

*Cowboy's*  
**SURPRISE TWINS**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LESLIE NORTH**

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## **BLURB**

**This grumpy cowboy needs an angel. And he may have just found one...**

Cowboy Dean Walters is no stranger to hard work. But when he takes full custody of his infant twins, he has to admit, even he can't raise them alone while running his ranch. Hiring a nanny seems like a smart move. But hiring a beautiful nanny that makes his blood run hot proves to be problematic, especially as she's only in this for the short term.

Amira Davis may a godsend for Dean and his new family, but she's causing this lonely cowboy a special kind of misery, as he slowly realizes he wants something more...

Amira has one rule: she fixes families, but she doesn't become part of them. Until she meets Dean. This sexy single dad may just be the most captivating man she's ever met, and his family definitely needs her help.

It doesn't change the fact she's committed to leave in two months, and a passionate romance isn't part of her plans. But for the first time in her life Amira is tempted to break her number one rule. The question is, will it end up breaking her heart as well....

## **MAILING LIST**

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There was a time when Dean had taken quiet for granted. It hadn't been something to cherish or chase, but a forgone conclusion. He would spend large parts of his day, the parts not dedicated to running his fly-fishing business, in solitude. The sounds of the river hurrying busily beside his little cabin, the birds in the trees, and the unseen animals rummaging in the woods had been the soundtrack of his life.

He had never realized how much he loved the quiet interrupted only by those little sounds, but he supposed that was how it went with people. So often, they didn't realize what they had until they didn't have it anymore. But the blissfulness of peace and quiet was not something Dean was going to take for granted ever again. Not now that he knew just how *noisy* life could be when you were caring for twin babies by yourself. He had been the sole parent to his three-month-old twins for only two weeks now, but calm and quiet already felt like a distant memory.

As if to punctuate the point, Caitlyn, balanced on his hip, let out a warning whimper. Her brother, Caleb, demanded absolute silence to sleep, but Caitlyn was different. The best way to get her to nod off and stay that way was to talk to her. Constantly. Even taking a break for a long breath was a precarious situation with this one.

"I know, I've gotcha, baby girl," he murmured, hefting her higher up on his hip and bouncing her lightly. "You're the boss."

Francis Howard, the man he was trying to hold a phone conversation with while soothing the beast that was his sleep-deprived child, cleared his throat pointedly. "Well, now, I didn't realize we were at that point in our friendship, Dean. I'm going to have to let that one sit with me for a bit."

"Sorry, man," Dean said with a groan and an apologetic laugh. "That wasn't meant for you. I'm working with a situation



here.”

Francis chuckled into the phone. “Understood. But what the hell is going on, man? Is that a *baby* I hear? Are you babysitting for your sister or something?”

While technically, Dean worked for Francis—on a contract basis, through Dean’s fly-fishing business whenever the high-powered businessman needed a break and carved out a week for a vacation—the two of them had made enough conversation over enough fishing trips that they knew some basics about each other. Including the fact that Dean had a sister with three kids. Though he must not have shared enough info for Francis to realize that his two nieces and nephew weren’t babies anymore. If he’d said it, Francis would have remembered. The construction magnate had a mind like a steel trap. He forgot *nothing*.

Dean groaned. “Don’t I wish. The *youngest* of my sister’s kids is six years old—she’s potty trained, old enough to go down for a nap by herself, and capable of opening her mouth and actually *telling* me what she needs instead of crying. No, the baby you’re hearing isn’t my niece. It’s my daughter.”

Francis let out a slow whistle. “You weren’t kidding when you said you had a situation. Since when do you have a daughter?”

“Since five days ago—and you don’t know the half of it. Literally. I don’t just have a daughter, I have a son, too. Twins. Three months old.”

“And their mama?”

“Let’s just say she and I had one great night together, and, well...” Dean admitted, feeling a little embarrassed. “You know how they say no form of birth control is one-hundred-percent effective? Anyway, first I learned of it was two weeks ago, when social services called to say that she was giving up her parental rights. I could take the kids myself, or they’d go into foster care.”

“So you took them yourself,” Francis finished. “Of course you did. You’re a good man, Dean Walters.”

“Well, right now, I’m a sleep-deprived man,” Dean retorted. “I don’t think I’ve slept more than an hour at a stretch since they arrived.”

“Sounds to me like you need help.”

“Don’t I know it.” With the babies and with so much more. It wasn’t like things had exactly been going smooth for him even *before* the babies arrived. But that was something he wouldn’t get into with Francis. Their relationship was friendly, sure, but that wasn’t quite the same as being actual friends. He didn’t want the man he’d come to respect and admire through their fishing expeditions to realize what a screwup he really was. “I hired a nanny—found her online. She’s coming today. Hopefully, she’ll be able to get things running smoothly.” Dean was pinning every hope he had on that, actually, because he wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take.

“Speaking of which,” he added, “it looks like she’s actually coming up the road right now. I’m going to have to let you go.”

Francis made some vaguely supportive comments before hanging up. Dean attempted to slide his phone into his back pocket without upsetting his hold on his Caitlyn. After five days, he still felt like he was constantly on the verge of dropping his babies, which was not the first impression he wanted to make on the new nanny. There would be plenty of time for him to prove his incompetence to her as the days and weeks wore on. No reason to make that case within the first five minutes of knowing her.

The car continued its bumpy progress down the rough gravel road leading to his cabin, finally pulling to a stop a few feet in front of where Dean stood. Just the one trip had kicked up enough dust to lightly coat the bottom half of the car, and Dean had a moment to hope that the woman inside of it wouldn’t be too thrown off by the less than glamorous living standard he had out here. When the newly arrived nanny opened her door and stepped out of her car, his first thought was that ranch life must be a new thing for her. His second thought was that she was almost alarmingly attractive. She had dark hair tucked behind her ears and wide, bright blue eyes.

She looked fit, in tight dark jeans and a black button-down. The clothing was simple but had the look of something fashionable to Dean's admittedly untrained eye. Her tennis shoes were such a bright white he doubted she'd ever worn them outside before. She was definitely not dressed for spending time in a remote cabin in the woods.

"Hi!" she called softly, waving a delicate hand and smiling wide as she made her way towards Dean and Caitlyn. "I'm Amira Davis. You must be Dean. It's so good to meet you."

Dean returned her smile and hefted Caitlyn up a little higher on his hip. "Hi, Amira, I'm glad to make your acquaintance, and grateful that you could take the job so quickly. I know this must be quite a change from Massachusetts."

She frowned a little, looking confused. "Do you mean Maryland? I'm actually based in the DC area."

*Did* he mean Maryland? He thought her profile had mentioned that her last job was in Massachusetts...but he tended to get East Coast states mixed up. Not to mention, he'd been frantically searching through profiles, trying to find someone qualified who was available right away. Maybe he'd gotten her profile mixed up with someone else's.

Oh well, when in doubt, turn on the charm. It usually worked to smooth things over, and in his service-oriented business, he'd learned that a smile and a self-deprecating joke could mean the difference between an angry client and an appeased one.

"There's a difference?" he joked, playing up his Colorado twang. "When I look that way from out here, all I see is one big coastal spread of confusion." He winked, and she laughed, her whole face lighting up. Dean's stomach did an involuntary flip-flop when he saw that. She really was beautiful.

"Fair enough," she agreed. "I can admit, the world looks different from out here. I was glad for an excuse to come out this way, actually. I've got a friend who lives close by. I'm planning on taking some time to see her while I'm here, if that's alright."

“Sure,” Dean nodded. “Don’t see why not. I’m just glad you made it. Have any trouble finding the place?”

Before answering, her eyes moved over his shoulder to the house directly behind him. He tried seeing it through her eyes. As a nanny in DC, she was probably used to some pretty fancy places. His cabin...wasn’t fancy. To say the least. For a bachelor, it had been perfectly comfortable, if a little spare. What more did he need than a bedroom, a decent-size living room, some basic kitchen facilities and a small bathroom? But throw in two babies, and things got a little...cramped.

“No,” she finally said, fixing a smile on her face again. “I wouldn’t say I had trouble. I did go to the main house before finding this one. There was a nice man there and he told me where to go.”

Dean shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He knew it would make more sense to move up to the big house. It was there for him to live in. But it didn’t feel like it was truly his yet. It certainly wasn’t supposed to be. The main house had been his father’s domain—with Dean’s older brother, Jackson, as the heir apparent. No one could have guessed that he’d lose both Jackson and Dad in the span of just a few years. Now Dean was the one left to shoulder all the responsibilities they had left behind. He’d stepped up to take over the ranch, but moving into the main house...that had been a bridge too far.

He turned his attention back to her, opening his mouth to invite her inside. When he got a look at her face, though, he stopped. Her formerly easy, smiling expression was gone. In its place was a mask of fear as she stared in horror at a spot on the ground. Dean followed her gaze and chuckled.

“He’s not going to hurt you, and that’s a promise.” He watched the small snake make its way over the bed of pine needles. Not looking reassured, Amira moved closer to him and Caitlyn.

“Oh yeah? He sure looks like he’s on a mission.”

He laughed again and Caitlyn stirred in his arms. “Don’t worry, you’re not on the menu. That kind of snake eats slugs and worms.”

She looked on the verge of believing him, but before she could relax, a toad landed squarely on the toe of her pristine white sneaker. It was apparently the last straw for Amira's composure. She gasped and jumped, catching her foot on a tree root hardly visible above ground. Her arms pinwheeled uselessly at her sides, and she started to go down.

Dean reacted reflexively. Keeping a strong hold on Caitlyn with one arm, the other shot out, catching Amira around the waist before she could land in the dirt next to the offending toad. He watched it hop off towards the nearby river, likely in search of water, shade, and slightly less commotion. Then his gaze moved back to Amira, whom he held firmly against his body. She felt good there—better than she had any right to. He might have forgotten himself and said something to that effect if not for Caitlyn's vocal indignation about the abrupt movement.

“Oh my gosh, I'm sorry about that,” Amira said, getting her feet solidly beneath her again and gracefully stepping out of his encircling arm. Her cheeks were flushed bright pink, which only made her look better in Dean's humble opinion. “I don't know what's wrong with me.”

Dean smiled and waved away the apology. “Nothing to be sorry for. Although you almost went from having a snake in your boot to a toad on your toe just now. Not sure which one sounds less appealing to you.”

But his default solution of smoothing things over with a smile and a joke didn't land as well this time because Caitlyn was now fully awake, and she was not pleased about it. She opened her mouth wider than seemed possible for such a tiny human, then began wailing. Dean's heart sank. There was something about a baby's cries that seemed to reach right down and squeeze his heart in a vise. He wanted to make things better—but he had no idea how.

He glanced at Amira apologetically before he started bouncing Caitlyn, hoping to calm her. Of course, it didn't work. “She's usually a happy baby, I promise. They're just kind of temperamental sleepers, my kiddos.”

She smiled, shook her head, and held out her arms. “Nothing to be sorry for, really. Unlike snakes and toads, this is something I’m very comfortable handling.”

She reached for Caitlyn, who was now kicking her little legs indignantly, having fully undone his awkward attempt at swaddling. At this point, Dean wasn’t sure anything but exhausting herself was going to make his little girl quiet again. He considered telling Amira as much, but she was already taking Caitlyn out of his strong hold. What happened next felt to Dean like some kind of small miracle.

First, Amira re-tucked the blanket around Caitlyn. She did it expertly, making the baby more securely swaddled than Dean had ever managed. Next, she held Caitlyn close to her chest so that her tiny head rested on Amira’s breast. There was no nonsensical, soothing talk. No bouncing her up and down. All it took was those two quick moves, and Caitlyn was nestling back into sleep. Dean had seen nothing like it. He was so surprised that he didn’t realize she was heading for the cabin door before it was too late.

“Oh, hey, hold on a minute,” he said urgently, stepping towards the door himself. “Her brother, Caleb, is sleeping in there and he needs complete silence or else—”

There was no need to finish that particular warning. No sooner had Amira jiggled the cabin’s door handle than Caleb’s wails of indignation started inside. Amira looked at him over her shoulder, shrugged, and smiled. “Looks like we’d better go in, don’t you think?”

Amira did her best to mentally steel herself as she opened the door to Dean's home and stepped inside. She let out a little sigh when it wasn't *quite* as bad as she'd been dreading. The cabin was well built, with sturdy, comfortable furniture. A few days earlier, it had probably been quite neat and cozy. Right now, it was...not, but that was to be expected when baby chaos arrived.

A pair of cribs were in the middle of the living room and taking up a substantial amount of the available floor space. No wonder he was having trouble getting them to sleep and to stay that way. The three of them were all underfoot of each other, and having Amira there was only going to make the space situation worse.

She walked over to the currently occupied crib where a baby in a dinosaur onesie was making his frustration with the world very clear. "Poor thing," she murmured, laying a hand on his back and rubbing gently, pleased when his wails softened to grumpy huffs. "Hungry, sweetheart? Or wet, maybe? I'll check on that in a minute, once I get your sister settled."

She looked up at the click of the door as Dean closed it behind himself. "It doesn't look like much, I know," he said apologetically. "You're probably wondering why we're here instead of the big house."

She was wondering a lot of things, though that was certainly one of them. "I'm sure you have your reasons."

He shrugged, looking around the little room fondly. "I've lived in this cabin for years. Long before the ranch was my responsibility, and certainly before Caleb and Caitlyn were even a vague idea."

"And you weren't interested in making the transition to the main house?" With Caleb mostly calm, Amira took the moment to settle Caitlyn, now sweetly dozing, into her crib—

years of experience allowing her to transition the baby down onto the mattress without waking her.

Her eyes weren't on Dean, but she heard a certain tightness in his voice when he answered. "Unfortunately, there's work to be done before that can happen. There's a bad termite problem, and some of the floors need to be redone. We just never got around to it before, but I don't see the sense in moving in until it's all taken care of."

"Right," Amira said quickly, nodding her head in understanding. "That makes sense. Then you'll be moving in once the problem is addressed?"

He shrugged. "It might not happen right away. I've got a lot on my plate at the moment, and moving can be a hassle. This works, for now, doesn't it? They're no bigger than a minute—what do they need a whole house for, right?"

He was flashing that charming smile again, the one that made it hard to ignore just how attractive her new boss was. She was a professional, always, but she was also still human. She couldn't pretend that Dean wasn't one of the sexiest men she had ever seen. He would have turned her head for a second look if she'd just passed him in the grocery store, and they were currently a whole lot closer than that. The two of them living together in such small quarters for any amount of time at all was going to be a whole new kind of challenging. But she'd faced bigger challenges before—she was kind of known for it. No matter how bad a situation was when she walked in, she always knew just how to fix it, all within the timeframe of her standard, two-month contract. She would get Dean to a place where he could confidently parent on his own, and then she would go. Just as she always did. Resisting the temptation he presented might be difficult, but it wouldn't last for long.

"If that's what you want," she said, careful to keep her voice free of the thoughts running through her mind. "We'll find a way to make it work."

Dean smiled and bent to retrieve Caleb, whose fussing had started dialing up again, from his crib. "And I'm sure it won't hurt having you here to look after them. Something tells me



they're going to be able to feel how much better at this you are than me.”

Amira returned his smile and glanced around the cabin again. Her official title was nanny, but truthfully, she felt more like a parent trainer. It wasn't that she didn't think high-quality childcare was important, because she did. But there was a big difference between having someone partner with you in raising your child and having someone else do the raising entirely. Amira was a firm believer in the first version. She was determined to bring Dean to that point in her two months with him. Once that was done, she'd move onto the next job and he'd be ready to find a permanent caregiver for the twins.

“Well,” she finally replied, taking another look around the room before returning her gaze to Dean's face. “I don't know about that. I'm sure you're a great father. And you're only going to get better.”

He dropped his eyes for a moment, and Amira was surprised to see that he was actually blushing a little. “I don't know about that, but it's very kind of you to say.”

“I'm the expert, and I'm sure of it. By the time my work here is done, you're going to feel like an entirely new parent.”

Dean frowned. “What do you mean, ‘by the time your work here is done’? You make it sound like this job has an expiration date or something.”

For a second, Amira just stared at him. What on earth was he talking about? Their contract—the contract that he had signed, and that she had a copy of in her purse—very clearly specified that she would only be working for him for two months. She had been very clear in her application and had mentioned it in their correspondence back and forth. She was positive that there was zero room for interpretation on that front. It had been years since she had stayed with a family for longer than that. She was always up-front on her stipulations in order to avoid precisely what Dean was demonstrating now. She wasn't interested in a long-term assignment. She had plenty of confidence in her skills and abilities, but she knew what suited her. She wasn't meant to stay with a family. Her job was to be

there for them at those difficult transitional times so that she could get them on the right track. It never took more than two months to accomplish, after which every family she'd worked with had been ready to move along without her. She came, she saw, she fixed. And then she left. That was how it worked. Always.

"I'm talking about the terms of my contract, Dean." She spoke slowly, still searching his face for any sign of recognition. "I outlined in very specific terms how long I would be staying here."

He shook his head, like he was trying to knock something loose. "What do you mean? How long *are* you willing to stay here? I know we're technically in our trial period right now—forty-eight hours to make sure that this is an arrangement both of us are satisfied with—but I was under the impression that once we got past the trial, our contract was open-ended. That you'd be staying long-term."

Amira's stomach flip-flopped uncomfortably. She felt like she was approaching the top of a rollercoaster, and she had never enjoyed those. "I'm sorry, Dean, but that's not what the contract says. Yes, we have a two-day trial period, but after that, my contract specifically states that I'll only be staying two months. No more. I'm...not sure where there could have been any source of confusion," she admitted. This had certainly never happened before. Sometimes families tried to argue or persuade her into changing her terms, but no one had ever acted surprised that those terms *existed*. It was all spelled out in the paperwork—in her application, in her emails with prospective clients, and in the final contract that she signed.

Dean, still holding Caleb in one strong arm, started pacing around the room. That was no easy feat, either, seeing as the majority of the floorspace was already occupied. Caleb started wiggling fretfully, but Dean seemed beyond noticing at this point. He was far too agitated by news Amira had never meant to come as a surprise in the first place.

When he finally stopped, he looked at her and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but this feels like a huge blow. I had no intention of hiring someone who wasn't prepared to stay on indefinitely."

Dean set Caleb gently down in his crib. The poor baby started fussing loudly, making his objections to the change in his circumstances known, but Dean hardly seemed to hear it. He was hurrying for the small back room that must serve as his bedroom in the little house. When he returned a few moments later, he was clutching several sheets of paper in both fists. His brow was deeply furrowed, what looked like unwelcome understanding spreading across his face.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he mumbled, whether to himself or to Amira she couldn’t really be sure. “I thought I was being so careful. So thorough. I was determined to get at least this one thing right, and I blew it.”

Balancing Caitlyn on one hip, Amira held out a hand for the papers in question. “I think you’re being too hard on yourself, Dean. You’ve got a lot on your plate. I can see that, and I’ve only just met you. Can I have a look at those? See if I can make sense of things?”

