told Lark about the feed test results, he was going to tell Clive. He had Clive's number, and Ansel would call him directly. No need to get Lark caught in the middle of this. Clive had handled the tainted-feed issue from before, and Ansel was sure he'd do the right thing if the feed was bad.

Only then would Ansel call Lark. And see if they still had any kind of future together.

"Should I tell Sam out in the yard to come help get the feed out?" Kelsey asked.

Ansel nodded. "Then start going through the receipts. Once you've got a list, I'll start calling people."

"Shouldn't be too many," Kelsey said. "Not a ton of sheep up here."

Ansel supposed that was the one good thing about all this. As Kelsey went for the feed yard, he looked at Pippa, who was watching him with hope in her eyes.

"You really think it wasn't Lulu's fault?" she asked.

"I don't know. Most likely it was her, but I just want to be sure."

She squinted at him. "You look terrible."

"Thanks," he said dryly.

She caught him in a fierce, quick hug. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be mean. Thank you for coming out last night. I know Lulu was out of it, but really, she was grateful you came."

He awkwardly patted her shoulder because she was squeezing the dickens out of him. He was big, sure, but she was surprisingly strong.

And yeah, he was touched too. Always was by one of his cousins' hugs.

"It was no problem," he said.

Pippa released him. "Um, I don't mean to pry, but you came with Lark last night. Like, together." She raised her eyebrows.

Ansel stifled a groan. “We were supposed to keep it secret because of her job.”

Pippa drummed her feet in a triumphant rhythm. “I thought something was going on!”

“What did Bear say?”

Her feet went still. “He’s not mad. But he was definitely surprised. I don’t know if he’s going to ask Lark about it or not. I think he likes to respect her privacy.”

“Well, we’re not really talking at the moment,” Ansel admitted, “so maybe he shouldn’t ask her just yet.”

Pippa’s face fell. “You guys got in a fight last night? No wonder you look so sad. Do you want to talk about it?”

For a moment he was tempted. But then he might have to tell her he and Lark were fighting about her and her sisters, and he didn’t want to do that. It would only upset Pippa, and she was already trying so hard to make Lark like her.

“I’m not quite ready,” he said. “But thank you.”

“Well, when you’re ready, you know where I am,” she said bracingly. “I hope you guys do work it out. I know I tried to set you up with Sasha, but I have to admit you and Lark make sense. I mean, you guys are together so much. And you’ve known each other forever. Something was bound to happen.”

Pippa didn’t even know the half of it. And if Lark had had her way, Pippa wouldn’t even know that much.

“I appreciate that,” he said. “And if you could keep it to yourself for now...”

She nodded. “Of course.” She mimed zipping her lips closed. “I’m going to get started on restocking the bird seed. There’s been a crazy demand for it lately. I guess all the wild birds are gobbling up what they can for winter.”

He gave her shoulder one last pat, then went to get started on his own tasks. By the time he made it back to his office, Kelsey had the list of phone numbers printed out and on his desk.

The very first entry was Lulu's number. It showed she'd bought three bags of sheep feed and one bag of goat feed about a week ago.

Ansel stared at the entry for several moments. When he looked up, he saw his list of vendor contacts pinned to the wall, some in his dad's handwriting, some in his. Lark's name and number was scrawled at the very bottom.

Just the sight made pain stab through his heart. After all this time, they were finally together, even if only secretly, and he'd told her how he really felt... and then this had to happen. It was like the universe didn't want them to be happy.

He shook his head at his own dramatics. He'd spent most of his life being even-keeled, the calm, capable one, and a few hours without Lark and he was cursing fate.

But damn did it feel like fate had stomped hard right on his heart. Wearing hobnailed boots no less.

Instead of calling Lulu, he dialed Javi instead. Javi picked up on the second ring.

"Hey." Javi sounded much better than he had last night. "What's up?"

"A couple of things," Ansel said. "Pippa tells me the ewes are improving."

"Yeah, they are. Celia got up about an hour ago, and Selena just a few minutes ago. They're not one hundred percent, but they're much better. Even Dolores is perked up, although she's still down. Penny's on her way out to check on them."

"That's great news," Ansel said and meant it. If Lulu lost those sheep, she'd be devastated. "It sounds like they're on the right track."

"I hope so. Lulu..." Javi's voice cracked. "It's been tough."

Ansel could just imagine. Seeing both Lulu and his sheep suffering couldn't have been easy for Javi.

“Well, I’ve got some more good news for you,” Ansel said. “If you guys want to bring back that sheep feed, I’ll refund you the price.”

There was a moment of quiet. “So there is something wrong with the feed?”

“Maybe,” Ansel said. “It’s just a gut feeling. I don’t want to get Lulu’s hopes up, but she is really careful with them. I didn’t say anything last night, but I took some of your feed and I’m having the copper levels tested. I can’t say for certain yet, but something might have gone wrong at the mill. I’m pulling all the Prime One sheep feed I’ve got and refunding anyone who bought it from me just to be safe.”

“Wow. That’s... that’s really good of you.”

“Don’t tell Lulu yet,” Ansel said. “But if you bring in the feed, I’ll get you your money.”

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it. With this vet bill we’re getting...” Javi’s voice died. “Lulu loves the sheep, so I’d do anything for them, but it’s going to be rough paying it. So every little bit helps.”

Ansel knew things had been tight for Javi since he hadn’t sold a car he was building for some custom buyer, but he hadn’t thought about how vet bills were going to make it worse. And it wasn’t like Lulu had a lot of money to spare either.

“Like I said last night, if there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

“This is more than enough.” Javi sounded almost happy. “Hey, Penny’s here, so I’ve got to go. But I’ll come in later.”

Ansel ended the call and looked at the next name on the list. Word about this was going to get back to Lark. There was no way it wasn’t.

She wasn’t going to be happy about this. Ansel would make sure not to place any blame on Prime One in his calls—he didn’t want to get sued—but she’d put two and two together. She’d see it as him blaming the company regardless.

That would be more than enough for her to want to end things with him permanently. Right now there might be something for them to salvage. After he started calling people to recall the feed and she found out, it could mushroom into something more.

But he knew in his heart, refunding the feed was the right thing to do. If he kept quiet and more animals got sick...

With a sinking feeling, he dialed the next number.



Lark was discovering there were different degrees of sleeplessness.

The kind she knew better than the back of her hand came from working too much, spending hour after hour trying finally to finish something, polish it until it shone. That kind of sleep deprivation sucked, but at least she'd have something to show for it. She could take pride in what she'd done even as her eyelids closed of their own accord.

The kind she was experiencing today, two days after her fight with Ansel, was very different. There was nothing to do during those long, wide-awake hours of darkness except to wrestle with her regrets and loneliness, to wish that maybe she could have done something different. Maybe she could have even been different.

And then she'd crawl out of bed like she had this morning and realize that her regrets were still with her and she had a raging headache to show for it.

She winced as she tilted her head, pain spiking through her temple. She'd already taken three pills from the ibuprofen bottle she kept in her desk, but it hadn't touched this awful headache. And it didn't help that she had hours and hours of video footage to review today.

The film crew had edited the videos they'd taken and sent them up to her to pull out the ones she liked best. Ansel was smiling out at her from the computer screen, eyes squinting

into the sun as he talked about how the feedstore had been in that spot for over a century.

As Lark watched him talk, she realized her heart hurt just as much as her head. The report from the lab still hadn't come back, but she was so tempted to call him.

When her phone rang, she almost jumped out of her skin. *Maybe it's him.*

With shaking fingers, she grabbed her phone. Immediately her excitement faded.