He didn’t move, so Amira closed the small amount of distance between them. She gently pried the paperwork from his clenched fists and glanced over it quickly. It didn’t take very long to see where his confusion might have come from. It was an honest mistake, especially coming from someone with so much chaos in his life. It was also a clear indication that he seriously needed her help.

“I think I see what happened here. It looks like when you were reviewing the applications and reaching out to the different applicants with your questions, it came down to me and one other woman named Amanda. She’s the one who just came off a job in Massachusetts. And the one who was available for an open-ended contract. Do you think it’s possible you mixed the two applications up, with everything you’ve got going on?”

He groaned. “That’s it. I remember now. I liked your profile better, but she was willing to stay on indefinitely. I meant to go with her. I guess I just got it turned around in my head when it came to asking you to send along your contract. I...I have to admit, I didn’t read the contract itself that closely before signing it.”

“It’s an honest mistake.” Her heart really did go out to him. He seemed so close to his breaking point already and this certainly couldn’t be helping.

He certainly looked lost when he spoke next. “So, what do we do now? It’s not that I don’t like your whole parent-training philosophy, because I do. Your application was great. But I need someone who can stay on for a lot longer than two months. I’ve got too much on my plate right now to start nanny hunting again just eight weeks down the road.”

Amira was at a loss, which wasn’t something that happened to her often. She prided herself on her organization and communication skills. They had kept her from walking into exactly this kind of situation on more than one occasion. The smart thing to do would be to walk out of the situation and move onto the next job. They were still in that trial period, so she was totally within her rights to cancel the contract and go find another assignment instead. She had a strong enough reputation that she wasn’t too worried about finding a new position at the last minute. Extricating herself from this messy situation was absolutely what she needed to do here. It was the only smart play. The problem was, she didn’t want to. Despite all of the chaos and the fact that Dean was looking for something she wasn’t prepared to give, something was telling her not to walk away from this struggling little family just yet.

Before she had a chance to voice any of this, however, Caitlyn and Caleb both started wailing as if on cue. While Amira had been busy trying to figure out the lay of the land in Dean’s home, the day had continued to unfold. Now, when she glanced outside, she saw that dusk was rapidly falling. Complications or no, the little darlings needed tending to, and that was something she knew how to do.

“Sounds like it’s the witching hour for these little guys.” She smiled reassuringly at Dean, who gave her only the ghost of a smile in return. “Is that right?”

He ran a hand distractedly through his hair. “It is. Time for food and bath time, then sleep, if we’re lucky. But, Amira, don’t we need to sort this out?”

“We do,” she agreed. “But not right this second. We’ve got a little wiggle room, thanks to the trial period. And in the meantime, I think we could all use some food in our bellies.”

Dean stood close to the fence of the horse paddock attached to the ranch's largest barn, watching the horses that seemed so quiet and peaceful. He envied the hell out of them. *They* didn't have an awkward family meal that they'd have to sit through.

"Feeling sorry for yourself," he grumbled under his breath, digging the toe of his boot into the dirt next to the paddock's fence line. "That's all you're doing, and it's not going to get you anywhere good."

It was Friday night, which meant that his family had invaded, taking over the main house for the family dinner night. They had all sat down to eat together every Friday night for as long as Dean could remember. When his sister, Vivien, had gotten married, her husband, Frank, had started attending, joined later by their three kids, Melissa, Manny, and Margot.

The more jarring change had come three years ago, when Jackson—a volunteer firefighter when he wasn't working with Dad on the ranch—had died rescuing a family from a house fire. His empty seat had cast a pall on the weekly meal, but it hadn't stopped the tradition from happening. Nor had the death of Dean's father, Ray, a year and a half later from liver cancer. They still met up every week in the big family house that no one lived in anymore, Vivien and Mom kicking everyone out of the kitchen to prepare the meal.

This was the first week the twins would be joining them—as would Amira, who had arrived just the day before.

"What's on your mind, bro?" Dean looked up to see that his brother-in-law had joined him, and he mustered up a weak smile for the man. Frank wasn't a bad guy, but the two of them had never really been all that close. Frank was a town boy through and through. Ranch life had never made much sense to him, even after the years he and Vivien had lived there while Frank got his furniture-making business off the ground. It had only been in the past six months that Frank had finally

worn Vivien down, convincing her that a house in town would work better for all of them.

“There’s just a lot going on right now. That’s all. I know you’re still one up on me in terms of number of kids, but you had nine months to plan for Melissa—and then you just had *one* of her to deal with.”

“But you’ve got that nanny to help you with the kiddos now, don’t you? She seems to have a pretty good handle on it, in my humble opinion.”

Both Dean and Frank’s gazes traveled to the front porch of the main house. Amira was walking little laps across the porch with Caitlyn strapped to her front and Caleb strapped to her back. Neither of his babies was making so much as a peep of unhappiness for maybe the first time since they’d unexpectedly come to live with him.

Frank elbowed him lightly to get his attention as nine-year-old Manny tore past them, with eleven-year-old Melissa and six-year-old Margot in hot pursuit. “Seems like she’s a godsend. Though I’d imagine quarters are pretty cramped for the four of you in that cabin of yours. Think it’s time to finally move into the main house?”

“I just need to get the termite thing under control, then I can get back to work on the floors. It will all get done. It just takes time.”

Frank raised an eyebrow but was kind enough not to point out that Dean had had six months during which he could have refinished the floors and taken care of the termite issue. And the babies were no excuse, since he’d only found out about them two weeks ago.

He supposed he should be grateful that this was coming from Frank and not Vivien. His sister wouldn’t have been nearly so gentle with her nagging. She had strong feelings about how their childhood home should be maintained, and she wasn’t shy about letting him know when he was falling short—which, according to her, was always. He was probably in for another lecture over dinner. While the Friday family meal was unquestionably the best food he got all week, he couldn’t ever

seem to enjoy it when it came with a side of family guilt-tripping. But there was no way out of it, so he just had to get through it.

He clapped Frank on the back. “I appreciate you looking out, man, really. But for now, what do you say we get everyone inside? You know how Mom feels about tardiness and unwashed hands.”

Frank chuckled and motioned for his kids to join them. “That I do, Dean. That I do.”

The two men, accompanied by Dean’s nieces and nephew, made their way to the front porch where Amira still stood with Caitlyn and Caleb. Dean couldn’t help but grin when his eyes met hers. It gave him a whiplash feeling, how much things had already changed since she had been with him on the ranch. His babies looked entirely at peace in her arms, and she looked as if she were made to hold them.

“Everything okay?” She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder when he reached her on the porch, almost as if she could sense his turmoil.

“All good,” he answered with a smile. “Just ready for some grub. Come on, this is part of the whole ranch experience I think you’ll enjoy.”

He reached the door and held it open for her, puzzled by the light frown creasing her forehead. “Oh, I wasn’t actually planning on eating with you guys, Dean. I typically take my meals separately from the family. I’ll get Caitlyn and Caleb situated, of course, but—”

She wasn’t given the chance to finish because his mother had gotten to the door and come over and taken Amira’s arm, tugging her inside the house.

“Hello, dear. I saw you earlier through the kitchen window with the twins, but there was so much to do to pull dinner together that I didn’t get a chance to come out and meet you. I’m Josie Walters, Dean’s mother. And this is Vivien, my daughter,” she added, gesturing to where Vivien had finally come out from the kitchen.



Dean's mom held out a hand for Amira to shake. She did so with a nervous smile, then turned to look at Vivien. Vivien was clearly not in as hospitable a mood as their mother, and only raised a hand in greeting as she got her kids settled for supper.

"Thank you so much for your hospitality," Amira said, "but I was thinking it would be best if I headed back to the cabin. That way you can have your family time without any intrusion."

Dean's mom dismissed this with a wave of one hand. She had never been all that good at taking no for an answer. "Nonsense. That's just silly. There's plenty of food, and besides, I'd like to get to know you better."

Amira looked to Dean again, but he just shrugged. If she really wanted to leave, then he'd take her side, but there was no reason for her to have to scrape something together in his cabin when there was a full meal ready and waiting here. Besides, even if she avoided his mom and her questions now, she'd have to answer them eventually. Mom would hunt her down if she had to.

He pulled out a chair for her next to his, which turned out to be the deciding factor. He didn't get the impression she was exactly pleased with the situation, but after settling the twins into their travel cribs, she took the seat. "Thanks. This all smells delicious."

That much was true. Dean's mom and sister knew their way around the kitchen. They also didn't believe in making polite small talk for the benefit of their guests. In fact, they were in rare form this evening. Dean realized that when his mother cleared her throat pointedly, looking around the house she used to run.

"You know what?" she said with a sigh. "This place really was too big for me at this stage of my life. We all know that. But I won't say I don't miss it from time to time. Living in an apartment? I just don't know. It doesn't seem natural somehow."

Vivien rolled her eyes. "'Unnatural' seems a little dramatic, Mom. Plenty of people live in them. I'd be willing to bet more

people live in apartments for their whole lives than ever get to live in a house like this.”

“Yes,” Dean’s mother countered in a voice reserved for the strained communication between mothers and daughters. “That may be true, but you don’t know what it’s like at my apartment. You’ve hardly spent any time there at all. It’s just so small and boxy.”

“Decorating and proper use of space can do wonders,” Vivien said around a forkful of food. “And you know I’d be more than happy to help.”

Dean’s mother forged resolutely ahead. “And the complex manager! He’s so surly, downright rude.”

Caitlyn made a small, disconsolate sound, perhaps responding to the tension in the room. That got Caleb fussing, but Amira moved fast, rushing to distract them with the toys she’d packed.

Dean flashed her a grateful look, then turned to his mother. “If you’re really unhappy, Mom, I’ll help you find someplace else. I want you to like the place you live.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that kind of fuss,” she said, waving the offer off. “And besides, you have your hands full already, don’t you? In fact, I should be the one coming out here to lend *you* a hand. You know I keep offering.”

That much was true. Dean had received several offers of help from his mother. She’d even come out a few times and tried to help with the kids and the housework, but they had just ended up tripping over each other in the cramped space. Caleb had cried, and that had gotten Caitlyn going, and they’d spent most of their afternoon calming them down. The housework had gone undone, and it had all ended up feeling like a waste of time. “That’s true, you do.”

Though come to think of it, there *was* one thing he needed help with—something that Mom might be able to take off his plate altogether. “And, hey, you remember the Strawberry Festival is coming up, right?”

“Of course she remembers,” Vivien interjected, snapping at him. Caleb started at that, but Amira tickled his belly, and Vivien lowered her voice to an urgent hiss. “It happens every year. We’re not likely to forget. We know it’s one of your ‘big things.’”

That was true, too. The Strawberry Festival happened at the beginning of every summer, lasting for two weeks. The whole thing kicked off with a potluck at the church and included all kinds of events, from bake sales to field games to a dance. His family had always run the show. When he was a kid, his mom had been the one in charge. Dean couldn’t quite remember how he’d wound up taking over that role, but he had, and he’d been doing it for years. Normally, he didn’t mind, but now? With two babies to care for? If Mom could handle it this year, that would be the best way of helping him. But it was a lot to ask of her. He didn’t feel right dumping it in her lap. He’d hoped that if he brought it up, she might make the offer herself, but thanks to Vivien’s interruption, that didn’t seem likely to happen.

“Be nice to your brother,” their mother said as if they were still children. “He’s allowed to bring up the things he’s excited about.”

Vivien rolled her eyes, then looked around the house with distaste. “Well, why can’t he get excited about fixing this place up? It’s a mess. Dean, are you ever going to start the repairs? Because I would definitely have gotten them taken care of by now.”

Dean opened his mouth to snap back at her, but just at that moment, Amira passed by. Her hand brushed his arm, maybe by accident, but when he looked up, he glimpsed her calm smile. *Calm, right, for the babies.* He drew a deep breath. He knew that it had been hard on Vivien, relinquishing the house and moving into town. Vivien had control issues at the best of times, and she seemed to be focusing all of her grief over their family’s recent losses on the state of the house.

“He’ll get it done,” their mother said, coming to his defense in the least helpful way possible. “You know he will. He’ll take care of this the same way he takes care of everything else.”

Amira resumed her seat next to him, and Dean felt better. Out of everyone there, she knew him the least. There was no reason for him to expect any understanding from her. His problems were not her responsibility. But he could feel her empathy coming off of her like waves of heat, and when his eyes met hers as he passed the rolls, they were full of kindness and understanding. It made him tingle all over in a way he wasn't familiar with. It was a feeling he could get used to—which was a problem, given that she wouldn't be staying for long. What he needed to do was find a nanny who planned on sticking around for a while, and he needed to do it as quickly as possible.

A mira shut the door to Dean's bedroom softly, holding her breath at the clicking sound it made when it closed. The twins were finally asleep, down in the portable crib that she'd set up in the bedroom so that she could have the living room area available, and she had no desire to see that change. She'd been nannying long enough to feel capable in the trickiest of situations, but the situation with Caleb and Caitlyn was seriously putting her to the test. Had she been in a house with enough rooms to accommodate their conflicting needs, getting them to nap would have been easy, but as things stood now? Trying to care for them in this tiny cabin, putting them to bed when one couldn't stand the smallest sound and the other craved it? Getting them down at all felt like a miracle.

She paused for a moment, ear to the door, ear pressed to the wood, breath still held. She ticked off the seconds in her head until enough time passed that she was reasonably sure they would stay down, then stepped gingerly away from the door. When she reached the little couch, she sighed with relief.

"There," she said with a sigh. "That's one thing done. Hopefully."

Hopefully, their morning nap would last long enough for her to take care of some clearly overdue tidying. It was always surprising, the amount of mess that came with babies in the house. For such tiny people, they required enormous amounts of tools, equipment, and accessories. It made it difficult to keep a household orderly under any circumstances. And this cabin was so small that there just weren't enough places to put things away. Finding some way to sort everything out would be a true test of her organizational skills—but she felt up to the challenge. With a sigh, she put in her earbuds and prepared to clean. She'd decided that she wouldn't be staying at this assignment once the forty-eight hour trial period was up, but she wanted to leave the place in better shape for whoever would come to take the job from here. Sorely in need of a little

friendly company, and someone to tell her that she was making the right decision, she dialed her friend, Bethany, so they could chat while she cleaned.

“Hey, girl!” Bethany cried happily after only two rings. “How’s the new job going?”

Amira smiled as she set to work scrubbing the counters. She tended to feel like she didn’t have time for phone conversations. Not for anyone, even her most favorite people in the world. She was proud of her reputation for being able to get even the most difficult of families on track, but it meant that when she was on a job, she very rarely had time to focus on anything but her work. Catching up with friends sometimes got put off for months at a time. Luckily, Bethany—a former nanny herself—was very understanding.

“Amira,” Bethany said chidingly, pulling Amira out of her thoughts. “I can’t read your mind, remember? If you want me to know what’s going on, you have to tell me. You’re located really close to me now, right?”

Amira nodded, as if Bethany could see the gesture. “Yes, that’s right. I have to admit, it’s stunning out here—though very different from what I’m used to!”

“I know, right? I can’t wait for your visit when this job is over. There’s so much I’m excited to show you.”

“That’s actually part of why I’m calling. I might be wanting to come stay with you a little bit earlier than we originally talked about.”

“Sure,” Bethany said, a slight note of suspicion creeping into her voice. “You know I would love to have you whenever, and you’re absolutely always welcome. Now that I’m settled and the only kids I’m looking after are my own, my schedule is really flexible. But are you going to tell me why? I thought this job was for two months, just like all of the rest of them.”

“It was. That was the plan. But now that I’m here? I honestly don’t think this is a job for me. I can’t see staying two weeks, let alone two months.”

Bethany's tone switched to business mixed with a hint of concern. "What happened? Did he do something he shouldn't have? I mean, you're safe, right?"

"Yes, of course I'm safe." Amira felt a flash of guilt. Maybe she was making too big of a deal out of this. It certainly wasn't like her life was in danger or anything. "Everything here is just very different than I was expecting. And it has been from the moment I arrived."

"Meaning?" Bethany prompted.

"Well, it's a beautiful piece of land, and enormous. From what I gather, it's been in the family for a little while. And the main building is this big, beautiful house, but my boss isn't staying there. He's got himself, the twin infants, and now me all staying in a little one-bedroom cabin on the outskirts of the property. It's not a terrible place or anything, but it's certainly not meant for four people to live in."

"Oh, no way," Bethany said, her disapproval clear across the line. "Did you tell him that's ridiculous? I'm sure he's got his reasons, but that doesn't sound like any kind of setup for twins—especially with a live-in nanny. You deserve to have some space to yourself! What, does he have you sleeping on the couch?"

Amira sighed and dropped her washcloth in the sink, suddenly very tired. "Yes, actually. It's supposed to be a pull out, but the cribs take up too much floor space so there's no room to pull out the bed. I've asked him about moving into the main house, but it's pretty clear he's not interested. That by itself wouldn't be enough of a complication for me to consider leaving the job, but he's also looking for something completely different than what I'm prepared to offer."

"What does that mean?" Bethany demanded.

"It means that he mixed up my application with the other girl in the running," Amira explained, bending to tidy the cabinet under the sink. Dean had all sorts of junk in there, tossed in willy-nilly. "He wants someone who is going to stay here indefinitely. I explained that isn't the way I work, that I stay

for two months to help parents get their situation under control before moving on, but he's not interested in that."

Bethany scoffed, immediately affronted by this information. "Well, then the man is clearly an idiot. He should realize how lucky he is to have you there to get him on the right track. That's what you *do*—it's your superpower. If he can't see that, there might just be no hope for him."

"No," Amira said quickly. As frustrated as she was with her current predicament, she didn't like the way it felt, hearing Dean bad-mouthed. "It's not like that, really. He's not an idiot. I think he's just reeling. A couple of weeks ago, he only had himself and the ranch to look after. That's very different than having two people whose lives literally depend on him."

Bethany was quiet for a moment and Amira could practically hear the wheels in her head turning. She was a good friend and fiercely protective, but she was also too generous a person to condemn someone for circumstances out of their control. "Okay," she finally acknowledged, although grudgingly. "If you say he's not a bad guy, I believe you. But you don't want to stay?"

"No," Amira said falteringly. "At least I don't think so. Would it really be okay if I came to visit two months early, though? I'm well aware that you have your own life."

Bethany laughed delightedly. "Are you kidding me, lady? It would be more than okay. I would love to see you, as soon as you want and for as long as you want."

"And you don't think it's, like, me quitting on something I should stick out?" Amira cringed when she said that. She was many different things, but one thing she had no desire to be was a quitter. She couldn't remember ever actually walking out on a responsibility in her life.

"No way!" Bethany exclaimed so loudly that Amira had to briefly pull the earbud out of one ear. "Are you kidding me? Quitter is the last thing I would call you. Honestly, I'm proud of you."

"Proud? Why proud?" Amira frowned.



“Because this is a big thing for you!” Bethany shot back quickly. “Look, you’re very, very good at your job. The best, actually. But being professional shouldn’t mean that you never put yourself first. Walking away from this job would be the first time I’ve seen you choose what’s best for *you* over what anyone else needs. What I really want, what I hope for you, is that you take some time to live for yourself rather than for other people.”

“I’m not sure what that means...” Amira said. “I *like* my job. I *like* helping people.”

“I know you do,” Bethany said, speaking with uncharacteristic gentleness. “But it makes me sad to see you living your life two months at a time, never having a place that’s really yours. I worry that you’re closing yourself off to the idea of finding somewhere to stay—someplace that can make you happy for a long time.”

“That’s sweet, Bethany, and I so appreciate your support. I just have to figure out what to do here before I can do anything else.”

“I understand. And I totally respect it. Why don’t you take a little time to make that decision and then let me know? You know I’ll be here and over the moon to have you come and stay.”

“I do know that,” Amira said with a smile, her eyes filming with unexpected tears of gratitude. “And it means so much to me. I’ll let you know just as soon as I do.”

The two said their goodbyes and hung up. Amira finished with the cabinet, then tackled Dean’s fridge. The rest would have to wait until they could have a talk, or Dean wouldn’t be able to find anything in his own kitchen. Still, Amira felt better with the kitchen less chaotic. She peeled off her rubber gloves and flopped down on the couch with a sigh.

She had never been someone who had trouble making choices. It was one of the things she liked most about herself. With Dean, though, she felt split straight down the middle. She could see clearly all of the reasons she should go. He needed a lot of guidance, and at the same time, didn’t seem particularly

open to her ideas. The cabin, while suitable for a bachelor, certainly wasn't ready for a family and Amira didn't think it could ever be made ready. The twins had no kind of existing schedule, and it would be a struggle to get them on one without more space and facilities to work with. And then there was the other challenge of the cramped space—the way it meant she and Dean were practically on top of each other whenever he was home. As much as she expected to be involved in a family's life while she worked with them, she still needed *some* degree of separation. Sharing a tiny space with Dean and going to family dinners wasn't helping with that. She could already see that staying on would lead her to break all of her rules with families. She knew that Bethany thought those rules were crazy, but for Amira, they helped her feel safe. On paper, the choice seemed obvious, so why was it that something in Amira's heart was tugging at her to stay?

Her phone buzzed on the couch beside her, alerting her to a new text, and she picked it up, relieved for any small distraction. What she found made her smile. It was a video from the mother of one of her former families with a note saying she thought Amira might like to see Tiffany's latest piano recital, seeing as the two of them had spent so many hours practicing together. Amira's smile widened into a grin. She could still feel those ivory keys beneath her fingertips and Tiffany sitting beside her. Despite her hard and fast two-month rule, Amira loved getting updates on the kids she'd worked with over the years. She liked getting little snapshots of what was going on with them. It helped her to feel like she was still a part of their lives in some small way.

She flipped distractedly through a few other updating emails, then let her phone drop with a sigh. She had loved each and every one of those jobs, truly, but she was also growing tired of the D.C. life. She had wanted a change, taking a job out west. Something new. But with the new experiences had come a whole new set of problems.

A knock at the door startled her out of her thoughts and she jumped to her feet, sprinting for the door to get it open before the knock could come again. The last thing she needed right now was for the twins to wake up.

“Hello?” She opened the door, slipping outside but leaving it open just a crack. “I’m sorry, can I help you?”

The woman on the front step gave her a warm smile. “Hello, dear. I’m Carol, the foreman’s wife. I don’t want to intrude. I just wanted to drop off this pie as a way of saying welcome.”

Amira was totally thrown. This was the kind of gesture one extended to a new neighbor, not a very temporary nanny. “Thank you so much, but you really didn’t have to do this. I won’t be here long.”

“Nonsense!” Carol said, waving Amira off with one hand and delivering the pie with the other. “Doesn’t matter how long you’ll be here, does it? Everyone on this ranch is family, and you’re no exception.”

Baffled, Amira couldn’t think of anything to do but thank her. True to her word, Carol left, insisting that she didn’t want to take up Amira’s time. As Amira stood and watched Carol go, she was again flooded with the feeling that she was crossing all of her clearly laid out lines. But there was another feeling growing inside of her, too. One that surprised her. It was one of welcome, and she couldn’t remember the last time that had come on so strong.

Dean put his truck in park outside of his little cab and let it idle, his hands still clutching the steering wheel. This place used to be such a safe haven for him, the one place that never felt chaotic, but that was far from true these days. He felt a little like a man trying to stay afloat in a little canoe while the waves around him kept getting bigger and stronger. He wasn't sure he could keep his head above water for much longer.

"Stop it," he muttered to himself, shutting off the engine. "Wallowing, Dean. Not a good look on you."

He stepped down out of the truck's cab and went around to the bed. It was full of boxes of paperwork his father and brother had compiled over the years. They were meticulous men, the both of them, but they'd never been tech-savvy. All of the information for the ranch, information they'd compiled to put together the last five-year plan, was right here. But those five years had nearly run out, and now it was his turn. The bank needed it from him, and *soon*. He had his work cut out for him—as if he didn't already have enough on his plate. It felt like the blueprints of the rest of his life was in these boxes. Now, it was up to him to carry them all inside and get them in order.

He could hear the other inhabitants of the cabin before he got the door open. It was getting close to dinner time, which usually meant pandemonium. At least, it *had*, before Amira's arrival. Now, he heard both of the twins babbling happily inside. Intertwined with those tiny voices was Amira's, talking low and sweet. He couldn't make out the exact words, but to Dean, it sounded like a song. It put a smile on his face, but that quickly faded when he remembered that Amira hadn't actually agreed to stay. They were coming to the end of the forty-eight-hour window in which she could step away from the job, and he was pretty sure she was going to take it.

He lugged the boxes from the bed of the truck and stacked them by the front door before swinging it open. "How's it

going in here?” he asked, popping his head inside and looking around the room with comic trepidation. “Everyone alive? All in one piece?”

Amira looked up at him from the twins’ playpen and smiled, tucking a lock of hair behind one ear. “So far, so good! We’re just letting out a little energy, aren’t we?”

“Wonderful,” Dean said, opening the door wider and picking up one of the stacks of boxes. “If you’re getting rid of energy, think you could send some of it my way? I could certainly use any you’ve got to spare.”

Amira’s eyes widened a little when she saw the boxes, her eyebrows raised. “What’s going on there? Are you being audited or something?”

“No,” Dean laughed. “Nothing like that. These are all of the records my dad and brother kept about the ranch. I’ve got a meeting with the bank coming up and I’m going to need to go through all of this first—put together a report to lay out my plans for the ranch for the next five years. Somewhere in here, there’s some stuff for the permits for the Strawberry Festival, too.”

Amira nodded, but Dean couldn’t help noticing the small frown on her face as she took in just how many boxes he had brought home. He couldn’t exactly say he blamed her. The cabin felt overstuffed already. Adding stacks of boxes to the mix wasn’t going to make things any better. Not for any of them.

“Here,” she said, rousing herself from what he suspected were similar thoughts. “Let me help you get some of those inside. We can figure out where to put them later, I guess.”

Dean’s heart gave a hopeful jump at the word later, but he warned himself not to get excited. She was a helpful person. That didn’t mean she was planning on staying. He needed to prepare himself for the inevitability of her leaving.

Dean and Amira transferred the boxes wordlessly from the porch to the living room, creating stacks alongside the couch. He kept glancing at Amira as they worked, sure that he was

going to see disapproval written all over her face—but she was a professional and kept her thoughts to herself.

When they were done, she stood, her hands pressed against the small of her back, and stretched. At the same time, the twins, who had drifted off to sleep while they worked, began to stir and fuss. Amira leaned down into the playpen and patted Caleb's back with a soft smile.

“Sounds like somebody is hungry,” she said sweetly. Caleb's fussing stopped briefly at the sound of her voice, but it was clear to Dean it was a temporary reprieve. “I don't blame you, sir. I'm feeling pretty peckish myself.”

Dean made a slow circle with his neck, wincing at the quick succession of popping sounds. “I'm with you guys. I could definitely eat. What do you say we get some dinner going for everyone?”

Amira was in the process of making her way to the tiny kitchen but paused mid-step. When she turned to face Dean, it was with a look of surprise. She hugged her arms around herself in a guarded gesture Dean couldn't for the life of him understand. “I don't usually eat with the families, Dean. The kids, sure, when it's just me and them. But not the parents, or the rest of the families.”

“Yeah,” he said in a slow, measured voice. “I kind of gathered that from your reaction to being invited to the family dinner the other day. But look around you, Amira. This place is too small for us to eat solo. I can leave to give you some space and come back later, but short of that, you might need to bite the bullet on this one.”

For a second, Dean thought she was actually going to take him up on the offer. Then she uncrossed her arms and shook her head with a small, tense smile. “No, that's silly. You're right. I can make an exception. For tonight.”

That “for tonight” seemed to hang in the air with actual, physical weight, just in case Dean had forgotten about her ability to opt out of the contract. Still, he was in no hurry to address the elephant in the room. They were all hungry, so why not take this last chance to have a meal together? Maybe

he could send her on her way without her thinking that he was a total mess, at the very least.

Which, as it turned out, was easier said than done. He had never been much of a cook. He had never needed to be. Now, his fridge was full of the groceries he'd bought in anticipation of Amira's arrival. Groceries he wasn't entirely sure how to make a meal out of, which would necessitate Amira's help—but the kitchen didn't have much room to accommodate two people.

“Right,” he said, running a hand through his hair and stepping gingerly around Amira into the kitchen. “I'll see what I can do, but I'm not going to lie, I'm no Michelin Star chef.”

Amira laughed warmly. She walked into the kitchen, too, moving around him so gracefully it was almost feline. “I'm not, either, but I know my way around a kitchen well enough to get by. I can take the lead, if you're ready to play sous chef.”

“Sure, I can do that. Thanks.” Dean wasn't entirely sure what a sous chef was, but he *did* know that he was starving. He was also grateful for Amira's help.

Not that it was a smooth endeavor. The two of them trying to navigate the miniscule space was like a poorly choreographed dance. He was put in charge of chopping while she whipped up a sauce and put pasta on to boil, but they kept stepping on toes and bumping elbows. When they both went for the salt at the same time, they somehow managed to get so tangled up that they wound up in each other's arms.

For a second, Dean couldn't breathe. She was so close to him he could feel her heart beating against his chest and when she looked up into his eyes, it was hard to swallow. He had noticed how pretty she was from the moment he first saw her, but up this close, she was so beautiful it was hard to believe. It was crazy, but all he wanted to do was kiss her. If not for the simultaneous sounds of Caitlyn whimpering and the pasta water boiling over, he might have done it, too. But before he could step off into the particular abyss of crazy, Amira took a quick step backwards, breaking the spell.

“I’ll drain the pasta,” she said, brushing past him without meeting his eyes. “Maybe you can pick up Caitlyn? You know she—”

“Likes to be held and talked to. I got it. I do know that much, at least.”

He went to the playpen, lifting Caitlyn up into the air gently, careful to cradle her head. He was still terrified that he was accidentally going to harm his children and wasn’t sure if that feeling was ever going to go away. He sat on the edge of the couch, glancing over at Amira. There was a tension in the air now and it made him feel like a skittish horse.

Amira began to speak as she drained the pasta, but she wouldn’t look at him. “Hey, so, I was thinking. The twins are perfect, and this is such a beautiful place, but—”

This was it. This was the “it’s not you, it’s me” conversation, just about a different topic than usual. Amira had her escape hatch, and now was when she announced she was taking it. He would be right back at square one, feeling like he was about to drown.

Caitlyn, however, couldn’t read the room. Still wriggling in his arms, there was a sudden explosive noise. This was quickly accompanied by a spreading warmth and an unmistakable stench.

Amira dropped what she was doing and hurried towards him. “Oh, boy. Okay, let me take her and get her changed. I think it might be a good idea—”

“To change her formula,” Dean interjected, beating her to the punch. His face grew hot at the look of pleased surprise on her face. “I’ve been doing some research. I’ve got to go back into town to discuss a feed bill. I’ll pick up a different formula while I’m there.”

“That’s great, Dean. Thank you. I’ll write down the name of one that works well for sensitive stomachs. Now, here. Let’s try this again.” Amira cleaned and changed Caitlyn with surprising speed, and handed her back to Dean, an expectant look on her face. “Remember. Just talk. She wants to listen.”



Dean stood, staring down into his young daughter's face. For a moment, the room was too quiet and he couldn't think of a single word to say. Then Amira turned on the tap and he cleared his throat and just started talking.

"Hey, sugar," he said in a low, smooth voice. "It's your dad. I bet this is all still feeling kind of confusing for you, huh? That's okay. I don't blame you. It's confusing for me, too. Kind of like the blind leading the blind, right? I just want you to know I'm doing my best, okay? I know it's not great, but I'm trying. There's just too much going on right now. The Strawberry Fest, the ranch, you and your brother. Feels a little bit like I'll never be able to breathe again, but I'm trying. Please believe that."

It took him a minute to realize the water had shut off again sometime during his monologue. Amira was watching him intently, her head cocked to one side, and when he met her eyes, she smiled, looking sympathetic.

"Hey," she said, drying her hands on a dishtowel and coming to sit beside him on the couch. "I know this is a lot for you. Taking on the ranch for your family's sake, bringing home the twins with basically no notice. Not every man would have done that."

"Yeah, well, I'm not doing a great job of it," he mumbled.

"You're still learning," she pointed out. "That's normal. But I believe you can do this."

Her smile was so warm that he couldn't help returning it. "Thanks," he said. "That means a lot to me." The moment started to feel a little too charged, so he looked away, clearing his throat. "I just hope whoever I find to come and take your place believes in me, too."

"Yeah, about that..." she said before trailing off.

"Yes?"

She paused for a moment, then nodded firmly, as if coming to an agreement with herself. "I'm going to stay, alright? If you'd still like me to."

“Yes,” he said so quickly it was embarrassing. “I mean, please.”

She laughed, holding up a hand in a not so fast gesture. “But if I’m going to do that, we need to be clear that I’m staying for two months only. And I’m not here just to be a nanny. I’m here to teach you how to be a better father so you can handle more things yourself. If I stay, you’re agreeing to be part of my daddy boot camp. Think that’s something you can work with?”

Dean grinned. Right now, she was offering him a life raft, and he would be a fool not to take it. He’d agree to anything if it meant she’d stay. He held out his free hand for her to shake.

“I think you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Amira woke the next morning, still feeling a little stunned by her own decision. She was dependable. Logical. She thought things through and made the decision that made the most sense. She was most definitely not the kind of woman who let an impulse sway a decision she had already made. And yet, here she was, midmorning and still on the Walters Ranch.

She still felt vaguely uneasy about her spontaneity, but she couldn't deny that she was also happy. She knew that if she left, she would likely always carry with her a nagging feeling that she'd left something incomplete. If anyone needed her help, if anyone deserved it, it was Dean and the twins.

The first step, and arguably the most important one, was getting the twins on a schedule, then getting Dean to follow it. He seemed to be operating under the belief that they would just magically adapt to a daily timetable that worked for him. It was her job to disabuse him of that idea, and she didn't think he was going to enjoy it. She went through the morning routine making a mental list of all of the things he would need to learn during her two months with him. She was used to helping families come together as a unit, and she was good at it, but even for her, this felt like a daunting task.

"Lucky thing you two are so cute," she said softly, going to Caitlyn and Caleb's cribs. "And don't you worry. We're going to get the three of you where you need to be. We're just going to have to work together."

Amira moved the coffee table to one side, doing her best to clear a decent amount of space in the middle of the front room's floor. She laid a blanket out on the clean space, stood to double-check the area for any potential hazards, then returned to the cribs. Lifting them gently so that their little heads were nestled against her shoulders, she carried them to the blanket. She was just placing them in the middle of it with

a nod of satisfaction when the front door opened, and Dean walked inside.

She looked up and smiled, trying not to notice the way the muscles in his arms, gleaming with a fine sheen of sweat, stood out against his plain white T-shirt. “Well, hello. Early morning for you today?”

“Early morning for me every day,” he said with a chuckle, doing his best to sidestep the quilt spread out on his floor on his way to the kitchen. “I’ll write up a schedule, if you like, so you’ll know where I am in case you need me. Days on the ranch don’t all look the same, but I can give you a rough idea.”

Amira raised an eyebrow at that. This was not exactly the way she wanted this conversation to start. “Sure, it would be great to have an idea of your schedule. That way, we can go from there.”

“Go where from there?” Dean looked so genuinely confused that she almost laughed. Fortunately, she was able to stop herself with a well-placed bite of the tongue. Something told her laughing wasn’t going to make things any easier.

“Establishing a schedule,” she explained patiently. “For you and the twins.”

He frowned. “Isn’t that what I just said?”

“Not exactly. You aren’t going to be able to write out a schedule and just have the twins adhere to it. It’s going to have to happen the other way around. I’ll help lay out a plan that will work for the twins. Then you can figure out how to fit everything else around it.”

She could see the wheels in his head spinning. In all of her jobs, she had never worked with a parent with less of a clue than he had. She smiled and patted a spot on the blanket beside her. “I promise, it won’t be as bad as it sounds. And this is an excellent place to begin. We were just about to start tummy time.”

“I’m sorry, what now?”

“Tummy time,” she repeated, scooting over a little as he got down on the floor, awkwardly settling into a crisscross

position. "It's very important to their development."

"Okay, sure. Right." His answer was slow and distracted as he pulled his cellphone out of his jeans pocket and frowned.

A flash of annoyance made Amira's face feel flushed and warm. As far as she was concerned, she had made her expectations very clear if she were going to stay. Dean had agreed to be a willing participant in her parent boot camp setup. To her, that meant giving her and the babies his full attention when she tried to show him something. Apparently, it didn't mean the same thing to him. Normally, families were effusively grateful for the services she provided. It had been years since she'd had to convince someone to give her the time and space she needed to teach him. She was proving to have far less patience for it this time around.

She reached out and put a hand on his wrist, which was enough to get him to look up from the phone. "Look, it's a process. Tell me how much time you have to spare right now."

"Right now?" He glanced at his phone again and his frown deepened. "I've got about thirty minutes. I know it's not much \_\_\_"

"No, it's fine. We've got to start somewhere, right?" She smiled encouragingly and he shrugged.

Now, all of the focus and attention in the room shifted to Caitlyn and Caleb. The twins were balancing on their little tummies, arms and legs splayed out awkwardly as if they were trying to swim without any water. Amira smiled and nodded at them, satisfied, then set the timer on her phone.

"What is this for? Why do you need to set a timer?" Dean's eyes weren't straying from his babies. Obviously, this was the first he was hearing of practices like this.

"Well, it's called tummy time because they're supposed to practice being on their stomachs," she answered in a confident, matter-of-fact voice she hoped would instill confidence. "It helps them strengthen their neck and shoulder muscles and build their motor skills."