"Hey, Bear."

"Hey. A couple of things." His voice sounded oddly strained, but that might have just been the crackling connection. "Are you having your 4-H meeting at the feedstore tonight? I need to talk to Carmen about her steer for the Indio fair, and I figured I could meet her there."

Lark groaned to herself. She'd completely forgotten about the meeting tonight, which wasn't at all like her. She'd blame her lack of sleep, but she usually wasn't this forgetful even when sleep-deprived.

Yet another side effect of her broken heart.

"Um, yeah, I'll be there." Quickly she pulled up her online calendar and added the meeting. How had it totally slipped through the cracks? And now she needed to come up with a topic and agenda.

Ansel would probably be there too. She might see him, maybe in his office, maybe in the feedstore. If the lab report wasn't back by then, what was she going to tell him?

I'm sorry. I love you. I miss you.

She swallowed hard. Yeah. She nodded to herself, everything becoming clear to her. Yeah, that was what she was going to say to him.

She missed Ansel too much to go on like this. It didn't matter who was right or who was wrong. And she really would be nicer to his cousins. She'd drown them in sweetness just to have him back.

“Lark?” Bear’s worried tone cut through her thoughts. “You okay?”

She wasn’t entirely sure how Bear would react if she told him the whole sad story about her and Ansel. Yes, he was in love now himself, but he reacted to strong emotions the same way he would a cactus out in the brush. He wouldn’t cut it down, but he’d definitely give it a wide berth.

“I’m fine,” she said bravely.

“Okay.” He didn’t sound super convinced, but she wasn’t going to pursue it if he wasn’t. “The sheep are doing a lot better. Pippa said they’ll all recover just fine.”

Lark blew out a relieved breath. “That’s awesome news.” She’d been worried about them, but she couldn’t very well ask Ansel to give her any updates. She never called Lulu or Pippa for anything, and it hadn’t occurred to her to ask Thorne or Bear.

Something scratched at the back of her mind. Thorne had been there that night—why? With everything going on, she hadn’t thought much of it or even questioned it, but it was strange. He had no reason to be there.

Come to think of it, neither did she. A horrified chill ran through her as she realized she’d shown up with Ansel. Late at night when they absolutely shouldn’t have been together. Especially not in the same truck.

They’d given everything away by doing that, assuming anyone had noticed. But maybe they hadn’t. It had all been such a confusing, chaotic mess.

“Tell Lulu and Pippa I’m glad the ewes are fine,” she said quickly, trying to think of how to get Bear off the phone before he could realize too. “It’s so great that everything ended well. Look, I need to get back to work”—she saw Ansel on her computer screen and her head throbbed—“so did you need anything else?”

He gave a rough exhale. “There’s no great way to ask this, so: Are you and Ansel sleeping together?”

Her mouth dropped open. No words came out.

Okay, maybe her brother wasn't allergic to strong emotions anymore. Although he'd been pretty blunt when he'd asked that.

Her old urge came rushing back, to deny, to hide, to protect herself. She was at work, for heaven's sake, the whole reason she couldn't admit anything.

But she waited for the urge to pass. Thought harder, deeper, about how she should answer. This was her brother. He wouldn't be angry that she was with Ansel—actually, he'd probably make a joke about getting a discount on feed—and he'd likely be hurt that she'd kept it a secret.

"It's kind of an involved story," she said slowly. The skinny-dipping she might keep out of it. Bear didn't need to know everything. "My career makes it complicated. We didn't want to tell anyone."

It sounded so weak when she said it. She hated the words as soon as they left her mouth.

But it wasn't as if she could shout it out to the world. Her job was still on the line.

"You can't sleep with him because of your job?" Bear cut right to the heart of it.

"Technically no. But..." She swiveled in her chair so her back was to the door and dropped her voice. "But we slept together anyway. Except we had a fight last night. A bad one."

Bear sighed. "Okay, I think there's a lot you're leaving out here, but fine. So you're with him, nobody can know, and... what did you fight about?"

Ooh, now this was tricky. Their fight kind of involved Pippa in a way, and Bear was not going to like that. She'd have to put this very carefully. Or else she and Bear would get into a spat too.

"He doesn't think that Lulu accidentally switched the feeds."

There was a long pause on Bear's end. "Really? Pippa thinks the same, but... I don't know. It's probably what

happened. Not that it makes Lulu a bad person, which I tried to explain to Pippa.”

The tightness in Lark’s chest eased. Whew. Bear was on her side then.

“These things happen,” Lark said. Even though she really did think Lulu should have taken a bit more care.

“And Ansel thinks something else happened? Like what?”

That the feed company I work for somehow poisoned the food. “We didn’t really get into details.”

“Hmm. Well, you guys will work it out. Um, when can I actually admit this is going on?”

It was a good question. One she couldn’t answer. “I’m dealing with some stuff at work. But maybe after?”

“Okay. Pippa will be really happy about it. She loves Ansel.”

Oh Lord, the two of them had probably had a long pillow talk about her and Ansel. Before that image could get stuck in her brain, Lark’s other line beeped.

“Hey, I’ve got another call coming in. Talk to you later?”

“Sure. And hey, real quick, I’m happy for you. Ansel’s a great guy. You couldn’t have picked a better man.”

Her throat closed up. She had to take a breath before she could speak. *Please don’t let me have messed everything up with him.* “Right. I’ll talk to you soon.”

She clicked over as fast as she could. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Jacinda from the lab.”

Relief flooded Lark. Finally she was going to get some answers. “Hey. How are you?” Lark had worked with Jacinda before and was glad to talk to someone she already knew.

“Fine. How about yourself?”

Not great. “Hanging in there,” Lark said with false cheer.

“Aren’t we all. I got the results back from that copper analysis you ordered.”

Lark held her breath. She couldn't tell anything from Jacinda's tone. And honestly, she didn't really know how she wanted this to turn out. If it was Lulu's fault, that would be devastating to Lulu and hurt Ansel by extension. If it was a problem with the feed, then Lark had a massive issue on her hands.

"Both the samples you gave me," Jacinda said, "have copper in the 40 ppm range."

"That's high," Lark blurted out. "That's like goat-feed range."

"Um, yes." There was the sound of papers shuffling. "Looking at everything else we tested for, these two feeds seem identical."

Lark felt as if there was a roaring in her ears, white noise that only she could hear. The two feeds were the same. One should have been sheep, the other goat—but they were the same.

And they both had enough copper to make a sheep very, very sick.

"Lark? Can you hear me? Did we get disconnected?"

Suddenly Lark snapped back to reality. "Yes," she said with a cracked voice, "I'm still here." She took a deep breath. "Can you email me those results? And thank you for rushing the analysis."

"Sure thing. If you need anything else, just let me know."

Lark ended the call with numb fingers.

She had to do something. But what? What?

Normally her mind would be racing with plans—everything that needed to be done, what should go first, what was most important—but it was blank.

All she could think about was Lulu's ravaged expression as she hugged her sick ewe.

That was Prime One's fault.

Lark's fault in a way. She didn't bag the feed herself, but she told people it was safe.

Heck, she did her best to sell that feed to as many people as possible.

And that feed had made some animals very, very sick.

She felt sick just thinking about it. She'd been wrong, so terribly wrong. And the feed was still out there, might be making other sheep sick.

Her breath came in unsteady pants. They needed to get it all off the shelves. They needed to test every lot they had and see how widespread the problem was. They probably also needed to contact the state vet in case more animals were showing signs of copper toxicity.

All that was beyond her authority though. She had to talk to Clive. He could get things started.

Before she did that, she grabbed Bozeman up from his bed and gave him a cuddle. He was as precious to her as the sheep were to Lulu—if he'd been sick like that, Lark would have been destroyed.

"I messed up," she told him in a wretched tone. "Really bad."

He whined and licked her face, telling her it would be okay. She hoped he was right. She put him back on his bed. "Stay." He thumped his tail to let her know he understood.

Time to go see Clive and fix this. As she grabbed her laptop—all the evidence was on there—she pondered what she was going to tell Lulu. And Ansel. *I was wrong* would probably be a good place to start. *I'm sorry* would probably be a good follow-up.

I love you would be the thing to end on. For Ansel, not Lulu.

As she went out the door, Bozeman raised his head from his bed in the corner, but he didn't follow.

She raced down the hallway, anxiety giving her extra speed. Her stomach rolled as the full implications of it hit her.

She'd been so quick to defend the company—and she'd let her feelings about the Crivelli sisters cloud her judgment—that she hadn't considered any other possible explanation.

She'd been wrong. Terribly wrong. And it might have cost her the one man she realized she loved.

But before she could fix things with Ansel, she had to get this feed taken care of before any more animals could be hurt. They were her first responsibility.



A sigh of relief left her when she saw Clive was in his office. He had on his reading glasses, peering down through them at something on his computer screen, looking so wise and capable it made her feel better already.

“Lark.” He immediately frowned when he caught her expression. “What’s happened?”

She grabbed the doorframe to help hold herself up. “We have a huge problem on our hands.”

She went quickly through everything she had, making sure she included everything needed for him to understand and only that. He listened intently but never asked any questions. And he didn't seem as shocked as she expected. Maybe he was only thinking of what to do next though.

“So we need to test all the lots of the sheep feed we have,” she finished. “And get it off the shelves. And tell the state vet so they can send out a bulletin.”

She sat back, mildly out of breath, and waited for Clive to say something. Anything.

Slowly Clive took off his glasses, folded them closed, and set them on the desk. He stared at them for a long moment.

Lark held back her impulse to prompt him to speak. She'd already laid out what she thought should happen. All he needed to do was act on it.

“Who else knows about this?” he asked in a quiet tone.

Lark didn't understand how that mattered. "Um, the Crivellis, my brothers, Ansel, and the vet, I guess."

"No." He shook his head like he was chastising her. "Who knows that the copper levels in the feed are too high?"

"Just me, I think." She still didn't understand.

"But the feedstore owner," Clive said, "he suspects something?"

The way Clive said that made her edgy. Like he thought Ansel was up to no good.

"Yes," Lark said. "And the point is, he's right."

"But he doesn't know for sure. Only you do."

"Exactly. Which is why we need to get the feed off the shelves. Because no one else has realized yet. And animals will get sick."

Clive leaned back in his chair. "There haven't been any reports from the state vet."

"No, which is good, because it means we caught it before too many bags went out."

Clive didn't look relieved. Instead, he seemed to be chewing on something. "I don't know that a... *loud* campaign is needed here. Or any at all."

She frowned. "But the feed is bad. Any sheep who eat it will get sick."

"*Might* get sick," he said. "And we don't even know how widespread it was. Might have just been a few bags. No need to drag the company through the mud for an honest mistake."

Lark didn't understand. Maybe it was an honest mistake, but it was still a mistake. "But we have to make it right."

"Yes, we'll internally review our processes in the mill," Clive said. "But there's no need to make anything public."

There was a long beat after that where Clive only stared at her.

She recalled how he'd handled the tainted-feed scandal before. She'd thought it had been great at the time, slow, methodical, making sure he knew what was going on before he announced anything...

But that hadn't been what he'd really been doing. He'd been dragging his feet. Trying not to admit anything until he'd had to. Until even Prime One couldn't ignore how many animals were sick and dying.

Oh. *Oh*. Lark touched her cheek, suddenly realizing how stupid she was being.

She thought Clive was going to make everything right. But he wasn't.

He was going to drag his feet again and protect the company. Just like he had before.

For a moment, she didn't know what to do. Clive was her mentor. He was supposed to fix all this. And in his mind, he was—he was going to make this go away as quietly as possible.

Except that wasn't the *right* thing to do.

"I don't..." She stared back at him, feeling way too young and lost. "We have to do something."

He smiled patronizingly. It was the same as his usual smiles, but Lark suddenly saw the edge that had always been there, the one she'd been too blind to notice before. "Let me handle this." He held out his hand for the reports. "You've done great. But I'll take over. And please make a full list of everyone who might know anything. So I can contact them."

She held on to what she had, her heart pounding. "Are you suggesting we not say anything about this? That I just forget about it?"

"We'll handle it quietly. Internally. That's what I'm saying. No need to fly off the handle."

As if she was being hysterical and there weren't several animals literally suffering right now because of the company's mistakes.

“I think I’m being quite levelheaded,” she said coolly, “not to mention proactive.”

“Quietly proactive,” Clive said. “That’s what we want. We don’t need the bad publicity, not now. Can you convince Ansel to keep his mouth shut? He’s the one I’m worried about.”

“I can’t force him to do anything.” Especially not after last night. “Not about something this big.”

Lark realized her pulse was slowing, her calm command coming back to her. She’d need it if she was going to get through this.

She wasn’t going to go along with whatever Clive had planned. Not if it meant covering up something like this.

Clive’s smile slipped. “But it’s not big. Not yet, and we’ll keep it that way. Can you at least ask him? I’m sure he’d be happy to do it for you. After all, you are sleeping with him.”

Lark was up and out of her chair before she’d even realized it. “Excuse you?”

“Oh, come on—the whole hypothetical situation was completely transparent. It’s why you chose his store for your ad campaign.” Clive gestured for her to sit down. “It’s not ideal that you started something with him, but we can use it to our advantage here.”

“You mean the company’s advantage.”

“Which is the same thing.”

Lark could only stare at him. She’d known him so long, but right now it felt like he was a stranger.

Except most everything he was saying was something he always said. The company came first. Protect the company at all costs. That was how you got ahead.

She’d believed it for so long too. Believed in him.

It was all a lie. All of it. And she’d been so stupid to buy into it.

“You have no intention of fixing this, do you?” She stayed standing as she threw that at him. “Properly, I mean. It’ll all

just be swept under the rug. Tell me, if the tainted feed hadn't been publicly known, would the company have ever admitted to it?"

He sighed. "If you're going to be VP, you need to wise up. Of course not. You always need to do what's best for the company, and running around shouting that we're poisoning animals is not the way to do it." His gaze went to stone. "You're not going to do that, are you? You signed an NDA. That would be very, very bad for you if you admitted anything publicly."

Was he actually threatening her? Lark's mouth almost fell open before she caught herself. After everything she'd given this company, everything she'd given up for her career, and this was how Clive reacted?

But again, if the company came first, then Lark had to be sacrificed. No matter how much she'd given to the company, she was still disposable.

She realized then that no matter how much she loved her job, when she weighed it against everything else in her life—her brothers, the ranch, her 4-H kids, what she could have with Ansel, and especially her own sense of what was right—it came up short. Badly short.

She could keep her mouth shut and become VP, but it would be at the expense of people and animals she cared about. Nothing was worth that, not even her own ambition.

"I understand what you're saying." She spoke calmly, feeling oddly at peace with her decision. "But I won't be quiet. This company will pull all the feed off the shelves. And it'll pay the vet fees for any affected animals. Or else I'll become a whistleblower."

Clive's expression turned to quiet fury. "If you do that, your career here is done. No VP position, not ever."