He raised an eyebrow, staring intently at Caleb, who was starting to loudly voice his displeasure with his circumstances. “Are you sure this is good for them? Because they look kind of miserable.”

“I’m sure,” she replied firmly. She wanted no room for disagreement here. “It’s how they develop the muscles they’ll need to do things like roll over, crawl, and eventually sit up. It’s one of the first things you can do for your children to help them become independent in life.”

“But they hate it. Look at their faces. Listen to them. Do we really have to do this to them?” His jaw clenched and Amira could feel how badly he wanted to pick them up.

She glanced down at the timer on her phone. “We really do. Please believe me when I say they’re okay. It might not be completely comfortable for them at first, but that’s because it feels new and strange, not because it hurts. And they’ve got less than five minutes left on the clock. Just talk to them while they tough it out. Let them know you’re here for them. That’s the best thing you can do right now.”

Jaw still tight, Dean nodded in agreement. For the next five minutes, his eyes did not leave his babies. He spoke in soft, soothing tones, telling the twins about all of the things he planned to do that day. It wasn’t exactly the kind of thing people usually talked to their children about, but that didn’t matter. It wasn’t the content that was important, it was the commitment—him being there for them, giving them his full attention. That was one of the most important lessons Amira could teach him, and she sincerely hoped this experience would help drive that point home.

Still, as engaged as he appeared to be, Dean let out a heavy sigh of relief when Amira’s timer signaled the end of tummy time. He frowned down at his phone, scrolled through something quickly, then got to his feet, groaning.

“What’s up? Where are you going?” Amira jumped quickly to her feet as well.

Dean’s answer was distracted, and almost all his attention was back on his cell now. “I’m glad I got to be a part of this, but

I've got to go. There are a million things I need to take care of."

Amira counted to five before speaking again. Losing her temper at him wasn't going to help get anything down. "What happened to the thirty minutes you said you had right now?"

"Well, this latest round of messages brought up some new issues that chipped away at it. Including a horse that needs to be reshod and a woman at the local church that needs me to come in and confirm their space in person. We're planning on using it for the Strawberry Festival. I need to make sure nothing goes wrong there." His jaw was working again, his stress levels clearly rising.

He was trying. She could see that plain enough. But he had to get used to following through on time commitments for his children. If he couldn't do that, this was never going to work.

"Look, I know you're busy," she said in the same soothing voice she used for cranky children. "And I know how hard you're trying. But you're the one who agreed to the whole daddy boot camp thing. You have obligations elsewhere, but that doesn't mean you can blow off your obligations here. You don't have to stay for the whole thirty minutes this morning, but why don't you read them a book or something before you go?"

She grabbed a little cardboard baby book off the kitchen counter and held it out for him to take. He looked down at his phone again, and for a moment, she was sure he was going to walk out the door. Instead, he shook his head, muttered something under his breath, and accepted the book.

"Alright, a book, then. I think I can manage that."

She grinned encouragingly and nodded towards the blanket. "I know you can."

While Amira started cleaning the kitchen as quietly as she could manage, she watched Dean intently. It was clear how uncomfortable he was with the whole scenario, from getting down on the ground to sit beside them to reading baby books at all. Despite that, it was also obvious to her that he wanted to

do well. The phone was in his back pocket and didn't show any signs of coming back out. The twins, on their backs now with legs kicking excitedly, both had eyes only for their father. They studied his face, enraptured, the entire time Dean read, and when he finished and glanced at them, he chuckled.

He reached out and rubbed Caleb's stomach gently. "You like that, little man? I thought that was pretty good myself. What do you say? Should we read another one? Really dig in?"

He reached around behind him for a side table where a stack of baby books stood precariously on one edge. Unfortunately, there were several other stacks of things in the way, including a pile of folded laundry Dean accidentally toppled.

"Everywhere," he grumbled to himself, trying to right the clothes and failing. "There is stuff on every available surface of this place."

Amira had been wondering if he even noticed the chaotic amount of stuff. Now that she knew he did, she jumped at the chance to bring up moving into the big house.

She left the kitchen, grabbed another book, and handed it down to him. "It really is intense in here with all the clutter, Dean. And honestly? That's only going to get worse as they get older. The sooner everything gets moved into the main house, the better."

The change in Dean's expression was total and immediate. The joy of reading to Caitlyn and Caleb was gone. Now, he looked completely closed off. He shook his head at the book and got to his feet, pulling his phone out again.

"I'm sorry. Maybe it wasn't the best time for me to bring it up." She was sorry, too. He'd been having a lovely moment and she had gone and spoiled it.

He shrugged and started for the door. "It's fine, but I've got work to do. And the house needs work, too. That's why we're not there. There are termites, the floors need to be redone. These things take time, okay? They just do."

He walked out the door, shutting it just a little bit more loudly than was strictly necessary. He was frustrated, that much was



clear. But Amira was frustrated, too. Dean was a shining example of one step forward, two steps back. She had never worked with someone quite like him before. It wasn't easy, just as she had known it wouldn't be. So why had she made the decision to stay?

Things in the little cabin Dean now shared with his children and Amira had felt tense for the past two days, and he was glad for the work that brought him out to the ranch's pastures and fields. Whenever they were in the cabin together, the abruptly ended conversation about moving into the main house still hung in the air between them, although neither one of them had mentioned it again. It didn't need to be mentioned again. It wasn't like Dean didn't know Amira was right about taking over the bigger house. But it still felt like his father's house—the one that was supposed to go to Jackson someday. It was never supposed to be his.

Pushing that thought away, he focused on the list he was going over with Mark, the foreman, and his son, Billy. As nice as it was to walk the grounds with them, feeling the solid ground beneath his feet and smelling the sweet, green scent of healthy earth, there wasn't much respite to be found in the conversation. The list of things the ranch needed was extensive. And *expensive*.

Mark sighed, shoving his hands in his back pockets and leaning up against the fence. "Sorry, Dean. I know that's a hell of a list of repairs."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Dean said quickly. "It's not your fault, right? And we can't exactly blame Mother Nature for doing her thing."

Mother Nature's latest big "thing" was a massive snowstorm in April that had done substantial damage to the property, some of which was still not fixed despite it being early June. Adding to the list of repairs was several other remodels and new builds the ranch needed to be in top shape and fighting form.

Billy, who looked like a carbon copy of his father, only younger, clapped his hand on the fence confidently. "It's going

to get done. We just need to put our noses to the grindstone. And Lord knows, not a one of us is afraid of hard work.”

“That’s true, son, we’re not. It’s going to take a little more than just hard work, though.” Mark cleared his throat, glancing at the cattle in the closest pasture, then turning his gaze on Dean.

Dean nodded in agreement. “You’re right, it is. It’s going to take a fair amount of money, too. Speaking of which, did you say you needed to talk to me about the herd?”

Mark nodded, and Dean couldn’t help a little inward groan. The cattle were a big part of the ranch and its success, but he had never been great at wrapping his head around how best to manage them. They had been Jackson’s pride and joy—a responsibility he’d taken over from their father early on. As a result, after their father, Ray, had been diagnosed with cancer—leading to him giving Dean a crash course on how to run the ranch that would soon be his responsibility—Ray hadn’t been able to teach him quite as much about the cattle part of operations. That part of the business had been largely out of his hands for many years by that point.

Dean was lucky to have Mark and Billy, both of whom were experts on the animals and had worked closely with both Jackson and Ray. Typically, when it came to this subject, he deferred to their judgment and left it at that. This time, though, he wasn’t so sure.

“So, walk me through it again?” he asked, needing to be sure he understood. “What is it Jackson wanted to do?”

“You know Jackson always thought that putting the money into improving the cattle was going to be the key to this place’s ongoing success, right? The genetic component?” Mark said.

“I remember.” Dean couldn’t help a small smile. He could still hear Jackson on one of his cattle soapboxes. It had been a regular fixture at the family dinners when his brother had still been alive.

“Well, the project he was most passionate about was improving the bloodline,” Mark continued. His frown

deepened a little, the crease in his brow growing along with it. “He wanted to add some insemination from new bulls with the right lineages to improve the standing of all of the calves subsequently born.”

Dean nodded slowly. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Mark, but that sounds like it could be pretty expensive.”

“It would be,” Billy interjected enthusiastically. “It could also pay off big-time in the end. Hard to say.”

Mark shot Billy a look, then shrugged. “It’s sound enough science, but the cost of taking something like that on right now makes it risky, especially given how long it’ll be before it starts to prove itself.”

Dean nodded again but said nothing this time. It wasn’t his area of expertise. He knew that. It was one of the reasons he deferred so much to the knowledge and judgment of Billy and Mark—and tried, as much as possible, to stick with whatever Jackson had planned. But with the ranch needing so much work, requiring so much money, already, it seemed like folly to take the cattle on, too. He couldn’t help questioning Jackson’s judgment on the topic. But just as soon as the doubt came into his mind, he was flooded with a wave of guilt that made him feel sick to his stomach. It had been one of Jackson’s dreams, this move with the cattle, and now he wasn’t around to see it through. Wasn’t it one of Dean’s responsibilities to do that for him now? Besides, who was *he* to think that he knew better than Jackson—the real heir, the one who had been born to be a rancher?

He thanked Mark and Billy, leaving them by the front pastures and heading to the main house. He didn’t want to be there, didn’t want to even think about that particular problem today, but with the pressure he was getting from Amira, he needed to take stock of what he was working with, whether he wanted to or not.

When he walked around the side of the house to the front porch, he spotted Vivien’s truck in the driveway. He stopped and sighed, bracing himself. He loved his sister. Truly, he did. But she was her own kind of force of nature, and he wasn’t

sure he could handle it today. Unfortunately, she was standing in the front window waving him inside, so it looked like he didn't have much of a choice.

She started talking at him before the door was all the way shut, her hands on her hips and a look of disapproval on her face. "What were you planning on doing? Just standing in the yard all afternoon?"

"Hey, Vivien. Nice to see you, too." He pulled her in for a stiff hug, but as soon as he let her go, her hands went right back to those hips, one of the universal symbols of displeasure.

"Seriously, what took you so long?" she asked pointedly.

"Sorry, I'm a little confused." Dean swallowed hard and imagined he was swallowing back a whole host of words better left unsaid. "You're making it sound like you've been in here all morning waiting for me, only I didn't know you were going to be here."

She opened her mouth, then promptly shut it. Apparently, he wasn't the only one trying to bite back words today. That was a pleasant surprise. Vivien was a good woman, an excellent sister, but she wasn't one to keep things to herself when she thought they were being done wrong.

She held his gaze for a moment more before letting out a loud sigh. She did a small turn in the middle of the room, throwing her hands up in the air. "All right, fine—you didn't know I was going to be here. I'm curious, though, why'd you come at all?"

This felt like dangerous territory, but Dean was willing to go there anyway. "Because I know there are things that need to get done here. Thought I'd come get a look."

"Get a look?" she repeated incredulously. Her eyebrows shot up so far they were practically buried under her hair. "Look at *what*? There's nothing here that you haven't seen—over and over again. We're here every week for family dinner, for starters. You were here just a few days ago."

"Yes, I know." It was getting hard to keep his voice level. Vivien knew just the right ways to get under his skin.

If she sensed his annoyance, though, she didn't show it. She was on a roll now. "It's been six months, Dean. Six months since Frank and I moved the kids back into town. We went over everything before we moved."

"I know, okay? I get that. But there's a lot on my plate. I can't do everything all at once."

She nodded vigorously. "I get that, Dean. I really do. But some of this stuff you won't even have to lift a finger for. Like the termite situation, for example."

"Oh yeah? They planning on moving out on their own or something?" Now it was his turn to raise an eyebrow.

"Um, no," she answered with a dramatic roll of her eyes. "But I checked with the exterminator, and you wouldn't even have to be here when they show up. I could handle all of it and you wouldn't have to do a thing. I don't think it gets a whole lot easier than that, brother."

Dean smiled and shook his head. Vivien could be a lot to take sometimes; passive-aggressive and on occasion, aggressive-aggressive. Even so, there was not a doubt in his mind that she wanted the best for him and for the Walters family. It was so important that she sometimes forgot that her own family needed things from her, too. He knew that her insistence on staying out at the ranch house for all those years had irked Frank, creating tension in their marriage. Now that Frank had finally gotten her into town, he didn't want those tensions to flare up again. If Vivien started spending too much time out here, taking care of the termite problem or whatever else she got it into her head that only she could fix, he worried about what it might lead to.

"What about Frank, Vivien?" he asked softly. "What about your kids? You know you guys moved for a reason. They need you there with them. They need your attention. Not to mention checking on Mom in her new apartment. I know she would appreciate your company and your help setting up house. You've got plenty going on without getting involved here, too."

She brushed that off with the wave of a hand. “I’m an excellent multitasker, Dean. I think I can handle it.”

Suddenly, Dean was hit with what felt to him like a stroke of genius. If she was so keen on lending a helping hand, he had just the thing for her. “If you’ve got so much free time, Vivien, why don’t you take over the Strawberry Festival? That would be a big help to me.”

Her expression darkened and she folded her arms across her chest. “That’s *your* thing. You’ve been running it for years—practically since you were a kid. Don’t do me any favors, acting like you need me to take it on. I bet it practically runs itself at this point. If you really don’t want my help, just say so. I’ll just go back to town like you said and take care of my kids.”

She brushed past him and was almost out the door before she stopped. After a beat, she turned to look at him, her expression noticeably softer. “I should have asked, Dean. I’m sorry. How are the twins?”

“They’re good, thanks. It’s not easy, but we’re managing. For now, at least.” This was the way things were with them. Vivien could be prickly, but when it came to her family, she led with her heart.

She nodded knowingly. “You know, if you ever need help there, you really can tell me. Seriously. I would be happy to come and babysit, lend a hand as often as you need.”

Dean was surprised by how much the offer meant to him, but he shook his head. “I appreciate that, Vivien, truly. But Amira’s got everything under control. She’s kind of a rockstar.”

He could see that mentioning Amira was a mistake as soon as her name slipped out of his mouth. Vivien’s face, momentarily so open to him, closed up again. She nodded and fished her keys out of her bag. “Right, got it. I forgot that Mary Poppins was here to save the day. Lucky you, having a stranger step in to take care of everything so you don’t need your family at all.”

He almost told her not to go, told her he would take her help, after all, but instead he watched her hurry down the front steps and climb into her car. Even though he'd wanted her to go—to return to town and focus on her life there—he wished it hadn't happened this way. He couldn't seem to fix anything without making something else worse.



“It’s going well, Bethany. I don’t know what else to tell you. It’s just...it’s just another job, at the end of the day.”

Amira glanced down at herself, phone still held to her ear, and laughed to herself. She had never been the kind of person to go into details when asked how she was doing. She was more of the “it’s great, hope things are great with you” type. Even so, she had to admit that her current situation might not fit most people’s definition of well. At the moment, she had Caitlyn strapped to her front and Caleb strapped to her back. They were becoming more and more fickle about what they wanted to get through the day. Today, constant movement was doing the trick. Fortunately, as soon as she got them out of the tiny cabin, she was in a place where she had plenty of room to do just that.

“Um, no,” Bethany said without missing a beat. “Sorry, lady, but that’s not going to fly with me. It isn’t just another job and ‘going well’ is not going to shut me up. Now, talk, if you please. I’m all ears, but only for the truth.”

Amira laughed and shook her head. Bethany was many things, but easily fooled was not one of them. “I don’t know, Bethany. I guess I’m trying to be optimistic. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“Nope. Not a thing in the world. Now, tell me what it is you’re trying to be optimistic about. Then we’ll really be getting somewhere.”

Amira groaned and laughed at the same time. “You drive a hard bargain. You know that, right? I mean I’m trying to be optimistic about the whole daddy boot camp thing—”

“Your life’s work so far, you mean?” Bethany interrupted.

“Yes,” Amira agreed. “That. I’m used to parents who actually *want* to learn—who make it a priority to carve out the time, who listen to my advice and follow my recommendations.”

“And Dean doesn’t do that?”

“There have been a couple of moments where it seemed like we were going to have a real breakthrough, but then it kind of just stalls. There are a couple of things that seem to be real stumbling blocks for him and, honestly, I’m not sure if I see him being able to move past them.”

She was surprised by how much it hurt her to say those words out loud. She worked so hard to keep herself emotionally separate from the people she worked for. She was good at it, too, as a general rule. But she wanted Dean to succeed. She wanted to be able to leave the ranch confident that he and the twins would be happy, and not just because she wanted the personal feeling of succeeding at her job. She liked him. She could try lying to herself, try pretending otherwise, but that wouldn’t stop it from being true. She liked him a *lot*—and found him deeply frustrating at the same time.

Bethany sighed. “Honestly? I can’t say I’m surprised. There’s a reason you had your doubts about him in the first place.”

“I know there was,” Amira said quietly. Because she couldn’t think of anywhere else to go, she was making her way towards the big house while she and Bethany spoke. Not that she was particularly keen on seeing it. It felt like a symbol of the progress she wasn’t making with Dean.

“Hey, why don’t you just call in another nanny?” Bethany asked suddenly, pulling Amira out of her thoughts. “Between the two of us, we’re bound to be able to come up with someone who’s available and wants to come out west. There’s got to be someone who would see it as an opportunity and jump at the chance of it. Dean himself might be a headache and a half, but I bet that land of his is gorgeous. How could it not be, given the location? I certainly fell in love with the Colorado lifestyle. That’s why I never left.”

“You sure didn’t,” Amira mused, glancing around at her surroundings. “I’ll admit, I was surprised when you first told me that you were settling down with someone and staying in Colorado after your last job ended, but it’s plain to see how happy it’s made you. It makes sense that someone else might

be just as excited about coming out this way, but honestly, I haven't really given the location all that much thought. I mean, beyond being worried I was going to be attacked by a wild animal when I first got here and stepped out of my car."

"Okay, stop, Amira. Please."

Amira's heart jumped uncomfortably, but she did as Bethany asked. "I'm sorry. I'm complaining too much, aren't I?"

Bethany laughed. "No way. I just want you to stop and take a look around you."

"Okay," Amira said slowly, still not sure what her friend was getting at. "I'm looking."

"Good. Because you wanted to come out west for a change. Remember? And now you're here. You're living it. It would be an awful shame for you to take the trouble to do that and not even notice what you came for. It's beautiful, Amira. I really hope you see that."

Bethany was right. Amira knew it, and she was a little ashamed of herself for needing that simple reminder from her friend. Back in D.C., she had felt terribly burned out with the constant motion. Everyone she knew, everyone she came into contact with, was living such a fast-paced life that it seemed impossible to have a real conversation. Now, here she was, surrounded by the exact opposite. Everything from the tempo to the temperature was unlike anywhere she'd lived before. There were parts of life in the city she missed, of course. Here, there were no twenty-four-hour corner markets or coffee shops open at three o'clock in the morning. But how often had she really taken advantage of that kind of thing? Now, instead, she had wide-open skies and stars unlike anything she had ever seen. Clouds so big they left shadows on the earth, mirror images of themselves as they made their lazy passages. The air not only smelled different, it tasted different, too, felt different as it filled her lungs. She was surrounded by more untouched beauty than she had ever seen before, and she hadn't really taken the time to notice it until this moment.