The words hit her hard. It was everything she'd thought she ever wanted. And he knew it.

But she'd learned some things about herself and this company during their confrontation. "I'm resigning anyway."

And if the company does pursue legal action against me, I'll make sure things get very, very messy." She was shaking inside as she said it, because a legal fight was the last thing she wanted. Could she even afford a lawyer to go up against a company this big? They could ruin her entire life.

She couldn't quite believe her relationship with Clive and with Prime One was ending this way. But she had to do what was right. "You can do the easy thing, which I've already laid out," she said quietly. "Or I can make this hard for everyone."

They stared each other down for long moments. Lark's heart hammered in her ears, but she didn't let herself look away. She wasn't that kind of person. And Clive knew it.

Finally he looked away, sighing as he did. "You're upset. I understand—it's very dismaying that some sheep are sick. But you don't want to throw away everything you've worked for over this. It's what, three sheep? That's nothing. You have so much invested."

That caught her short for a moment, like a hand pressed hard against her belly. A hand catching her from falling. She'd devoted so much to this job. Losing it would be like losing a limb.

But if she stayed, she'd lose even more important things. Her integrity. Her relationship with Ansel. Possibly even her friendship with him.

That was more than a hand to the belly—that was a fist, fast and hard, driving the breath out of her.

"You don't understand." Her tone was strained even though she felt strong. Assured. "The sheep aren't nothing. Not to the people who own them and not to me. I can't toss any more things and people away to keep feeding this job. It's done." When his expression fell, she added, "I'm sorry. But I have to do this."

"I can't stop the company's response if you do go public." For once, he sounded almost sad. "I can't protect you anymore."

“I don’t need you to,” she said, heading for the door. “I’m doing the right thing. And I can protect myself.”

The words were brave, but she wasn’t entirely sure they were true. She’d set her entire career on fire and made an enemy of her mentor. She’d never be able to work for another feed company again.

But as she went back to her office, feeling somehow both heavy and light at the same time, she found she didn’t regret what she’d done.

She was sad and scared, and she’d just turned a messy situation into an insanely knotty one. But in the end, she’d done what was right. She was going to suffer for it, but at least she could hold her head high. Even though her hands were shaking too badly to even hold her phone.

She might get sued. Somehow she didn’t think Vince, the only Harvard Law grad in town, would be willing to represent her pro bono.

And she had to clean out her office, say goodbye. To everyone she’d known and cared about for years here. A tear slipped down her cheek, then another.

Ansel wouldn’t be getting his free ad campaign anymore. A thousand small details like those flew through her head, jostling for her attention. There was too much floating around in her to make any kind of plan. Everything was shattered into a million pieces, and she couldn’t imagine even beginning to pick them up. She wiped her cheeks, but the tears kept coming.

Lark felt lost. She’d done what was right, but she still felt lost. What was she even going to do with herself? Without her job at Prime One Feeds, she didn’t have anything.

But even as she thought it, she realized it was wrong. She had her family, her community, everything she’d chosen when she’d told Clive she wouldn’t lie for him.

And then it hit her. She needed to go to the Crivelli place and make things right. They all deserved to know what really

happened. And she'd apologize at the same time. She could at least plan for that.

After that, she'd go find Ansel. She prayed he'd be in a listening mood when she did, because she had a lot of making up to do with him.



“So it really wasn’t my fault?” Lulu asked Ansel with naked hope.

Ansel shook his head. He’d come over to his cousins’ place as soon as he got the call from the analysis lab, wanting to tell them right away.

What to do after this, he wasn’t sure. He’d pulled all the Prime One sheep feed off his own shelves, but the rest had to be done by the company themselves. He supposed he’d have to call Clive after this. He wasn’t looking forward to that.

What to tell Lark... He had no idea. At least not what to tell her about the feed.

He knew exactly what to tell her about them. He’d thought about it, and he knew that keeping them a secret wasn’t an option anymore. Not for him. And he wasn’t going to make the same mistake he had last time and let her drift away without a fight.

No, they’d have to have it out and say some hard truths to each other. He loved her, and he wasn’t going to be the shameful secret she snuck into her bed under cover of dark.

She’d have to hand the feedstore account over to someone else. It would probably mean the loss of the ad campaign—and would make the coming fight with Tractor Supply that much harder—but he was willing to risk it. He’d realized he’d risk anything for her.

He only hoped Lark felt the same way. He supposed he’d find out once he confronted her.

He and his three cousins were at a picnic table next to the goat pen. The day was on the cooler side with a stiff breeze blowing through. Hecate watched them from the barn, chewing her cud with an almost savage grinding motion. Artemis and Athena watched from the gate, clearly hoping someone would drop some treats in their mouths. They all three looked wider than the last time he'd seen them. They made pregnancy look uncomfortable as heck.

He was grateful they seemed to be doing fine. Sick goats on top of sick sheep would be awful for his cousins. Besides, he had to admit to a soft spot for Hecate. There was something refreshing about a goat so openly contemptuous of the humans who tried to boss her around.

“The results say pretty clearly that both feeds have too much copper for sheep,” he said. “I’m guessing somewhere in the milling process, goat feed got put into sheep feedbags.”

“Then Prime One has to do something,” Pippa said fiercely. “Does Lark know? You’re going to tell her, right?”

Trying to answer that question would be like grabbing a nettle. “We’ll see what the company does.” It was the best he could offer.

“Could they at least pay the vet bills?” Lulu asked. “Since it was their fault?”

He tipped back his cap, scratched his head. “Honestly, you might have to sue them to get those bills paid. Prime One is a big company. They don’t just pay out things.”

Lulu’s smile was sad. “We don’t have the money for the vet bills, much less a lawyer.”

“They can’t get away with it.” Pippa’s hands curled into fists. “They just can’t. Seriously, can’t Lark do something?” Her chin jutted out. “I’ll talk to Bear. He’ll make her understand.”

Ansel wanted to sigh. He understood where Pippa was coming from, but things didn’t work like that. And he didn’t want to put Lark in that position. He might be upset with her right now, but he still loved her. “I don’t think Lark has the

power to do anything. I know her boss; I'm going to call him. But right now we just have samples from what we think are two different feeds. The company could claim you just grabbed two bags of goat feed by mistake."

"But you have the inventory records."

"They can claim those were mixed up too. Prime One needs to be testing their own feeds in their warehouses to prove anything. And unless there's more pressure than just us, it probably won't happen."

Ansel would do his best to convince Clive to do it, but he didn't have high hopes. Unless more sheep got sick—which he didn't *want* to have happen—Prime One wasn't likely to take action.

"The sheep have all gotten better," Allie said softly. "In the end, that's all that matters. We'll figure out something with the vet bill."

"How come these people high up"—Pippa waved her hand at the sky—"never have to take responsibility? Why's it always us, the little guys, eating a loss?"

Ansel thought of the Tractor Supply that was coming and how it would flatten his feedstore without even meaning to. How Prime One would never even notice something was wrong with their feed because not enough animals were dying.

"That's just the way the world is," Lulu said, sounding so world-weary it hurt Ansel to hear.

"It's not." Allie actually sounded heated for once. "Okay, yeah, things aren't always fair. But there're good things in the world. Look at Ansel. He helped you when you moved here, gave Pippa a job, still helps us today with the farm. Same with Bear and Sayer and even Javi. And Summer. And Lale's going to help us research the family history. And Nella promised to give me duck eggs to hatch. People help each other more than they screw each other over. We have to remember that."

It was quite possibly the most touching speech Ansel had ever heard. And it surprised him some—his cousins really had

put roots down here. He hadn't realized how deep until Allie had listed all that off.

Pippa and Lulu stared at their sister.

"Wait, when did we decide to get ducks?" Pippa asked.

"Are they going to fight with the chickens? Are we going to have poultry turf wars?" Lulu asked.

Ansel suppressed a laugh. "Well, you might want to keep them apart at first. But generally they get along. Or at least they ignore each other."

"You got chickens all on your own," Allie said to Pippa. "I can get ducks."

"I'm so glad that all our discussions these days get derailed to poultry or goats," Lulu said dryly.

"If it were up to you," Pippa said, "we'd only ever talk about sheep."

"That's because sheep are the best," Lulu said smugly.

Ansel gave up trying to hold in his laughter, wiping his eyes as he roared. "I'm so glad you guys moved up here," he said when he could speak again.

"Aww." Pippa hugged his arm. "We love you, coz."

"Yeah," Lulu said. "Thanks for getting the feed analyzed. I was losing my mind, thinking it was my fault."

"But it wasn't."

Lark. Ansel immediately came to attention at the sound of her voice, his nerves already on fire even before he turned to see her. She was coming up from the driveway, and the sight of her... He couldn't remember why he was upset with her. He only knew how happy he was to see her again.

When their eyes met, it was like the entire world lit up. God, but he loved her. So much.

"Hey," she said to him, awkwardly waving her fingers.

"Hey," he said back, his throat tight. He tried to think of something to say that would be appropriate in front of his

cousins. Nothing came to mind.

“Ansel already told us about the feed.” Lulu clearly wasn’t feeling overwhelmed by the sight of Lark. She sounded ready to throw down. “It’s your fault. Your company’s fault. And you kept insisting it was mine.”

“Yeah,” Pippa said belligerently.

Ansel could feel his cousins forming up a wall, uniting against Lark. And here he was in the middle.

Lark tore her gaze away from him, focused on Lulu. “I was wrong. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry your ewes were hurt. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you. And I want to make amends.”

She said it so openly, so rawly, it caught everyone off guard, Ansel included.

There was a long beat of silence as they took that in. He knew this had to be so hard for her, but she’d stood before them all and done it. Ansel had thought he’d loved Lark before, but as she apologized like this, no pretense, no protecting her job, he realized how much deeper his love could go.

“You tested the samples then?” Lark asked when no one said anything. “I should have guessed you would.”

He nodded. “I had to pull all the Prime One sheep feed. I wanted to tell Lulu and Pippa and Allie first, then I’ll call Clive.”

“Don’t bother.” Lark’s smile was bitter. “He already knows.”

“So what happened?” Lulu demanded. “Is Prime One going to make this right?”

“I don’t know,” Lark said. “I resigned today.”

Ansel jumped up from his seat. “What?” There was no way she’d done that. No way.

But she looked as serious as a heart attack. Hope flared in him. If she’d left her job, that meant there was no more reason to keep their relationship a secret.

“Yeah,” Lark said with a wide smile. “Clive wanted to keep quiet about all this. I wanted a full accounting and investigation. So it was time for us to part ways.”

“Should you be so happy about this?” Ansel would have guessed leaving her job would have devastated Lark, but she was the opposite.

She shrugged. “We messed up—I’m guessing that for the lot you guys bought, the goat feed got put into sheep packaging somehow—and animals got hurt. The right thing to do would be to take responsibility. The company was reluctant to do that, so the right thing for me to do was to resign.” Her smile wobbled. “I’m technically violating my NDA right now, and they’ll probably sue me over this.”

“We’ll get Vince to help you,” Pippa said, her loyalty swinging back just as quickly as it had swung away.

Ansel’s heart sank because even with a lawyer, going up against Prime One would be tough. But Lark was more than willing to do it.

“I’m very sorry for you,” Lulu said dryly, “but we’ve still got vet bills to pay. Big vet bills.”

“I know.” Lark nodded sharply. “And I’m going to get them to pay those for you. They want this to end quietly, but I can make it very bad for them and they know it.”

“They can make it bad for you too,” Ansel said.

“We’ll see. I’ve demanded they pay your bills and pull all the affected feed off the shelves. I figure in a day or two, they’ll see reason.” She looked to Ansel. Again, sparks flew between them. “If you have lab results too, that will also help pressure them.”

Lulu squinted at Lark. “So... you really did quit your job for my sheep?”

Lark kept her gaze hard on Ansel. He felt the weight of it all the way to his bones.

“Among other things.”

Pippa flew to Lark and slammed her into a hug. Lark went stiff for a moment, then patted Pippa's shoulder.

"I thought you didn't even like us!" Pippa said.

"Well," Lark said awkwardly, "we didn't get off to the best start. But I want a do-over. Particularly since Bear's never breaking up with you, not ever."

Pippa beamed at her. "And I'm never ever breaking up with him."

Lulu started wiping her eyes, catching silent tears. "Thank you," she said in a soft tone. "Seriously, thank you so much. I was so worried I'd done something wrong, and then the vet bill..."

"I swear," Lark said, "it will be taken care of."

Ansel watched them all, his heart full. He loved all these women, and seeing them come together... Somehow it made him think of his parents. Of his mom and dad smiling at each other, then at him. That feeling that sharing just a smile between people who all love each other could bring.

It felt like being home.

Allie, who'd been quiet as a mouse, suddenly cleared her throat. "Pippa. The sourdough needs folding. You have to come help."

"I do?"

Allie looked significantly between Ansel and Lark, then at Pippa.

Ansel bit the inside of his cheek.

Pippa looked between Lark and Ansel, made a perfect *O* with her mouth, then at Allie. "Right. The sourdough."

When she actually winked at her sister, Ansel burst out laughing. Lark did too, clapping a hand over her mouth.

"I'm going to go check on the sheep and tell Javi," Lulu said. "And I'll just say goodbye to you two like a normal person."

Allie dragged Pippa to her trailer. Lulu gave Ansel a quick hug, then set a hand on Lark's shoulder. "Thanks again."

It seemed that things between them all were going to be just fine. Eventually.

"So," Lark said, drawing the word out until it almost broke. She opened her mouth, closed it, then spread her hands. At a loss for words, it seemed.

"We have to talk," he said, his tone dropping to a deeper register.

She swallowed hard. "I know."

He was already stalking toward her, eating up the distance between them.

And then he crushed her against him.

Lark immediately went limp, trusting him to hold her up. Which of course he did. Always would.

"Are you okay?" he asked into her hair.

"Shouldn't we ask the sheep that?" As jokes went, it was weak.

"Sheep can't talk." He released his hold enough to see her face. "And the sheep didn't just give up a career they've spent years working for."

Her expression fell. "It hurt, but I thought about it and... Not only was it the right thing to do, but I didn't want to give up anything more for that job. When I thought about everything that matters to me—the ranch, my family, the 4-H kids, you—the job wasn't even making the top ten."

"It was still a very brave thing to do."

"Was it?" She searched his face. "I'm definitely feeling way more scared right now."

His heart tripped. "Why?"

"Because." She wet her lips. "You told me you loved me before. And I was a coward then. Still am. But I'm going to be

brave now.” She reached up and framed his face. Everything in him went still. “I love you.”

The world went quiet. Like it had been holding its breath, same as him... and could finally, silently, exhale.

Lark was in his arms, and she loved him. There was nothing more he wanted in this world, not even for the next moment to come.

And then there was a scuffle from the pen behind them and a series of thunks. Ansel looked behind him to see Hecate smashing skulls with first Artemis, then Athena, rising high on her back legs to really smack them down.