"See?" Bethany said softly, her usual sass momentarily set aside. "There's a lot to be thankful for here. If you want help

finding a replacement nanny, I'm on board for that. One-hundred-percent. Just don't get so wrapped up in the things you aren't satisfied with that you miss the good."

Amira took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Thanks, lady. Really. I needed that reminder. And I'll think about the replacement idea."

"And let me know if you need my help?" Bethany pressed.

"Yes," Amira agreed with a laugh. "I will definitely let you know if I need your help."

Bethany solicited one last promise from Amira and the friends hung up. Amira wasn't any closer to figuring out what to do about the Dean situation, but she still felt better. The simple reminder to look at the beauty around her had helped.

"What do you say, my little buddies?" she asked, smiling when the twins cooed and gurgled in response. "Should we see what other trouble we can find?"

Her spirits lifted, Amira didn't even mind seeing the big house again. She hummed to Caitlyn and Caleb as she walked, making sure to actually notice her surroundings for once. She wasn't going to be here for long. Once she left the Walters Ranch, she wasn't sure where she would end up. After a short visit with Bethany, she could very well find herself once again caught up in the rat race of the big city. If she was going to stick it out for the whole two months, she meant to make the most of it.

Her mood was so much improved that she even started imagining what the main house would be like once Dean finally took the place over. She had only been there for the one dinner, and she had been extremely tense the whole time, but she had been in more family homes than she could count. Homes, especially ones that had been lived in for a long time, carried feelings with them. The Walters land had been in the family for generations. Its walls still held all of the love that came from that. It just needed someone to take a leap of faith and restore it.

She was still deep in brainstorming mode on the subject when she rounded a bend and the house came fully into view. It really was a lovely house, there was no denying that. She started to smile, then gave a little start. Standing between her and the house was Dean. He shaded his eyes and grinned at her and she smiled in return. For some reason, seeing him here was making her blush. She shook her head to clear it, hoping that if he detected the flush, he would attribute it to the physical activity. He might be almost too handsome to handle, but she was still a professional, and she didn't want to get caught acting like a teenager with a crush.

“Well, will you look at this? Didn't expect I'd be running into the three of you here.” Dean sauntered towards them as he spoke, stopping close enough that Amira could smell the spice of his cologne.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and shrugged. “I was just taking these little guys for a walk. They're feeling a little restless today. And being outside, walking, is really good for them.”

“Makes sense. But what made you decide to walk toward the house?” He turned and looked at the place over his shoulder, as if he were checking to make sure it was still there.

“Honestly? I didn't really know where else to walk,” she answered with an embarrassed laugh. “I'm used to cities and sidewalks. With this much open land? I guess I wasn't really sure where to go when there was no path to guide me.”

He laughed too, reaching out and running a calloused hand lightly over the top of Caitlyn's head. “Fair enough. I bet it's a pretty big change. I'd be happy to show you some of the trails sometime, though, if you're interested. There's a lot here that's prettier than this.”

“Sure!” she said brightly. “That would be great! It's been brought to my attention that I should start paying a little more attention to the beauty around here.”

“There sure is a lot of it.” He ran his hand lovingly over Caitlyn's head again.

Amira's heart jumped, watching him peering at his daughter like that. He was radiating pure love for his children right now. An idea popped into her head, and she cleared her throat. For some reason, she felt nervous.

"Hey, you know, you could show us now if you like. We're not done walking and it's just as good for adults as it is for the little ones. Want to hold her?"

As if to punctuate the point, Caitlyn's little arms started wiggling. She reached for Dean, and he laughed, a sound of unadulterated joy. For a moment, he looked like he was actually going to ditch his work and join them. She could feel how much he wanted to take Caitlyn into his arms. As he started to reach for her, though, a guy came bounding up the path leading from the house to one of the front pastures.

Dean turned to greet him with a sigh. "Hey, Billy. What's up?"

"Sorry to interrupt, man," Billy said, shooting Amira a shy, sheepish smile. "But Dad's got a question about one of the fences. He was wondering if you could come take a look?"

Dean looked at Amira and she nodded. "It's fine, Dean. We'll just walk up to the house and double back. You can join us a different time."

He looked torn, but in the end, his sense of duty to the ranch won. He turned to follow Billy while Amira and the twins continued to the house. She was just settling onto one of the porch swings for a little breather before starting back when an unfamiliar man with a clipboard rounded the side of the house. She assumed he belonged to the van she'd seen parked alongside the house.

"Oh! Sorry, ma'am. Hope I didn't startle you. I was told nobody was going to be here."

"That's perfectly alright!" Amira assured him, getting back to her feet. "Us being here was a spur of the moment thing."

He looked down at his clipboard, squinted, then looked at her again. "Might be a lucky coincidence for me. I finished my inspection and if you'd like, we can go ahead and set up the extermination appointment."

For a second, Amira's mind was a blank. Then she realized what the man was saying and felt a surge of pleasure. She hadn't known how to bring up getting the house in order again after how poorly Dean had taken it last time. Now, it turned out she didn't need to. He must have finally started taking those steps, beginning with calling the exterminator to come out here for an evaluation. Since he'd already picked the company, it didn't feel like overstepping to go ahead and make the appointment for him. He had so much to deal with—if she could do one, small thing to help, she was more than happy to do so.

“Absolutely,” she said with a smile. “I can help you with that.”

Dean woke the next morning in a better mood than he'd been in for a while. Sure, the cabin was small and seemed to be getting more cramped every day. He'd convinced Amira to move into the bedroom with the twins, which left him bunking down on a lumpy couch that wasn't quite long enough for him. But Amira was still here. She was wonderful with the twins, and if he could just manage to find the time to really clock in and learn something from her about how to juggle parenthood with his responsibilities to the ranch, he thought he might just do alright.

It was a beautiful morning, and he breathed in deeply, savoring the crisp morning air. Maybe this weekend he would make good on his offer to show Amira some of the trails the ranch had to offer. He liked the idea of helping someone else get to know the place some, of showing the land off a little. And, if he was being totally honest with himself, he liked the idea of spending time with Amira. He enjoyed her company. Maybe they could even throw together a little picnic and make a day of it.

He held onto these good feelings and fantasies right up until he reached the main house. He had a whole host of chores to get done each day, but this morning, the house was where he wanted to start. It was high time he took a good look at those floors and figured out how much work and time it would take to refinish them. This morning felt like as good a time as any to come up with a game plan for that.

But when he trained his eyes on the house instead of the gravel road, he stopped short. Any feelings of positivity vanished completely. Apparently, he wasn't the only one with a plan to start on the house today. Somebody had gotten here before him. Someone with a giant tent large enough to cover the entirety of the home.



“Son of a—” Dean hadn’t called any exterminator, but *somebody* had, and without consulting him. He quickened his pace as he closed the remaining distance between himself and the front porch. There, he found a man with a clipboard full of papers. “Excuse me, do you mind telling me what’s going on here?”

The man looked up from his board, squinting at him over smudged glasses. “Oh, hello. You must be Mr. Walters? We’re all set here. Just wrapping up, actually. I’ll have my team back here in a week to take everything down and you’ll be good to go.”

“A week? What are you talking about?” This was starting to feel like a bad joke.

The termite guy looked vaguely confused, but just shrugged. “I mean you’ve got to wait a week before the tent comes off and it’s safe to go inside. Termites are no joke, Mr. Walters. You don’t want to mess around with the stuff it takes to kill them.”

“Right,” Dean said slowly, his hands balling up into fists by his side. “Thanks for letting me know. I apologize for the confusion. Nobody told me this was going to happen today.” Amira and his family may not agree with the way he was handling the house, but it was his choice to make. He didn’t like that choice being taken away from him. He didn’t like that one bit.

Dean headed back to the cabin and pushed the front door open just a little more aggressively than was necessary. He found Amira seated on the floor with Caitlyn and Caleb in carriers set in front of her. She was reading a book to the twins, facing it towards them so that they could see all of the pictures. When the door opened, she jumped a little, but she smiled when she saw Dean standing there. It was such a sweet, happy smile that he found some of his irritation wavering.

“Oh my gosh, hi!” She greeted him excitedly, jumping to her feet in one fluid, graceful motion that would have impressed Dean if he wasn’t already agitated. “How did it look? Are they still working on it or is it all tented already?”

“The termite guys? You knew about that?” He frowned, clenching his jaw a little as he spoke.

Her face fell. “You mean you didn’t?”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. From the sounds of it, though, it seems like you had some idea. Mind telling me how that happened?”

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry, Dean.” She winced, looking miserable. “I thought *you* were the one who had arranged it. They were at the house the other day, when we met you outside of the house on our walk. The guy said he had finished with his inspection, and he just needed to set a date to do the thing. I figured you had called him in, so you wouldn’t mind if I just told him to slot you in for the next available day. If I’d had any idea—”

Dean held up a hand for her to stop. “It’s alright, Amira. I believe you. I’m sure you were just trying to help me out by setting the appointment.”

“I really was. I would never have deliberately gone behind your back like that.” She still looked miserable, and any remaining frustration he held towards her evaporated.

Still, for a second, he was stumped. He believed her when she said she hadn’t gone around him to expedite the move into the big house. But that guy hadn’t just taken it upon himself to come do an inspection. And last time he checked, Dean wasn’t in the habit of sleepwalking. Not of setting appointments in his sleep, either. Then his mind flipped back to the conversation he’d had with Vivien a few days before, and everything clicked into place.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me.” He groaned and took out his phone. He started to call her, then remembered that he was supposed to head into town for a Strawberry Festival planning meeting before too long. Vivien was going to be there, and this was a conversation he wanted to have in person.



“I really am sorry, Dean, if I caused any problems. Or if I created tension in your family unknowingly. That’s the last thing in the world I want to do.”

They were descending the steps for the church basement where the Strawberry Fest meeting was supposed to take place. Amira and the twins had come along to check the town out, and she had been apologizing to him every couple of minutes ever since they left the ranch.

“Please,” he said again, stopping the apology cycle before it could start all over again. “I’m not upset with you. You didn’t do anything wrong. There’s no way you could have known. Vivien, on the other hand, knew exactly what she was doing. This is on her, not you.”

Amira didn’t look quite convinced, but she nodded anyway. She dipped her face to kiss the top of Caleb’s head as Dean opened the doors to the basement room and ushered the four of them in. Vivien was already there waiting for him, her three children tearing around the room and bickering loudly.

“Hey there,” he said through clenched teeth. “Would you happen to know anything about why an exterminator showed up at *my* house without me calling him?” Dean glared at his sister, who beamed back at him, looking pleased as punch.

She batted her eyes at him in mock innocence, then laughed. “I think the words you’re looking for are ‘thank you.’ And you’re welcome—for taking care of what you should have done yourself months ago.”

Normally, Dean liked to think of himself as a pretty laid-back guy. It was a good quality to have in a family like his, full to the brim with big personalities. Right now, though? He was not in the mood for jokes.

“I’d appreciate it if you took this a little more seriously, Vivien.”

Vivien’s smile straightened into a flat, thin line. “I was doing you a favor, Dean. It needed to get done, and you keep talking about what a full plate you’ve got.”

“Are you serious?” It was taking a considerable amount of effort not to yell. “We talked about this. I wanted to do this my own way, in my own time, and you knew that.”

Her arms crossed tightly across her chest. “Look, I don’t know what you want me to say. It’s done. I thought you’d be *glad* to have some help.”

Dean threw his arms up in the air, thoroughly exasperated now. “Yes! That’s right. I *do* want help, but not with that. I’ve already told you where your help would be the most useful. You really want to have my back? Take over the Strawberry Fest. Take care of the potluck, the craft market, and the dance.”

“You know that’s not how it works,” Vivien shot back. “That’s not how Dad did things. He raised me to look after the house and to take care of the dance for the festival. Those are my things. Those are my jobs.”

“Well, Vivien, Dad is gone. He’s gone, okay? He’s not coming back, and things are going to change. They have to.”

The room went completely silent. Vivien’s kids stopped running around, opting instead to stand stock-still and stare at him, mouths hanging open. Even the twins seemed to sense the mood in the room. Neither one of them made a sound.

He hadn’t meant it to sound as harsh as it had. Lord knew he hadn’t. While Dean’s relationship with Ray had been a little strained at times, he knew full well that Vivien had adored their father and had taken it very hard when he’d gotten sick. The last thing he wanted was to rub it in her face that the man was gone now.

On the other hand, though, it didn’t do anyone in the family any good to try to live in the past. Yes, they used to have rigidly defined roles in the family, with everyone staying in their lane, but that just wasn’t feasible anymore. It made sense for Vivien to be in charge of the main house when she lived there, but now she *didn’t* anymore. Likewise, it was fine for him to run the Strawberry Festival when he was a carefree bachelor with just his fly-fishing business to worry about—but now he had twin babies and the weight of the whole ranch on

his back. Things had to change. He genuinely needed Vivien's help, and he wasn't going to let outdated roles assigned to them years ago hold him back.

After a couple of seconds of giving him a death glare, Vivien rolled her eyes. "Fine. Whatever you say, Dean. You want me to take over the Strawberry Festival? That's exactly what I'm going to do. And it's going to be the best darn festival this town has ever seen."

Dean wanted to discuss it with her further, or at the very least, apologize. The doors opened again, though, and the rest of the attendees started filing in. They were excited to be there, and that excitement only intensified when Vivien announced that she would be taking over as head of the Strawberry Festival. Everyone's eyes shifted to him, along with rapid-fire questions.

There was only one person in the room he could stand to look at in that moment, and he focused on her steadily. Amira's eyes were on him along with everyone else's, but the expression hers held was very different. Just with a look, she was telling him that she had his back, and he was more grateful for that than he would ever have believed possible.

Amira felt stuck in her head the day following the Strawberry Festival meeting. It had been a roller coaster of emotion, from the happy expectation of Dean discovering the termite job was being done, to the terrible guilt of realizing she had inadvertently gone behind his back. The thing she really couldn't seem to shake, though, was the confrontation in the church's basement. That conversation about their family responsibilities? Amira had spent the day going over it and over it in her head. This was clearly a family that had a lot to work through. Amira still hadn't gotten the full story on what had happened to Dean's father and older brother, but it was clear that their deaths still hung over everyone in a way that appeared painful and unresolved.

The twins had been a little off all day, too. At first, Amira had chalked it up to them feeding off of her mood. Now it was well past their bedtime, though, past her bedtime even, and she knew she'd been wrong.

"What is this? Why is this happening?" Dean was making his thousandth lap around the cabin's tiny living room with Caleb in his arms. His hair was all mussed up and the look of disbelief in his eyes would have been hilarious, had Amira not been so tired herself.

She kissed the top of Caitlyn's head, who she was bouncing to little avail. "I know. It's rough, right? This is what we call the four-month sleep regression."

He raised his eyebrows in question. "The what now?"

"The four-month sleep regression," she repeated with a smile. "I know it feels terrible right now, but it's completely normal. It has to do with their sleep patterns shifting as their brains go through some intense development. They're trying to learn a whole lot of new things all at one time. It's kind of mental overload. They have a harder time going to sleep, they wake

up often, and when they do, they have trouble getting back to sleep again.”

As if to punctuate the point, Caleb flailed like he was waking up from an upsetting dream and let out a wail. Dean looked down at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Trouble, huh? I’m not one for melodrama, but I have to tell you, that doesn’t feel like a big enough word. This is like a case of full-on possession.”

“It’s not permanent,” Amira said with a laugh. “I promise. Although I get that doesn’t mean so much coming from me at midnight.”

Caitlyn seemed to want to weigh in on that point, too, having been not so gently prompted by her brother. Her big, blue eyes flew open along with her rosebud mouth. She let out a cry that rose into a wail and harmonized perfectly with that of Caleb’s.

That was the biggest problem here. Caitlyn and Caleb were feeding off of each other’s restlessness and fussiness, making it even more difficult for them to lapse into deep sleep. As soon as one drifted off, the other woke up squawking and they were both wide-awake again. As a result, neither Amira nor Dean had caught a wink of sleep and the way things were going, it didn’t look like they were going to, either.

“Hey, let’s try not to just dwell on it, okay?” Amira said as Dean made another loop of the room with a dejected look on his face. “It’s only making things worse. Talk to me about something.”

He frowned in confusion. “Something? What kind of something? My brain is fried right now, Amira. I’m going to need more to go on.”

“Talk to me about the ranch,” she persisted, getting to her feet and beginning a lap of her own. “Tell me what’s going on there. Any updates? How’s the five-year-plan thing going right now?”

Dean sighed and plopped down on the couch, careful not to disrupt the bouncing rhythm he had going with Caleb. “Not

sure that's a topic to keep you awake, but if you want, I can tell you about that."

"Excellent," Amira said, then laughed when he remained quiet. "Why don't you do that?"

"It's a lot," Dean said, passing a hand over his tired eyes. "Keeping up with everything, the practical and the business side of things on the ranch. It's more than I expected. My dad and my brother always made it look easy, natural. Maybe it really *was* easy for them. They were such naturals at it—always seemed to know just what to do. Nobody ever expected me to be the one running things, so I wasn't prepped for it, you know? Not until my dad found out he was sick. Then, it was like he tried to cram a whole lifetime of lessons into just a few months. I tried to learn as much as I could, but...I don't know. Nothing about it ever feels easy to me."

Amira's heart went out to him. She had an almost overwhelming urge to hug him and was glad to have Caitlyn to hold onto instead. "I'm sorry, Dean. That must be really hard."

He shrugged. "I don't mind working hard. I just wish I didn't spend so much time feeling like I'm working in the *dark*. Even having all of Dad and Jackson's notes to work from, there's still so much I don't understand, so much shorthand they had between them that only they understood."

Amira glanced at the stacks of boxes containing paperwork pertaining to the ranch's business. They were a little hard not to notice in a place where space came at such a high premium. She knew how hard Dean was trying to keep everything afloat. But he was struggling, specifically with the things that reminded him of his family's losses. The house, the papers for the five-year plan. These were both reminders that the men he associated them with were gone.

She walked Caitlyn, whose eyes were starting to get ever so slightly droopy again, over to a bouncy chair. She slid her into it as gently as if she were handling a live bomb, which, in a way, she was. One wrong move and this little lady would go off. Once Caitlyn was settled she crossed the small living room and gently took Caleb out of Dean's arms. He gave her a



look like he thought she was crazy, and she stuck out her tongue. His eyes widened and he covered his mouth with the back of his hand to keep from laughing out loud. She crouched down and slid Caleb into his bouncing chair with the same delicacy she had used with Caitlyn. When they were both settled and strapped in, she stepped away from the chairs slowly, walking backwards in order to catch the first signs of mutiny. When she was reasonably sure they were going to stay asleep for more than thirty seconds, she plopped down onto the couch next to Dean.