Of course their big moment together was interrupted by a boss-bitch goat terrorizing her herd mates. That was farm life, and he supposed he wouldn't have it any other way.

“She really is a terror, isn't she?” Lark asked.

“She's a demon in goat form. Which I guess is usually the form demons take.”

Lark laughed into his chest. When she looked up at him, heat in her eyes, his pulse kicked up. “Should we go somewhere quieter? Like my place?”

He nodded, and as she led him to her truck, he knew he'd follow her everywhere. For the rest of his life.



Lark ran a hand over the mass of Ansel's shoulder, the aftershocks of her climax still shuddering through her. Lord, but he was well made.

He pulled her close, burying his face in her neck. They were both sheened with sweat and limp with pleasure, the afternoon sun streaming through the open window.

She couldn't believe she was home in the middle of the day, getting down and dirty with the man she loved. The Lark of even yesterday would have been shocked. It seemed quitting her job had made her new person.

But not really. She'd quit because of who she'd always been.

Ansel sighed heavily, making her squirm with the ticklish sensation. "Sorry," he murmured.

She kissed his forehead in reply. She could kiss him forever, she was realizing. Everything else they'd done was spectacular, but kissing him was the kind of soul-deep pleasure people could only dream about.

"Do you have to go back to the feedstore?" She really hoped he didn't. She was feeling selfish and greedy and wanted him for all the hours she could get.

He shook his head. "I'll get Kelsey to close." His big hand found her waist and traced the line of it. "So what are you going to do now? Because I know you have a plan."

She wasn't at all offended because she did. He knew her too well.

"First off, I need to tell my brothers I quit. And that we're together."

"Will they be okay with all this?"

"This specifically?" She gestured to their naked state. "I'll leave these particular details out. But yes, they'll be more than okay. I'll have more time to help with the ranch, and they all love you. Bear will probably even expect a discount at the feedstore."

"We've got a family discount, so that's no problem."

That sounded very... permanent. Like their relationship would be formalized into marriage eventually.

She loved how that sounded and felt. *Family*. Yes, Ansel was already family. When she eventually asked him to marry her, it would be the final touch on something they'd started a long time ago. Maybe even the first time they'd met.

"Good." She cleared her throat. "And I was thinking about the ad campaign for the store. The one that isn't happening now."

He frowned. “I don’t care about that.”

“But I do. I was thinking you should sell more local handicrafts in the store. Everyone in this town makes something. Laurel Warner sews those chicken aprons. Maria embroiders and bedazzles dog collars and leashes. And Parker makes those Plasticine figures—you saw them at the fair. He made an entire barnyard scene. You could put things like that in the store and sell them online. Get people buying them from all over the world. You’d need to have social media though, but I can do that. And that’s not even a fraction of the things you could put in the store.”

He was quiet as he thought through it. “I’d pay you for this. I won’t let you do it for free. And I meant what will *you* do now?”

“Well, things like that. I know a lot about animal nutrition, running a family ranch, and using social media to sell ag products. There’re a lot of smaller ranches like ours, looking for someone with my exact knowledge.”

“You did really think about this.” He smiled on the left side of his mouth. “I bet you even made a PowerPoint.”

She sniffed. “A great PowerPoint is a wonderful thing. There’re just too many bad ones out there is all.”

He smiled on both sides of his mouth. “You did make one, didn’t you?”

“Only in my head,” she protested. “I like to think things through.”

“I know.” His expression turned serious. He lifted up on one arm. “Lark, I have to tell you—I’m sorry I called you a snob.”

She swallowed hard and rubbed his shoulder. It still hurt a touch to hear. But only a touch. “I’m sorry I was a bitch about your cousin.”

They slowly smiled at each other. And with that, it was done. Everything was fine between them.

“You’re very easy to apologize to,” Lark told him.

“Well, I’m not going to make a habit of doing things I’ll have to apologize to you for.”

“Me either.”

She caught sight of herself in the mirror then. She braced herself for another shocking vision of herself, but strangely enough, she looked normal. Not glow-y, not sad, just a little sweaty and ruffled but happy. Just Lark.

She pointed to the mirror. “Does anything seem weird to you about that mirror?”

He sighed. “I don’t get what’s with you and that mirror. But no, it looks fine. I just see you.”

As Lark stared at it, she realized the mirror seemed different somehow. Like the glass was simply glass and not a portal to some other dimension. Like the mirror would only ever show her what everyone else could see.

She was relieved and sad all at once. It was like the magic had gone out of it. She couldn’t say she always appreciated the magic of it, but it was still a loss.

Although maybe the mirror had done what it meant to, and that was why it was ordinary now. It had shown her that she was her best self with Ansel. That she loved him and only him and would forever.

As far as peace offerings went, that made the mirror pretty spectacular.

Epilogue



“So in conclusion,” Owen Warner said with a flourish toward Hecate, his unwilling volunteer, “I hope this presentation on dairy goat structure was both entertaining and illuminating.”

Everyone in the communications project applauded, Lark loudest of all. They were gathered at the Crivelli place to help Owen film his video essay for the state presentation day. The parents were clustered at the back, clapping just as hard as the kids.

Ansel caught her eye from behind the camera. He raised an eyebrow. *The kid did really good.*

She gave him a private smile back because Owen had been spectacular. And even Hecate had behaved. Somewhat. Lark had tried to convince Owen to use a nicer goat, but he’d insisted because Hecate had the best structure. Even Lark had to admit Hecate was a gorgeous goat. Mean as a snake but gorgeous.

Hecate, not caring that Owen had done well, reached over to the table with Owen’s notes and started eating them.

“Whoops.” Allie was up in a flash, pulling the paper out of Hecate’s mouth. “That’s not for you,” she said, more gently than Hecate probably deserved. “Watch the laptop,” she told Owen. “Hecate likes to eat them.”

Lark didn’t want to know how Allie knew that.

“Do you want to do another take?” she asked Owen. “Or are you happy with that?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Do you think it was good?”

Lark almost told him she thought it was great, then reconsidered. “It’s your call,” she said. “Do you think there’s anything that can be improved? Or was that your best effort?”

He thought about it. “There’s always something that can be improved,” he said, “but I think that’s the best I can do right now.”

That was a great answer. Lark was always amazed at how thoughtful and mature these kids were—and how much they grew up each and every day. “Then we’re done.”

Immediately the rest of the kids got up to help Owen clean up. Lark sighed and sat back in her chair, letting the kids handle it. This was her second project meeting of the day.

With more time on her hands, Lark not only led the communications project, she also helped Bear with the beef project, had somehow gotten roped into helping with the dairy project, and Ash Warner had almost talked her into taking over the poultry project when the current leader retired next year.

She was busy, even busier than before, but it felt better than before. Probably because most of it was for other people instead of her own ambition. She was working more on the ranch, Ansel had hired her to manage her handicraft idea, and she was starting her own consulting sideline. It was a lot.

Ansel came over to her then and put a hand on her neck. “Tired?” he murmured. He started to massage her neck, his strong fingers finding all her tight spots.

Some of the parents watched them with indulgent smiles. Lark found she didn’t mind too much. Turned out having people smile fondly at how cute you and your boyfriend were together was pretty nice.

“I’m finally done for the day,” she told him. “Are you closing tonight?”

He shook his head. While she’d been busier than ever, he’d been taking more and more time off, training Kelsey to become a manager. He was discovering he was actually a

pretty good cook, sometimes having dinner ready for her when she got home. She loved those nights.

She loved all the nights with him really.

Prime One had very quietly pulled all the affected sheep feed off the shelves in the end. They'd also paid Lulu's vet bills. There had been no other reports of sick sheep, so it seemed only Lulu had gotten unlucky. Lark had seen Clive again after that to bring him the vet bills. It had been strained and sad, and she'd known they'd never again have the relationship they'd once had. He'd chosen the company over everything else and she hadn't, and he wouldn't be able to forget that.

But there was no way she'd ever choose differently. Not if it meant losing Ansel. Or her integrity.

Tractor Supply was still coming, and her consulting business wasn't anywhere near off the ground, but things were good. She knew they'd make it work no matter what.

Lark had even had a few girls' nights with the Crivelli sisters and enjoyed herself. They really were great people, and while they still had a lot to learn, they were committed to making their farm work. And Lark was actually looking forward to the day when Pippa became her sister-in-law—Bear hadn't proposed yet, but he was certain to soon.

Bozeman came running up then with Howie, Lulu's dog, beside him. They were both covered in dirt with mud caked thick on their muzzles. Their tails were wagging so hard it was a miracle the motion didn't lift them off the ground.

"What have you been up to?" Lark exclaimed. "You're worse than a pig."

"Hey," Ansel said mildly. "Porkina would never."

"She did last night."

Porkina and Bozeman got along much better these days, especially since they'd discovered a shared passion for digging in the dirt. While Lark and Ansel had been eating dinner—and then fooling around for dessert—those two had managed to get

nice and dirty together in the backyard. They'd probably do it again tonight.

Lark held out a hand to Ansel, and he pulled her up out of the chair. She didn't need the help, but she loved how strong he was, how he never hesitated to help her. And the feel of her hand in his—she'd never get tired of that.

“Should we head home?” She wasn't certain if they'd end up at his place or hers—both were home to her now.

He kissed her temple, one of those helpless kisses they were both addicted to. “Yep. Home it is.”

Thank You!



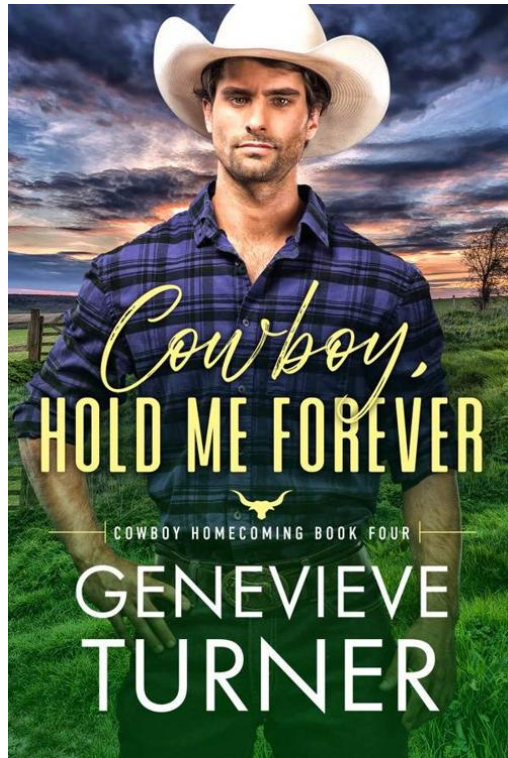
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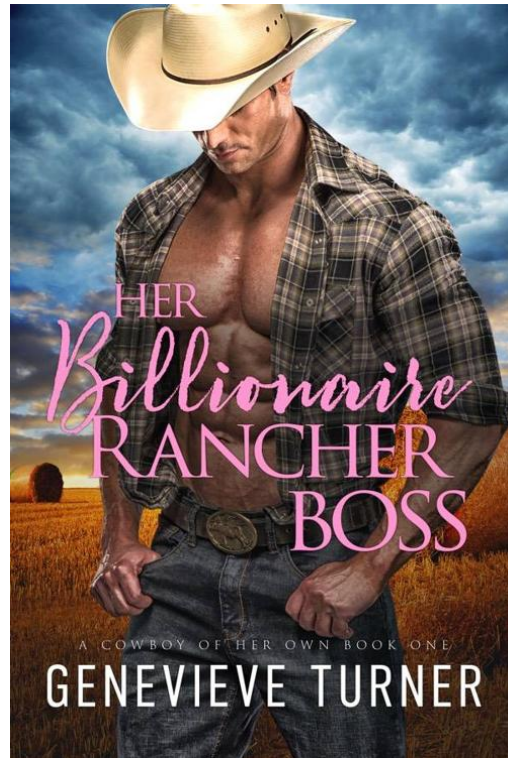




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The handsome cowboy is completely off limits...

Benedict Merrill is the perfect cowboy: rugged, wealthy, and handsome as sin. He'd be perfect for Pilar... if he wasn't her boss. In her wildest fantasies she's in his bed every night, but there's no way she can seduce him. Not unless something changes.

She can be his... but not forever...

To escape the burning tension between them, Pilar only has one option: resignation. But once Benedict has her two weeks notice, all bets are off. He wants her between the sheets, on the floor, and anywhere else he can have her. A short steamy affair should be everything Pilar could hope for.

But what will she do when her heart wants more? Can she convince her rancher to stay with her for good?

Turn the page for a sneak peek!

Her Billionaire Rancher Boss

Benedict set his knuckles on the desk and rose from his chair as Pilar stood there in silence. “Now I know something is wrong.” His voice vibrated with worry—actually *vibrated*—setting off tiny tremors in her limbs. “Please tell me. I want to help.”

She nearly whimpered. There had been nothing like that from him when she’d first applied. It had been all impersonal efficiency layered over what was really happening: “*Yes, you’re the best qualified person, I’m happy to hire you,*” instead of “*You need my help.*”

She closed her eyes, reached for indifference.

People leave jobs all the time. You’re not ungrateful or resentful. You’re allowed to move on.

She almost believed it.

Eyes wide, shoulders back, heels snapping, she marched to him, the envelope hanging at the end of her stiffly outstretched arm. He snatched it from her before she could say anything.

“What’s this?” he rumbled as he tore into it.

“It’s, um...” God, she still couldn’t say it. And he was already reading it!

His gaze snapped back and forth as he scanned it. “What the fuck?” he snarled before throwing it to his desk.

Whoa. He never swore like that. Ever. She blinked at the letter lying there between them.

He pointed at her. “Sit down.”

The force of her butt hitting the seat snapped her out of her odd mood. This—his reaction—was all wrong. People left jobs—even people who worked for him. He’d need a few months to adjust to a new admin, but snapping at her? *Swearing?*

“Yeah, that’s my resignation letter,” she said. “Which you already know.”

Snark. Her favorite weapon in awkward situations. Sometimes he even laughed at her little asides.

He wasn’t laughing now. He sat down himself, pinning her with a look that was intense. Almost mad.

No, not mad. She’d seen him irritated, and this was different. Hotter. And sadder, all at the same time.

“I won’t let you leave,” he said starkly.

The room seemed to rise, spin three hundred sixty degrees with her as the unmoving center, then settled back into place, everything as it was. Only not quite. Things gleamed a little brighter, edges were a little harder, shadows a little murkier. And Benedict, a house cat turned into a mountain lion, his sharp teeth lengthened into fangs.

Stop it. That was crazy. He was only pissed that he’d have to train a new assistant.

“I’m pretty sure you have to let me leave,” she pointed out. “The Thirteenth Amendment and all that.”

He blinked at her. “Did you just invoke the Thirteenth Amendment?”

“Yeah,” she admitted. “I guess I did.”

He reached for the letter again, his fingers pinching and releasing the folds but never opening it. “Of course you can leave.” His voice took on a funeral hush. “I... I can’t make you stay.”