She angled her body towards him and studied his face. “So, you’re looking for the paperwork for the old five-year plan so you can use it as a model for the new one you have to put together. Is that right?”

“It is indeed, your honor,” he answered with mock solemnity that almost sent a very tired and somewhat punchy Amira into a fit of giggles.

“Well, I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” she continued when she had herself under control. “but you’ve got kind of a lot of paper boxed up over there. How much do you need?”

“I just want the latest draft,” he answered, eyeing the boxes dubiously. “But I’m not actually sure which box it’s in. If I let myself go down that rabbit hole, I may not ever find my way out again.”

She nodded, chewing on her bottom lip thoughtfully. “You know, I could help you look for it. I don’t mind.”

“Come on, that’s not in your job description.”

She shrugged. “No, maybe not, but I think I could branch out and make an exception. Plus, I’ve got a slightly selfish motive, too. I wouldn’t hate it if we could definitely eliminate some of these boxes. Once we’re sure they don’t have anything you need in them, they can be relocated somewhere else, right?”

Dean chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, I suppose they could. Okay, then, if you really want to help, you can look through those boxes whenever you like. I’m just looking for the document with the most recent date.”

“No time like the present, right?” She gave him a challenging look and slid off of the couch, settling cross-legged in front of the closest stack of boxes.

It wasn't exactly her idea of a riveting way to spend an evening, but if she was going to be kept up all night by tiny tyrants, she might as well make herself useful. Besides, she wanted to do something to help Dean. Something more than she was already doing. A distant voice in her head warned her that this kind of thinking was dangerous. She was skirting dangerously close to stepping over her lines, and those lines were there for a reason. Even so, this was something she could do for him, and she wanted to.

“Tell me a little bit about it,” she said as she took the top off of the first box. “The plan for the ranch that you're going to put together. What's your dream for this place over the next five years?”

He smiled and got a faraway look in his eyes. “It's kind of complicated. Most of it is just continuing with the plans that Dad and Jackson put in place. For example, they were very keen on improving things with the cattle. Something to do with strengthening the bloodline, although I'm not so sure I'm on board with that.”

“What else?” She liked listening to him talk.

“There are big plans for the infrastructure. For strengthening the existing infrastructure so that it won't be so badly damaged by storms like the one we had in April. So far, I've mostly just been working on repairs. There are plenty of those to go around. And I've always been pretty good at carpentry. I like working with my hands.”

Amira's eyes dropped to Dean's hands when he said that. She couldn't help herself. He was unlike any of the other fathers she had nannied for, and in a way she found undeniably attractive. He was strong and sure, his muscles taut and well-developed from years of hard, physical work. His hands certainly looked capable enough, and before she could stop herself, her mind flashed to what it might feel like to have those hands running up the length of her body. Suddenly, her

face felt too hot. She was sure he would be able to see what she was thinking if he looked her way.

Fortunately, a well-timed giggle from Caitlyn broke the tension as both of them looked her way. She was becoming quite the escape artist, and both of her arms had wriggled free of her swaddling.

Amira got to her feet, laughing. “Oh, my goodness, little lady! You’re definitely going to be the troublemaker in the family. I can tell.”

“She pop out of her burrito casing again?” Dean asked, getting to his feet and following her to the bouncy chairs. The noise had woken Caleb, and Dean lifted him as Amira took Caitlyn into her arms.

“She did indeed,” Amira agreed, kissing the tip of Caitlyn’s nose and heading for the bedroom. “She’s been getting awfully good at that, too. But you know what I think?”

Dean chuckled. “No, ma’am, I don’t. But I’ve got a feeling you’re about to tell me.”

She motioned for him to follow as she laid Caitlyn on the bed. “I think this is the perfect time to have a little swaddling tutorial. It might seem like a silly little trick, but there are times when it’s a life saver.”

“Well, then count me in. I need all of the help I can get. I’d like to have a whole arsenal of silly little tricks under my belt.”

Amira smiled and let her hand rest briefly on his shoulder. “I’m more than happy to help you build that arsenal.”

“Thanks, Amira,” he said, watching intently as she started the folds of the swaddling. “I really do appreciate it. I thought I would be a little more set on all of this because I helped out when Vivien’s kids were little, but looking back on it now, there really wasn’t much I had to do. There were so many people around to help. I did a little babysitting, but that was about the extent of it. Mom did the most—she was right there with Vivien for night feedings and everything else. They were all in the same house, and it just worked.”

“Have you considered asking your mom for some help with the twins?” Amira asked. “I know it’s not the same since she doesn’t live here on the ranch anymore, but she could come by every now and then, right?”

“We tried that,” said Dean. “But it didn’t work out. We were just tripping over each other, the cabin’s so small. And, more importantly, she’s got this whole new life she’s building for herself in town, with her new place and new hobbies and all the rest. I don’t want to add another thing to her plate by asking her to help with these goobers. It’s best for us all if I give her some space. It wouldn’t be fair to impose on her while she’s already stressed out.”

Amira kept quiet about that one. Honestly, she wasn’t so sure about that. She knew Dean meant well, but she thought he might be inadvertently alienating his mother. At the family dinner, she’d gotten the sense that his mom wanted to be included, wanted to feel like her help was needed and appreciated. By giving her space, Amira worried that Dean might be accidentally making her feel unwanted. Still, his relationship with his mom—and his sister, for that matter—was not hers to fix. That wasn’t part of her job description. If she was going to help, she was going to do it with things like teaching him how to swaddle.

When both twins were safely wrapped up again and looked like they were on the verge of passing out, she looked up at Dean, speaking quietly. “You know, you can head off to bed. I think I can take care of this, and I know you have busy days.”

“Nope,” he shook his head emphatically. “No way. I’m not abandoning you. We’re in this together.”

He settled down on the bed beside her, the swaddled twins between them. As her lids started growing heavy, those words kept rattling around in her head. He wouldn’t abandon her. She knew he’d said it offhand, that it didn’t mean anything, but it touched her deeply, nevertheless. The last thought she remembered having before slipping into sleep was that she needed to be careful, or things were going to start getting very messy.

Dean came out of sleep slowly, gradually becoming aware of the world around him. The first thing he noticed was the feel of the sun dancing across his face. The second was that something warm and soft was pressed up against him. He opened his eyes, half-convinced the sensation was a dream, but then he saw Amira. He was playing big spoon to her little spoon, and she had never looked so beautiful.

At some point during the night, one of them must have transferred the twins to their cribs because that was where they were now, sleeping peacefully. Amira was curled up so that the length of her body pressed against him, her simple white T-shirt sliding down her shoulder and exposing a tantalizing strip of skin. Her face was peaceful, her long lashes moving ever so slightly with the movement of her dreaming eyes. He had a strong desire to kiss her eyelids, then work his way down to her perfect, full mouth. He hadn't meant to fall asleep this way, and yet he would have been more than happy to spend all day in bed with her just like this. Then he caught sight of the clock on the bedside table and the peaceful moment was broken.

In the endless night that was his babies' sleep regression, he had forgotten to set an alarm. Normally, he would have woken up on his own, but his internal clock was wrecked after the twins had gotten off their sleep schedule, and his body no longer had any idea what time it was. He prided himself on being punctual and responsible, and he had a very full day ahead of him. Now, he was going to be playing catch-up before he ever got started. He pulled himself away from Amira slowly, pausing each time she stirred. He had work to do but there was no sense waking her up as well. Before he set out, he paused to take her in one last time. She was so beautiful...and so off-limits.

He worked double time to get through his morning chores, intent on making up the time he'd lost by sleeping in. He kept

right on working straight through lunch, ignoring the ribbing of the ranch hands and the slightly concerned questions from Mark. He finally stopped with just enough time to get back to the cabin and clean up a little before heading right back out. This time, it was to the cattle barn, where he had a meeting with Doug, the Walters' business manager. This wasn't something he was exactly looking forward to. Somehow, Doug always had a way of making Dean feel like a kid being chewed out for doing poorly on a test.

When Dean got to the cattle barn, he found Doug already there, talking to Mark and Billy while he waited. Doug took his job very seriously, Dean had to give him that. And he'd been a very good, loyal business manager for Dean's dad. Jackson had trusted the guy, too, and Dean knew that was the only endorsement he needed. He could put up with the way the man treated him like he was five years old.

"Hi there, Doug," he said, offering his hand to the big, beefy man in greeting. "I apologize for keeping you waiting. It's been a hell of a day."

Doug nodded knowingly. "And it's not done yet, am I right? I've heard all about the changes you've had in your life lately. More than enough to keep you busy. I've got three kids of my own, and they sure are a handful. All I can say is, I hope you've got a good support system."

Dean thought of Amira. Of how she had looked with sunlight dappling her face and those long lashes. "I'm happy to say that I do. For the time being, at least. And that's good enough for me today."

Doug nodded approvingly. "I'm happy to hear that. And I appreciate you carving time out of your afternoon to meet with me, with everything else going on. I thought it might be a good idea to go over that five-year plan. The clock's ticking on that, you know. You haven't forgotten have you? Because it's important, and it's time-sensitive."

"No, sir—of course not. I'm willing to talk through anything you'd like to know. I'm happy to say, I've gotten started on it." Again, he was grateful for Amira, this time for having him

walk her through the plan just the night before. Finding the old plan and pulling it out of the box was technically getting started, right?

“Glad to hear it,” Doug said, nodding his approval. “Why don’t we start with the cattle? That’s really the cornerstone of the whole operation, after all.”

Dean furrowed his brow. “Right. I’ll be completely honest, I don’t know that I understand that part of the plan well enough to speak on it just yet. I do understand it enough to know that going along with what my dad and Jackson had in mind is going to be extremely expensive, though.”

Doug nodded, a little pompously. “Well, I can see how it would be confusing, young man. There’s a lot of overly complicated, technical language in there, but what it boils down to is a relatively simple endeavor. Basically, you’ll be using artificial insemination—with product sourced from the highest quality stock—to impregnate the cattle you own. That way, you’ll end up with a better breed of cattle. It will enrich the quality of calves they produce.” He raised an eyebrow at Dean, looking for understanding.

“Right,” Dean said slowly. “I understand the basics, of course. I’m just not sure the expense is worth the payoff. There’s nothing wrong with our stock now, is there? Do the calves really need that much enrichment? I’ve kind of been thinking we should focus more heavily on the infrastructure part of the five-year plan. Fortifying what we have, but also new builds. Upgrades, right?”

Doug shook his head. He looked both disappointed and reproachful and Dean cringed inwardly. This was exactly the kind of interaction that left him feeling like he’d been a bad student. He was supposed to be running the ranch, and here he stood, feeling like he was about to receive detention.

“Look, Dean, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but improving the ranch isn’t the kind of thing you can settle with a handshake and a beer around the paddocks—even if that’s the way you used to do business back before you took over the ranch.”

“Sure,” Dean said, hating the hint of apology in his voice. “I understand that. It’s just—”

But Doug cut him off. “To keep this place running for generations, you’re going to need to start thinking long-term, not from season to season like you have with fly-fishing. Your father, your brother, they knew what was best for this place. Do you believe that?”

“Yes.” There was nothing else he could say. He wasn’t going to argue with their legacy.

“Exactly,” Doug went on. “They built this place up to be one of the most successful ranches in the state. I know you weren’t expecting to have to take over this place, but that’s where we are now. The best thing you can do is follow the example they set out for you—and stay on track with the plans they had in place.”

“Sure,” Dean said quietly. “I hear what you’re saying. And I know you’ve always had this place’s best interest at heart. I appreciate you coming by.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, engaged in a little small talk, then said their goodbyes. Dean watched the business manager drive off, his expensive car rocking unhappily from side to side on the rough gravel road. There was more for him to do around the ranch, but he just couldn’t muster the resolve to tend to it. Not when all he wanted to do was hide out somewhere and lick his metaphorical wounds. He’d gone into that meeting feeling a small amount of hope that Doug would at least hear him out. He knew his ideas were a departure from the current five-year plan, but the running of the ranch was on his shoulders now. If he was going to carry it, shouldn’t he also have some say in what went on? Apparently not.

When he finally climbed into his truck to leave the paddock, it was much later than he’d intended. He was still feeling put out by his meeting with Doug by the time he arrived at the main house, and he was glad to be there after the ranch hands had begged off for the day. If Mark or Billy had been there, there was a good chance they would want to hear about his meeting



with Doug. That wasn't something he was ready to talk about with them. Especially because he was pretty sure they would agree with Doug's assessment of the situation.

He was planning on maybe cleaning up a few things around the yard surrounding the still tented house before heading back to the cabin, but as he approached, he was surprised to see Amira and the twins walking towards him. Her head was bent while she whispered something to Caleb, who was in the front today. When she looked up and saw him, she smiled.

"Well, look who the cat drug in, little buddies," she said, taking Caleb's little hand and helping him to wave at Dean. "It's your daddy. Should we ask him to what we owe this pleasure?"

For the first time that day, Dean smiled. Seeing Amira and his babies took what felt like a whole ton of pressure off his shoulders. "I didn't expect to see you three here. What's going on?"

"We were off on another one of our walks," she explained, glancing up at the sky and smiling again. "It's such a pretty time of day. I don't have to worry about the twins getting too much sun, and they appreciate the fresh air. Plus, we just like getting a look at what the day has to offer."

"Is this part of my daddy boot camp?" He grinned.

She adopted an expression of mock seriousness. "It absolutely is. So make sure you remember it. Make a mental note."

"I will certainly do that, ma'am," he said with a chuckle. "Now, have any interest in me showing you one of those walking paths I was telling you about? It's more scenic than the one you took to get here, especially at sunset."

She cocked her head to one side, considering. "That sounds lovely, but what about your truck?"

"It will be fine here until morning. I could do with a little walking myself. Especially if it has the same benefits for adults that it has for babies."

They walked in silence for a while, the only sounds those of the twins' babbling and the wildlife of the ranch. It had been a

while since he'd walked this land just to walk it, and it did seem to be doing him some good. Seeing it through Amira's eyes as she took this path for the first time was even better. There was something about her that made him feel peaceful, calm. He got the impression that he could talk to her about anything, and she would understand.

"So, I had a meeting with our business manager about the five-year plan," he started slowly, keeping his eyes on the path. "Thank you for finding the paperwork I needed last night. That was helpful."

He could feel her giving him a sideways glance. "I'm glad. How did the meeting go?"

"It went," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I told him that I'd like to concentrate on infrastructure. He said I should stick to the plan my dad and Jackson came up with for the cattle. I don't really know what to think. It's fine for now to just continue what's already in place, but will that make sense long-term? What will happen when their plans get outdated? I might not be able to come up with what the next steps should be. The cattle have never really been my thing."

"If not the cattle, then what?"

"What?" He turned to look at her.

"What *do* you feel confident about? What's your thing?"

He looked at her, considering. "You really want to know?"

"Yes," she said with a smile. "I really want to know."

"Fishing. Fly-fishing, to be exact. I had a little business going for it before I had to take over the ranch. Nothing much, but it was mine." He hadn't realized how much he missed it, but now it made his heart ache just to think about it.

Amira laughed. "I doubt this will come as much of a surprise, but I have zero experience with fishing. Fly or otherwise."

"No," Dean chuckled. "That doesn't surprise me. But for me, it's always been a sort of refuge. My brother was master of the land here. The water was always my domain. It felt like home. Like a space that could be just mine."

Amira was quiet for a moment, and when she spoke, she sounded a little sad. “That sounds lovely. I’ve never really had anything like that.”

“No? Not even when you were growing up? No treehouse or secret hideaway that was just yours?”

She shook her head and passed her palm over the top of Caleb’s head. “Nope. I was sick a lot as a kid. I had diabetes, and it got tied in with some other auto-immune issues that caused a lot of problems before I was finally able to settle into a good treatment plan. I was well-cared for, loved. But I didn’t really get to explore or have adventures. And even in the house with my family...I kind of felt like I was always in the way because my illness was such a burden on my parents. I spent a lot of time feeling out of place.”

“You seem like you’ve got complete control over every place you’re in,” he said.

She shrugged. “I learned how to do that. I found it made me more useful, and that’s important to me. It means something to me to be there for the families I work for—to find all the ways to make their lives easier. And once that’s done, I move on. It’s why I have the two-month rule for myself.”

“I’m not sure I follow.” This was something Dean was keen on hearing. She seemed so devoted to his children. The whole time cap thing just didn’t fit with the way she behaved. Why would she be so determined to rush away when she clearly cared about them so much?

“It’s enough time to teach the families everything I can, and I get to leave knowing I made their lives better. That I was a bright spot for them. But they aren’t my family, no matter how much I love the kids I look after. Anything more than two months, and it would hurt too much to leave.”

Dean nodded. “Which has you moving around all of the time. Hard to build a place that feels like home when you’re never in one place.”

“Yes,” she agreed with a sigh. Yes, it is.”

“I get it. It’s part of why I’ve been so reluctant to leave the cabin. And I know fishing isn’t your home, but I’d be happy to teach you some time, if you like.” His heart hammered in his chest. He wasn’t sure why, but he wanted her to say yes, badly.

“Do you know what?” she asked with a look of surprise. “I think I would. I think I would like that very much.”

A mira felt strangely peaceful the day after her evening walk with Dean. She felt like things might finally be moving in the right direction. The main house was getting taken care of, and although Dean wasn't happy with the way his business meeting had gone, it seemed like progress was being made with the five-year plan, too. As for Dean himself and his progress in parenthood, she felt like things were moving in the right direction there as well. True, she didn't usually open up to the parents of the kids she nannied the way she had last night, but she reasoned with herself that maybe that was part of what he needed to understand; what her role was and what she could help him achieve. Maybe finding that common ground with each other would help him to be a more open, honest parent to Caitlyn and Caleb.

When Dean told her that afternoon that he was going into town, she asked if she and the twins could come along for the ride. She was feeling restless, for some reason, and an outing sounded like just the thing. Dean had been more than happy to agree, and the four of them had buckled up in the truck, sitting in comfortable silence on the drive until he pulled into a spot at the church.

Dean put it in park, then turned towards her. "I've got some errands to run in town that you are more than welcome to come along for. On the other hand, you're also welcome to say no thank you and do some exploring."

"I think these two would appreciate an adventure, so exploring it is," she said with a laugh, climbing out of the truck. She fitted herself with both the front and back baby carriers while Dean climbed out of the truck to unbuckle the twins.

"Oh, my goodness!" A woman's voice came from behind them. "Look what we have here! I didn't know you were coming to this. Vivien said you had her take over all things Strawberry Fest."

Dean gave Amira a small smile before turning to greet his mother. “Hey, Mom. Vivien was right about that. I’m not here for the festival meeting. I’ve got some errands to run, and the church seemed like a good place to park. Central, so Amira and the twins can set off in whichever way the wind wants to take them if they decide to do some wandering.”