She frowned at the letter herself, at his fingers plucking purposelessly at it. It sounded almost as if he *wanted* to make her stay. But there wasn’t anything deeper in his protests. Her own frustrated attraction was adding nuances that simply weren’t there.

“Why do you want to leave?” he asked. “Pilar”—his voice went to a register of pleading she’d never heard before from him—“God, I thought you were happy here. With me.”

Was this a discussion about her resignation or a breakup? Things were getting very weird. “Of course I’m happy to work for you.”

His frown deepened. What the hell? She’d just said she was happy to work for him. She’d thought he’d be pissed and that he’d try his best to hide it. That reaction she’d been prepared to deal with.

But this... *guilt trip*? It wasn’t fair. She’d been an excellent secretary for five years. She’d *raised her brother* for five years. She deserved to snatch something for herself, and she wasn’t going to feel guilty about it. Or at least she wasn’t going to let that ball of guilt forming in her gut stop her plans.

“So why?” he demanded.

“Javier graduates in three months,” she began.

“I know,” he said shortly. As if he had it marked on a calendar or something.

“After that, it’s time for something different.” Somewhere far away from Cabrillo. And from Benedict Merrill.

But not too far. She still had to keep an eye on Javier.

Benedict slid his knuckles along the edge of the desk, the menace in the gesture made ice crust her spine. Man, he was freaking out here. And freaking her out.

“What different thing do you want to do in Cabrillo?”

If he was going to offer her another job... But of course he would, if he assumed she was staying. The Merrills had a finger in every pie in this town. Hell, they *owned* half the town.

Which was part of why she wanted to escape.

“I’m planning on moving. Maybe to LA. Maybe even farther,” she said defiantly. She appreciated the opportunity he’d given her, but now she was going to go make some opportunities of her own, in a place not *his* own.

“You really are leaving,” he said slowly, his brows drawing together.

Finally. Some of this was getting through to him.

“Yep,” she said. “But in three months. Plenty of time to find a replacement and help train them.”

“Really?” He cocked that eyebrow again, disbelief dripping from the word.

How come he’d never done that eyebrow thing before? Although it was probably for the best since it made her imagine naughty things. Even while in this weird situation where she was trying to resign and he was being stubborn about it.

“I would never leave you high and dry like that.”

“Wouldn’t you?” A dark purr. A darkly sexy purr.

She gripped the arms of her chair, the edges sinking into the soft bits of her palms, and ordered her blood to slow.

A purr? What was wrong with her? He wasn’t trying to be sexy—he was annoyed. A man as controlled as he was, he liked things to stay the same. Training a new admin, no matter how competent, was going to put his mood into a kink.

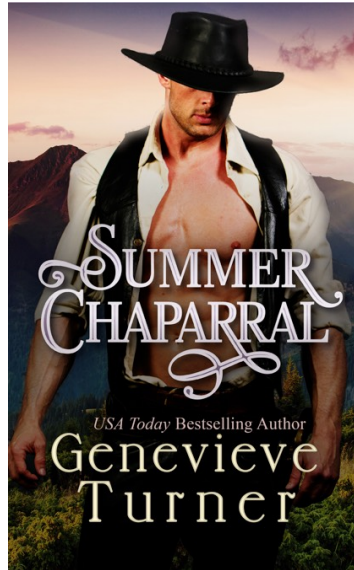
Kink. Kinky.

She was heading into sexual harassment territory here. *Focus.*

“No, I wouldn’t.” She sat straighter, put on a blank expression. At least one of them could be rational about this. “I’m giving you three months’ notice—more than enough time to find a suitable admin.”

He leaned back in his chair, but his stance was anything but easy. He hooked his thumbs in his belt, and she ordered her stupid libido to ignore that. “What if I think you’re irreplaceable?”

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Summer Chaparral

San Jacinto Mountains, Southern California

Late summer, 1898

“Are you enjoying yourself, Señor?” She kept her voice low and husky. “You certainly attracted quite a bit of attention from the ladies here.” There—now that she’d said it so casually, he’d never guess at the irritation it caused her.

“No more attention than you yourself got from the men.” So he *had* noticed. “You were watching me, hmm? I got the impression you didn’t care.”

“Where would you get an idea like that?” She kept her tone as falsely casual as his had been. “You seemed to be ignoring me as hard as you possibly could.”

He smiled at that, the white flash of his teeth an echo of the moon’s glow behind him. “Now why would I ignore a lady who was obviously trying so hard to get my attention? Especially when she’s the prettiest woman in Cabrillo.”

She seized on the compliment, while ignoring the suggestion she’d appeared desperate. “If that’s true, why didn’t you ask me to dance?”

“How was I supposed to make my way through all those beaux you had by your side? I’d have needed a stick to fend off all those men.”

As if it were her fault she was so popular. “So you passed the time by dancing with every other woman in town. I see.”

His head lowered to hers. “Darlin’, I don’t think you do.” His voice was a velvet growl, softer than the evening air. “If I so much as glanced sideways at you, your pa would be on me like a coyote on a chicken. But I got you out here, didn’t I?”

She gave him her slow, sidelong look, her very bones vibrating with anticipation. “Only to ask for your handkerchief

back, correct?" she dared him.

"I don't want the damn handkerchief. But *you* wanted my attention." He spread those large hands wide. "You got it."

He admitted that she'd won the field, and in doing so scored a victory for himself. Such gestures weren't in the rules of the game—she set the rules and the men followed. She was in fast-rising water with this man, but having his attention was a thrill too heady to relinquish.

"And what should I do with it, now that I have it?" she asked breathily.

"Well, a man does like a compliment now and then." His smile gleamed again.

"Oh, I don't need to tell a man like yourself just how strong and handsome you are. Or didn't Margaret and Lily and Agnes tell you that already?" She pushed her inflection toward playful, to remind him that she would set the tone. "No, I suppose those silly girls botched the whole thing. Thankfully, I'm quite accomplished." She took in the outline of his well-shaped head, the broad lines of his labor-hewn shoulders, his lean hips sliding into long, strong legs.

There was so much to compliment on this man; too much, really. An abundance of masculine riches.

I want more.

"Shall I tell you I'd love to run my fingers through your hair, to test if it's as thick and soft as it appears? Would that do for a compliment?" She'd never in her life been so forward, so bold with a man. The kisses she'd stolen had been silly, giggling affairs, no more serious than a wink across a room.

"I think that'd do just fine." His head dipped a fraction closer to hers, his voice lowering to a rough whisper. "And that could be arranged, if you'd like."

Slowly, she threaded her fingers in his thick hair. Amazingly, it was even softer than it looked. She stroked gently, the strands entangling her fingers as if reluctant to release her, her fingernails lightly raking his scalp, in thrall to

the moment and her own boldness at touching a man in this way.

In the silence of the rose garden, his breaths grew deeper and slower, her own breathing slowing in response, matching his. His head dipped, allowing her access to the warm, smooth skin of the back of his neck. As she caressed this new frontier, his head moved lower, as if compelled by her touch to crowd closer to her lips.

With one last dip he was there, his mouth brushing hers, his mustache tickling her upper lip. His lips were smooth, warm and firm—very different from the bristly mustache above them. The contrast sent those delicious shivers running up and down her spine.

But it wasn't enough.

I want more.

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About the Author

Genevieve Turner is a *USA Today* bestselling author of western romance. She loves cowboys, the rural life, and happily ever afters. She lives in beautiful Southern California with the perfect number of kids, dogs, and turkeys—and probably too many chickens.

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