Amira smiled, feeling a little shy, for some reason. “Hello again, Mrs. Walters. I don’t think I’ve seen you since I crashed your family dinner.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Mrs. Walters said, brushing the comment off with a wave of her hand. “You did no such thing. If anything, it was more of a hostage situation. I didn’t give you much of a choice, did I? And I don’t want any of that ‘Mrs. Walters’ business, either. It’s Josie or nothing at all.”

“Alright, Josie, then. And I didn’t feel like a hostage! I promise.” That wasn’t strictly true, but it was certainly the polite thing to say. Besides, Dean’s mother was trying to be friendly. Who was she to push that gesture away?

Josie kissed Dean on the cheek, rising up on her tiptoes to do so. “I understand why you passed the baton for the festival, dear, Lord knows I do. Still, it’s going to feel a little strange, not having you there.”

“I’m sure you’ll forget about me entirely after things get going,” Dean chuckled. “I know very well how intense these brainstorming meetings can get.”

“And what about you?” Josie asked, turning towards Amira with a questioning look on her face. “How would you like to sit in on our little meeting? It might not be the most interesting thing in the world, but I have it on good authority that the refreshments are going to be top-notch.” She gestured down at the Tupperware container in her hands and winked.

She should say no, and she knew it. The Strawberry Festival had nothing to do with her role taking care of the twins, so she had no actual reason to attend other than curiosity and a desire to get to know Dean’s family a little better. And that wasn’t a good enough reason, especially when she had gotten the sense that Vivien didn’t like her all that much. It was muddying the

water of her rules, and that was precisely the thing she liked to avoid. But even knowing all of that, for some reason, she wanted to go.

“Sure, Josie. That sounds lovely. I’m not one to turn down the offer of delicious refreshments.”

Josie clapped her hands. “Excellent! That’s wonderful. Dean, you can just wait for them here if you finish your chores before the meeting is up, yes? Or, you’re always welcome to come in and join us if you like.”

Dean grimaced. “Thanks, Mom, but I think waiting out here sounds like the better move. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Amira watched Dean saunter off, feeling a little like he was taking her escape route with him. Even though a big part of her wanted to attend the meeting, she was half-tempted to call out to him and say she’d decided to come with him, after all. But then Josie linked an arm through hers and she was being shepherded towards the church doors.

The basement looked very different this time than the last time Amira had been down there. The circle of folding chairs in the center of the room was more than half-full, and with the women milling around and chatting while they partook of the refreshments that had been laid out buffet style on a long table. It looked like there was going to be a full house. Vivien was standing at the front of the room talking to three women who looked to be around Josie’s age. The phrase that came to Amira’s mind was “holding court,” then she mentally kicked herself for being unkind. The look that Vivien gave her when she saw her a second later, however, made her think involuntarily of the Red Queen from *Alice in Wonderland* right before she shouted “Off with her head!” Holding court, indeed.

“Come on, dear,” Josie said, giving her a sympathetic look after frowning at Vivien. “Let’s have a seat. We can do some grazing of the snack tables when the meeting is done.”

“Trying to ensure I won’t make an early escape?” Amira asked with a laugh.

Josie raised her eyebrows, then winked. “Let’s just say, this isn’t my first rodeo.”

Josie and Amira sitting seemed to act as a signal to the rest of the women. They gradually followed suit, and the talking died down to a low rumble. In a matter of minutes, the only people still up were Vivien’s children, who were playing a game of tag in the furthest corner of the room. Them, and Vivien, who stood at the head of the room where she could command everyone’s attention.

“First of all, ladies,” she said loudly enough to quiet the remaining whispers in the room. “I want to thank you all for coming. As you know, this is my first year running the Strawberry Festival, and I very much appreciate your show of support.”

“We’re very pleased to have you!” one of the older women in the room called out.

Josie leaned into Amira and whispered, “That’s Ethel. You see those four women sitting closest to my girl? The old fogies, like me? They’re lovingly referred to as the Grand Dames of the Festival. The matriarchs. I used to be one of them. Before...well, you know.”

Amira did know, or she thought she was starting to get a pretty good picture. Suffering the loss of her eldest son followed shortly after by her husband’s illness and death must have been utterly devastating for her. She had retreated from her life, given herself the time and space to heal. Now that she was ready to plug herself back into her old life, Amira got the sense that she was finding it wasn’t so easy.

Vivien smiled beatifically at her supporter. “Thank you, Ethel. I appreciate that. Those of you who know me know that I like to be very hands-on with everything I take on. The Strawberry Festival will be no exception. Of course, the various tasks will need to be delegated. Even I can’t do everything by myself. But I do intend to have a hand in everything. I hope that sounds alright to all of you.”

Amira might be imagining it, but she thought Vivien shot her another look here. It was almost like she was trying to make a



point to Dean by using Amira as his proxy. What was she after? Did she want Amira to report back to Dean that Vivien was doing a good job? Amira would be happy to do so. She could already see how capable Vivien was. She seemed to be a natural born leader, and Amira was sure the Strawberry Festival would come together beautifully. Still, she could see where the tension between brother and sister might be coming from. Vivien was capable, and when she saw something as her responsibility, she was like a pit bull. Unfortunately for her, she was having trouble letting go of the things that had once fallen under her domain and now belonged to Dean.

“Now,” Vivien went on briskly, all business. “We have a lot to get through, but I am confident that if we work together, and efficiently, we’ll get it all sorted out in no time at all. Our main points of business this afternoon are the potluck, the cowbake, the crafts table, and the dance. Like I said, a lot, but there’s no time like the present, am I right, ladies?” Everyone was nodding along, so all of that must have made sense to them. For Amira’s part, she had no idea what a cowbake was, but she figured she’d look it up later.

This meeting that followed was all about organization. Women tossed ideas back and forth for the running of the different items on the agenda, with Vivien acting as facilitator as well as the one with the final vote. It was the first time Amira had seen her like this, and it was also the first time she had seen Dean’s mother in a social capacity. What she saw made her heart hurt a little bit.

It was painfully clear just how out of the social loop Josie really was. More than once, when a subject was raised, she piped up with things like, “When I was running that table,” and the old classic, “Back in my day.” Each time she tried to interject, she was talked right over. At one point, Vivien did acknowledge her mother, but only to say that the potluck was Ethel’s territory now and she ran things differently.

There was nothing spiteful about it, and the other women didn’t seem to even realize how their words impacted Josie, but it still felt awful for Amira to watch it play out. Before she

could think to stop herself, Amira reached for Josie's hand and squeezed. "This is kind of intense, isn't it?"

Josie smiled sadly. "Things move on, don't they? The world keeps going, even when you decide to take a break from it for a while. I took time away when my family was suffering. They all kept going. I certainly can't fault them for that, can I?"

"No," Amira agreed, although it still struck her as vaguely unfair. "I guess you can't."

Josie continued, her eyes shining as they lighted on Vivien. "Besides, look at my little girl. Not that I have any place to call her that now. Look how capable she is. What a fine woman she has become. She certainly doesn't need my help. She doesn't need anything from me, just like the Strawberry Festival."

That much certainly seemed to be true. Vivien was a capable, almost formidable woman. She was running this meeting like a CEO of a Fortune 500 company and doing so without a lick of help from anyone. All the same, Amira couldn't stop herself from wanting to help Josie somehow. She was used to swooping into families like Mary Poppins, doing her two months, and leaving. Getting to know the issues of the extended family was far outside of her usual wheelhouse. But it was in her nature to help, and her heart went out to Josie. She couldn't imagine feeling useless after so many years of being central to the goings-on of her world. And wasn't it possible that helping Josie would help Dean and the twins in the end? It could only be a good thing if the twins had their grandmother active and involved in their lives.

The point of just how far out of the loop Josie had become was punctuated when one of Vivien's girls fell and skinned a knee. She cried out and pulled her leg in, the scrape clearly bleeding. Amira felt Josie start to rise from her chair, the instinct of so many years of childcare kicking into gear. Before she was on her feet, though, Vivien sprang into action. She was across the room in no time at all, kneeling beside her daughter and speaking in a low, soothing voice.

Amira glanced at Josie and saw that her eyes were shining. She couldn't tell if it was from joy or from tears, but she suspected it was a little bit of both. "See what I mean? She's wonderful. Completely in control. She doesn't need my help. Nobody needs my help anymore."

Dean was distracted as he took care of his errands in town. With all that was going on, it had never been more important for him to keep his head in the game, and yet it seemed like every other second his mind was slipping back to Amira. When he closed his eyes, he could still see her curled up against him in the morning light. He could feel the warmth of her body pressed up against his and smell the sweet scent of her hair.

“Stop it, man,” he muttered to himself when he dropped a feedbag, attracting the attention of his fellow shoppers. “She’s your nanny, and you’re not some kind of love-sick teenager. Get it together.”

It was good advice, but that didn’t make it easy to take. He rushed through his errands in record time and found himself leaning up against his truck before the Strawberry Festival meeting was through. He stood there for a good ten minutes before women started streaming out of the double doors. When he saw Amira pushing the stroller, his babies asleep inside and his mother walking by her side, he grinned. He liked the look of this. He liked seeing Amira fitting so seamlessly into his life. It was easy to imagine her taking on that role in a more permanent way, throwing her two-month rule out the window. Easy to imagine, and dangerous, too.

“Hey there, ladies,” he said when they were near, careful to speak quietly so as not to wake Caleb and Caitlyn. “I see everyone survived the first real meeting of the Strawberry Festival. How’d it go? How did Vivien do?”

His mother laughed, although Dean thought he detected something a little off in the sound. “Your sister is a force of nature, Dean, just as you knew she would be. She may have been hesitant to take over the festival when you first brought up the idea, but you’d never know it to see her up there this afternoon.”

“So, I can rest easy that it’s in good hands?” He raised an eyebrow, looking from his mother to Amira and back again.

“Most definitely. You can keep your focus on the ranch and all of your big plans there.”

They said their goodbyes, Dean smiling when he saw how warmly his mother treated Amira before she left.

When she was gone, he turned his full attention on Amira. “Alright, fess up. Now that she’s gone, it’s truth time. How was it?”

“It was intense!” Amira said with a laugh. “I’ve never seen anything like that. I didn’t realize how much work actually went into putting a festival together.”

“Now you know why I wanted someone else to do it,” Dean said with a chuckle.

Amira nodded vigorously. “It also left me hungry! I feel like those refreshments were just a tease. We spent so much time talking about food that my stomach started growling. I feel like I could eat a horse right now.”

“Well, we could have an early dinner when we get back to the cabin,” Dean mused. “I might even be able to throw something together myself, although I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

Amira looked down at the twins and frowned. “Yeah...we might have a little bit of a problem there. These little guys are out cold, and I want them to stay that way as long as possible. But I don’t think we can move them to the car without waking them up.”

Dean looked at his sleeping children and knew that she was right. A month or two ago, it wouldn’t have mattered at all. They might not have even woken up in the transfer from stroller to car seats, and they would certainly have gone right back to sleep if they did. But these days, it was a very different story. He had seen firsthand how nasty their sleep regression could be. The fact that they were asleep right now felt like a small miracle, and he wasn’t at all interested in jinxing that. The drive home was close to forty minutes. If they did wake

up, that was a lot of time to be stuck in a small space with screaming babies. Forty minutes was also a long time to wait when you were starving and the food available and waiting for you was unlikely to make a satisfying meal.

“I agree,” he finally said, looking over his shoulder at the town. “Risking waking them up would basically be shooting ourselves in the foot.”

“Whatever are we supposed to do?” She smiled at him, cocking her head to one side.

He laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, my suggestion is that we make the most of our circumstances. You haven’t really spent any time in town, have you?”

“None at all, really.”

“So, what do you say we change that?” he asked. “I can show you some of the town and the tiny tyrants can keep sleeping in their stroller.”

She grinned and tucked her hair behind her ears. “I say you’ve got yourself a deal. But only if the tour ends with something to eat. Otherwise, I’m out.”

The four of them set off, heading for the town’s Main Street. He had the same feeling now that he’d had the night before showing her a new walking path. There was something about introducing these things to her that made him feel like he was seeing them for the first time again. He was thankful for all Amira was teaching him about caring for his children, but he might be more grateful for this. He recognized now that he had been dangerously close to becoming cynical. Now, when Amira moved onto her next post, he thought he would be able to hold onto this renewed appreciation. As far as he was concerned, a gift like that was priceless.

As they walked, Amira was all eyes. It was like she was exploring a foreign country, and she didn’t want to miss a single detail. The urge to put his arm around her shoulders was so strong he didn’t think he would be able to resist. Instead, he shoved his hands deep down into his pockets. He couldn’t keep himself from looking at her every other second, though.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” she said, still looking at the shops they were passing instead of at him. “But I get the distinct impression that you are staring at me.”

“Sorry,” he said with a sheepish laugh. “I guess I kind of am. I’m just curious to see what you think of the town. This is the first time I’ve ever given anyone a tour, if you can believe it.”

This time she looked at him, and when she did, her eyes were shining. “I think it’s lovely, Dean. Truly. It’s a beautiful town.”

“Oh yeah? Tell me what you like about it.” He was so pleased to hear this, one might have thought he’d built the whole town up himself, brick by brick.

She glanced around, her eyes shining. In them, Dean saw the faint reflection of twinkle lights strung up in the trees. “It’s just...it feels like such a real place. I mean, of course it’s a real place. I don’t know if I’m making any sense. Sorry.”

She cut herself off, her face going red. Dean had such a strong urge to reach out and caress her flaming cheek that he put his hands behind his back. Just to be safe.

“No,” he said, gesturing for them to cross the street with his chin. “Nothing to apologize for. You’re making sense to me, although it’s something I haven’t thought about for a long minute.”

And that was true, too. So much of his life was beyond his control. He hadn’t realized how much resentment he’d been building up over that fact, nor how that resentment was bleeding over onto his love for his hometown. Amira’s gentle, sweet description of the place was helping him to remember how much there was to love, and he could have kissed her for it. In fact, he would very much like to kiss her. It was something that had occurred to him the first time he saw her, but the urge was becoming stronger all the time.

“What? What’s that face?” Her head cocked to one side and Dean got the distinct impression she had an idea of exactly the kind of thoughts he was having.

On impulse, he grabbed her by the hand and steered them towards the nearest crosswalk. “What do you say we go ahead

and grab that bite of food right away? If we wait much longer, you're going to hear my stomach protesting."

She raised one eyebrow, then laughed and nodded her agreement. He was grateful that she didn't pull away. Dean was past the point where he could deny the chemistry between them. It had been building at a steady pace and now, her smooth, soft fingers swallowed up in his calloused hand, he couldn't deny it any longer. It didn't help matters that they were essentially on a first date, a fact that didn't escape him as he finally led her into the town's most popular restaurant. And even if he'd stayed oblivious to the date-like implications, the curious glances of the place's patrons would have made it impossible to miss.

"Is it just me?" Amira asked, noticing the looks they were getting as well. "Or are we getting some attention?"

He laughed it off, pulling out a chair for her to sit. "It's a small town. Close-knit community. People tend to take notice of newcomers. Give it a little time and they won't look quite so curious."

Amira faltered for a fraction of a second as she sat. She favored Dean with a warm smile as she took up her napkin and twisted it in her hand. It was enough to remind Dean that she wasn't going to be around long enough for people to lose their stranger's interest in her. It was something he was going to have to deal with, but not tonight. Tonight, he just wanted to enjoy her company.

"Well, will you look at this, Dean Walters. Don't the four of you just paint the cutest picture a person ever saw?" Deborah, their waitress for the evening, smiled down at Dean's table.

Dean glanced at Amira, saw her blushing again, and smiled. "Hey, Deb." He introduced Amira, and the two women briefly exchanged pleasantries. "The twins are out cold, and we thought we'd steal the chance for some supper," Dean finally said, wanting to get their order in. "What do you say you bring us the sampler plate? The big one."

At first, it seemed like all of the attention was going to be the third wheel at their dinner. When Dean finally sensed Amira



start to relax, right around the time an obscene amount of barbeque landed at their table, he was tempted to hold his breath. She so rarely seemed to let her guard down and he didn't want to do anything to jinx it.

“Oh my god!” she exclaimed after biting into a rib. Her eyes went wide. Dean couldn't think of a time when she'd looked sexier even though she had a dab of sauce on her cheek. “Seriously, I had no idea.”

He chuckled and took a sip from his mug of beer. “No idea that we had the best barbeque on God's green earth?”

“No,” she laughed, rolling her eyes. “Well, yes, that, but just that places like this actually exist outside of TV shows. I had nothing like this growing up. Towns where everyone knows each other. Places that hold weeks-long Strawberry Festivals. Just...all of it.”

Dean's heart sped up. He'd heard practically nothing about Amira's history. It felt important that she was opening up to him like this. “No? You didn't grow up with everyone knowing each other's names?”

“No way.” She laughed, shaking her head emphatically. “I've always kind of been a nomad.”

Dean nodded. This fit with his idea of her being a modern-day Mary Poppins. What he wasn't sure about was whether or not she'd ever consider something different. “You know, if you stuck around someplace for long enough, you might see what it's like to have this kind of community for yourself.”

“Maybe,” she agreed. “But I might also never actually find that one out for myself.”

Dean rested his hand on the table, just shy of where Amira's rested beside her fork. They were so close now he could practically feel her touch. It was as if his nerve endings were singing for her skin. He might have finally breached that invisible barrier and taken her hand in his again if not for the sudden burst of giggles from the next table over.

Dean rolled his eyes, smiled, and tipped an imaginary hat to the ladies shamelessly ogling his table. “One thing's for

certain. The church ladies of this town are going to remember you for a good, long time, whether or not you decide to stay.”

Amira glanced over her shoulder and offered the women a little wave. When she turned back to look at Dean, her entire face was alight with mirth. Dean knew another thing for sure, too, although this one he kept to himself. He wasn't going to get her out of his blood anytime soon, whether or not she stayed. All he could do now was hope to God that she would.

A mira slept poorly the night following her impromptu dinner with Dean in town. Each time she drifted off, she slipped into dreams with her current employer in a starring role. They weren't platonic dreams, either. Far from it.

They also made her acutely aware of just how small the space she was sharing with Dean really was. She was going to have to work harder to keep her head clear and her focus on the future. She couldn't let herself get distracted, no matter how hot her boss was.

When she felt reasonably clear of the fantasies from her dreams, she padded into the front room. She was greeted by the smell of bacon, bread, and butter, and she couldn't help smiling to herself. Before she came here, she couldn't recall the last time a man had made a meal for her, but Dean's breakfasts had become a daily ritual. She breathed in deeply, forgetting herself and shutting her eyes. As soon as she did that, however, she saw a flash of Dean from last night's dream, shirtless and lowering himself on top of her. Her eyes flew back open to find Dean watching her intently, a crooked smile on his ridiculously handsome face.

"Everything alright over there?" he asked, spatula still in hand. "You look like you just gave yourself a fright."

She shook her head. "No, nothing like that. I don't scare easily. I was just thinking that we should talk about..." She wracked her mind for something she could say. "...finding someone to help out," she managed at last.

"Finding someone?"

"That's right," she agreed, trying to sound both professional and upbeat now. "For potential childcare to watch the twins from time to time."

He frowned, looking almost as petulant as a child himself. "But why do we need that? You're doing a great job."

“Sure, but the goal is to get you to the point where you don’t need a nanny. Or at least, not a live-in, full-time one. But even while you have a nanny, it’s good to have some backup options, too.”

“Because...?” He looked like a lost puppy dog.

“Because even the best nannies need at least a little time to themselves,” she explained gently. The last thing she wanted to do was make him feel foolish or put him on the defensive. “For things like visiting friends, or running errands, or going on dates. Or just enjoying some time to themselves.”

“Right. Of course, they do. Sorry, that was a stupid thing to ask.”

“It’s not stupid,” she corrected quickly. “You’re learning. It’s not all going to come to you overnight. You should try to be kind to yourself while you’re figuring it all out.”

He shrugged, the gesture making it pretty clear to Amira that being easy on himself wasn’t something that came naturally to Dean. “Fair point. But in answer to your question, yes, we should come up with some options. We can put together an ad, post it on the community board and see what kind of response we get. Might be best to do it right now, seeing as the twins are still sleeping.”

“Great! That’s exactly what I was thinking.” Amira agreed brightly.

Dean dished up breakfast, and they both sat down to eat.

“So,” he said. “You’ve got my full attention. What do you think I should include in the ad?”

Amira hesitated for a moment. As a matter of fact, she had someone in mind they could reach out to directly—no ad needed. A person she thought might be just perfect for the job. The only problem was that she wasn’t at all confident that Dean was going to see her point of view or share her opinion.

She made sure to maintain eye contact as she said, “I’ve been thinking that Josie could do it.”

For a moment, Dean only stared at her blankly. Then, as understanding dawned, his eyebrows shot up so quickly it was almost comical. “My *mother*? Are you saying I should try to rope my mom into being a substitute babysitter when you’re not around?”

Amira cringed at that. She could only imagine what Dean’s mother would think if she heard the way he was talking right now. She thought of Josie in that church basement, the way the entire Strawberry Festival committee, including her own daughter, had dismissed and ignored her. It didn’t take a genius to see that Josie was feeling a little lost. Without the role of caring for her family, she was rudderless.

“No,” she answered, doing her best to keep her voice even. “That’s not what I’m saying. And I’m not saying you should demand a lot of her time. Just put her in the rotation, maybe. I think she’d like to feel needed. Useful.”

Dean shrugged his shoulders and Amira already knew he was about to disagree. “It’s nice of you to think of her, but I’ve got to say, I believe that you’re reading this one wrong. Mom has been dedicating her life to the members of this family for a very long time. Now, she’s finally got a chance to live her best life without having to take care of the rest of us. I don’t think that involves putting her to work.”

“Sure, I know, but—” Amira started, but was promptly cut off.

“And I love her, Amira,” he continued with real feeling in his voice. “I love her, and I understand very well how hard it can be to have responsibilities you weren’t expecting heaped on your shoulders. I’m not going to do that to her. I’m just not.”

For a moment, she considered pressing the point further. She could see that Dean was trying to protect Josie. His heart was clearly in the right place. But Amira had a very strong gut feeling that he was wrong about this one. If she’d thought there was a chance of helping him to come around to that line of thinking, she might have kept pushing. It was clear to her, though, that this was a matter on which they were going to have to agree to disagree.

After that, they managed to hash out an ad, which Dean posted immediately on the online community board. Responses started coming in right away, and with Dean's blessing, Amira set up a series of interviews for the next day. The main house was now both termite and tent free, and that was a good start. She couldn't imagine holding interviews in the already severely overcrowded cabin she and Dean were occupying with the twins. They spent the evening going over the various questions Amira wanted the candidates asked. Amira had high hopes by the time they were done, but she was still nervous when the next morning came, and the first of their applicants knocked on the door.

They sat side by side on the couch to do the interviews. There was a tingling where his knee touched hers, and it was rapidly spreading up the length of her arm and across her whole body. It was an annoyingly pleasant feeling, and certainly not the one she needed to have while interviewing high school students who were looking to take on some after-school babysitting.

Despite her being the one to insist on having these interviews, the day proved to be a long and somewhat tedious one. There were far more applicants that Amira would have expected for a job so small, and she had agreed to meet with all of them. The majority of them were wildly unqualified, as evidenced by their responses to her questions and especially by their handling of the twins. There was a girl trying to pass herself off as a high schooler who cracked almost immediately and admitted to being in seventh grade. Still, she was clearly knowledgeable, and Caitlyn and Caleb took to her right away, so she made the short list of options. There was a high school football player who looked nothing like a part-time babysitter, but he handled a diaper change like a pro. For Caitlyn and Caleb, it was clearly love at first sight, and Amira had to mentally chastise herself for making assumptions based on stereotypes. That was something she had done with both Dean and the Walters ranch, only to be proven wrong. She should have learned her lesson by now.

By five o'clock in the evening, it was clear that everyone in the room was worn out. Amira had expected to have to run

each of the interviews despite Dean's presence, but she'd been mistaken about that, too. He had taken lead on everything, showing a surprising amount of insight in the questions he asked. She had to admit, she was impressed at how much he'd paid attention to everything she did with the twins, and how determined he was to find babysitters who would provide not just safe, competent care but also stimulation and engagement.

She was pleased with the progress he'd made in his journey to becoming a capable, committed dad. She was less pleased with how *hot* she found him in that role, but she did her best to keep those feelings under wraps.

After hours of interviews, they were all running out of steam. Caitlyn and Caleb were both grumbling unhappily in their rockers. They were extremely even-tempered for babies, but even the good-natured ones had their limits. After being handled by a succession of strangers for the better part of the day, it was clear that they were ready to return to the isolation of the cabin. Fortunately, there was only one interview left, and it was with Carol, the foreman's wife. If they had to handle another one, Amira was grateful to do it with someone they knew.

"Well, hello!" Carol said in greeting, speaking softly as she let herself in the front door. "I hope you don't mind me saying, dears, but you lot look a little worse for wear."

Dean chuckled and nodded his head. "I think I can speak for all four of us when I say we're feeling that way. Who would have thought this process would be so grueling?"

Amira had known it would likely be just that, but kept her mouth shut. There was a time and a place for well-meaning corrections, and this was not it. Carol seemed to know what she was thinking anyway, however, and flashed Amira a secret, knowing smile as she took her seat opposite Amira, Dean, and the twins.

"So," she began, folding her hands in her lap. "Tell me. Am I too late? Has the position already been filled?"

Amira shook her head emphatically. "We're not just looking for one person, for starters. Also, I'm positive that the people

we've seen, as good as some of them were, aren't anywhere close to as qualified as you are, Carol."

"I'd have to agree," Dean chimed in, his brow lightly furrowed. "And I'll be honest, I'm having a hard time figuring out why you'd want to take something like this on. You've already done more than your fair share of childrearing, what with your boy and how you stepped in to care for us when needed. Aren't you kind of—"

"Done with it all?" she interrupted with a musical laugh. "Oh, no, Dean. Not at all. I'm here because I'd like to offer my help to your new family, but for selfish reasons, too. I miss having babies in my life. Rather profoundly, if I'm being honest. Something part-time like this should do the job nicely to scratch that itch until my son decides to get married and have little ones of his own."

Dean glanced at Amira as Carol spoke, and for reasons Amira couldn't fathom, the look made her blush. There was something intimate in that glance, as if she and Dean might be starting their own family sometime soon. She knew it was a ridiculous thought and did her best to shove it aside.

Carol didn't really require an interview, as Dean knew her qualifications well, so they fell into an easy exchange of small talk instead. Caleb and Caitlyn, lulled by the sound of pleasant, gentle voices, wriggled less and less in their rockers. Their eyelids began drooping, and by the time Dean walked Carol to the front door, they were both fast asleep. Dean shut the front door and rejoined Amira on the couch, sitting closer than he had before. When he looked down and saw his peacefully sleeping children, he smiled contentedly.

"I guess we worked out a new way of putting them down, huh?" he asked with a small laugh. "We just have to talk them to sleep, both together."

Amira laughed as well, although her skin seemed to be tingling all over with his proximity. "It's unconventional, but I can't deny that it worked."

The two of them sat in silence for a while, marveling at the wonder of the beautiful children Dean had helped make. When



his hand first found hers, then wrapped it in his own, Amira made no move to pull away. In that moment, all of the voices of reason were silent. The only thing her mind told her was that she wanted more. More of his touch. More of *him*. For as long as she was around to have it.

“Amira?” His voice was husky when he spoke her name, unlike anything she had heard from him before.

Her heart skipped a beat as she turned her head to meet his gaze. “Yes?”

“Thank you.”

They were the only words he said, but it wasn't all he had to express. He leaned in slowly, kissing her so lightly their lips might not have touched at all. Then, the kiss deepened, and that told her more than words ever could.

Dean and Amira spent a few days going over their interviews and finalizing their picks. They decided they should have three stand-in options. The relief staff, as Dean dubbed them, which earned him both a roll of the eyes and a smile from Amira. Finally, they decided to have their first trial run with Chelsea, the lone middle schooler of the bunch, in what Amira called a “mother’s helper” day. She and Dean would finally take care of refinishing the floors in the main house, and Chelsea would look after Caleb and Caitlyn in one of the carpeted upstairs rooms of the main house. That way, if she ran into any trouble, they would be there to help.

While there had been much discussion of stand-in babysitters, there was one topic they had yet to talk about at all. Dean had considered bringing up their kiss a couple of times, but it was like Amira had a sixth sense, because every time he made up his mind to broach the subject, she found a pressing reason to be anywhere but in the same room with him. Still, the charged energy between them was palpable. There was a sexual tension that made the air in the great room of the main house crackle. Dean knew that, for his part, at least, there was no going back to a purely professional relationship. Now that he had felt her lips against his, he would never be able to look at her again without wanting another taste. As many tastes as he could get, in fact.

He didn’t realize that he was staring at Amira, but she certainly noticed. She cocked her head to one side, a light smile on her perfect lips.

“You’re staring at me again,” she said, blushing prettily. “You seem to do that a lot. Do you see something interesting?”

He nodded and slowly stepped closer. “I do, as a matter of fact. I see something of extreme interest to me. Want to come over here and let me show you what it is?”

He didn't want to come off as pushy, but he didn't seem able to control himself around her. Certainly not as well as he could with everyone else. Ever since that one kiss, having her was all he could think about. But Amira was handling it differently, at least so far. She was flirtatious, sure—enough to make it clear his advances were welcome—but only up to a point. If he pressed the point too much, he felt her pull away, just like she was doing now. She was still smiling, but the feeling of it changed. Now, there was a certain amount of self-satisfaction in it. He knew exactly where it was coming from, too.

She'd been looking at him with that same smile pretty much constantly since the previous afternoon when he'd told her he was finally ready to refinish the floors. She'd been gently prodding him in that direction for the umpteenth time and at first, her eyes had widened in surprise when he'd agreed. Today, though, he could read the smugness on her face loud and clear as he worked.

It was obvious to him that she believed herself responsible for his change of heart. The truth was, while she had certainly helped him get to this place, it wasn't actually anything she'd said or done that had made him see the light. He just hadn't been ready to do it before. Now, he finally felt that he was. He was finding a way forward, with Amira's help. It was like he had been underwater for a very long time and now he could actually breathe again.

He hadn't been quite sure what to expect when Amira had volunteered to pitch in while the twins were with Chelsea, but she was proving to be a capable assistant. At first, he tended to the floor in silence. After about the fifth time of slopping stain on himself, however, Dean sat back on his heels and groaned.

Amira, still hard at work, looked up at him, saw the mess, and giggled. "Oh my. It looks like someone might have slightly underestimated how messy a job this was going to be."

"No," he said with a rueful laugh. "Not slightly. Totally. You would think growing up on a ranch I'd have an idea of what constitutes a dirty job, but this one I failed to anticipate."

Amira put down her cloth beside the bucket of stain and sat back on her heels. She stared at him long enough that he felt like she was looking into him instead of at him. “I’m curious, then.”

“Curious about what?” he asked self-consciously.

“About why you didn’t let Vivien handle this,” she said matter-of-factly. “The termites, the floors. All of it, really. I’ve only known her for a short while, but it was clear to me she was desperate to do it. She would have been happy to take care of everything, and you wouldn’t have had to trouble yourself with it.”

Dean considered this for a moment. He knew the reasons. He had always understood why he’d made his decisions, even if they had struck those around him as unreasonable. Even so, he had never spoken them out loud. Amira was such a practical, straightforward thinking woman. If he gave her the answer she was after, would she find him ridiculous?

“Honestly?” he said, setting aside all pretense of continuing work for the moment. “If I let her fix everything, then I’d have no excuse not to move into the main house. And I just wasn’t ready to take that step. I knew it needed to happen, and I realize it probably sounds silly—”

“No,” she interrupted quickly. Her attention was entirely focused on him, and her eyes were full of both interest and concern. “Your feelings are valid, not silly.”

“Thank you for that.” He nodded, swallowed hard, and continued. “There was just so much change in the last few years already. Big, big changes to my life that I had no real control over.”

“I know a little bit about not having control over your life,” she said quietly, her eyes remaining steady on his face.

He smiled at her. “So then maybe this doesn’t sound so crazy to you, after all. With everything already going on, with so much immediately heaped on my plate, having my own home change, too, was more than I could handle. So I used the

excuse of the work the house needed—and then kept putting off actually getting the work done.”

“You weren’t comfortable.” It might have been his imagination, but she seemed to move ever so slightly closer to him when she said this.

He nodded in agreement. “I wasn’t. I needed some kind of continuity, and I decided to get it from staying in my cabin—the place that I really saw as *mine*, while this house was still my dad’s, at least in my head. It wasn’t logical, I can see that now, but I just couldn’t have one more new thing.”

Her head tilted to one side, considering him. “And now? How do you feel about new things now?”

“Like I’m prepared to take on any of them. Like I’m ready.” It was the truth, and there was zero hesitation in his answer. The thing he left out was that he felt that way, in large part, thanks to her. Without Amira coming into his life, he didn’t know where he’d be right now. He didn’t want to know, either.

She looked pleased with his answer, picked up her cloth, and got back to work staining the floors. Dean followed suit, although what he really wanted was to keep her talking. Talking about anything. He couldn’t seem to get enough of this woman who, in so many ways, remained a mystery to him. He let the silence linger between them as long as he could stand it, then broke the tension when it seemed clear that she wouldn’t.

“So,” he started, looking for a way to get her to open up. “You must have a bunch of crazy stories from your jobs over the years.”

She tossed her head back and laughed. The sound made his heart jump. “Crazy...yes, I suppose you could say that. It certainly hasn’t been the most conventional of lives.”

“Anything that stands out the most? Any favorite times?”

She considered this for a moment, then smiled sweetly. “Yes, actually. There was a family I worked for with the sweetest little girls. Twin girls, actually, only six years old. I was with their family over the holiday season and they had me come

along for a Christmas in Paris. It was magical, seeing that city for the first time through my eyes and through the eyes of those sweet girls. Like a living fairytale.”

Dean set his rag aside again and looked across the room. From where he sat, he had a clear line of sight to the large dining table, long enough to hold all kinds of extended family and friends, and to the kitchen beyond. Christmas was something he hadn’t given much thought to in several years, but now he couldn’t help himself. He could see the big, beautiful Christmases of his childhood so clearly it was almost like he’s resurrected them. He could smell the sweet, spicy scents of holiday treats wafting from the double ovens. When he looked up at the large wooden beams of the rafters, he could see the twinkling lights wound around them by his father, balanced precariously at the top of a terrifyingly tall ladder.

He shook his head to clear it, then looked back down at the floor, and caught Amira watching him intently. “What’s happening over there, mister? Where did you go?”

“I was just thinking about the way Christmases used to be here,” he said a little wistfully. “It used to be my favorite time of year. We had so many great traditions back then. After everything that’s happened, we kind of just let them slip away.”

She scooted closer to him and took his hand in hers. “Do you want to know the very best thing about traditions like that?” She smiled sweetly. “It doesn’t matter how long you’ve let them go. You can always bring them back. And you should, Dean. Really. Bring them back for your children, but for the others, too. You still have a wonderful, loving family, and I’d bet anything they miss those Christmases, too.”

He looked up at the rafters again and chuckled. “You might be onto something. This place is really something when it’s all decked out. You should see the ranch when it’s covered in snow. You can’t beat it.”

“I bet,” she said in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. “I think I might like to see that.” The wistfulness in her tone was

an uncomfortable reminder that she'd be long gone before the snowy season started.

They grew quiet then and remained that way while they finished overhauling the floors. Time flew by, and they were just finishing up when Carol let herself through the front door.

"My word!" she exclaimed, her hands going to her cheeks. "I thought I'd stop by to see how you two were getting along. I never imagined you'd be finished!"

Dean glanced across the room. "I didn't either, honestly. But we got it done, from the looks of it."

"You two make a good team, that's what I think," Carol said, dropping Dean a little wink that had him more flustered than ever. "And now you've got some extra time on your hands to show for it. What sort of trouble are you two going to get into?"

Dean's face grew hot. Carol had always been a sharp, perceptive woman. She'd known him for some time, too. Clearly, she could see that Dean wasn't keen on parting from Amira's company just yet. And maybe, if Carol's apparent assessment of the situation was right, Amira wasn't ready to leave him at the moment, either. The problem was, finishing the floors did not mean they were without responsibility. He knew it, and Amira obviously did, too. After all, her whole reason for being here was to care for the children. The middle schooler's trial seemed to have gone well, but they'd only asked her to help out while they took care of this task. Now that they were done, they had no reason not to take the twins off her hands.

"I should probably shower up and get Chelsea home." His stomach dropped as he said the words. Sometimes, it seemed like having a sense of responsibility was a curse.

But Carol surprised him by holding up a hand to stop him and shaking her head. "I think I'm more than capable of seeing Chelsea home safely. And I've already told you I'd like to soak up as much time with your precious little ones as possible. So it seems you two have some time to yourselves, after all. Surely there's something you'd like to be doing."

Amira spoke up then, and by the look of her, what she said next surprised her every bit as much as it did Dean. “Fishing! You told me how much you enjoy it, and I’ve never been. Have any interest in taking me fishing with you, sir?”

Dean’s face split open into a wide, uncontrollable grin. At the moment, there was nothing in the world that interested him more.



Amira had been pleased with her bold move at first. She'd crossed a line, asking to spend time with Dean alone, but it had felt right in the moment. Now though, sitting beside him in his truck without the buffer of the twins, she was starting to doubt herself.

"Everything alright over there?" Dean asked with a sideways glance as he put his truck into park at the fishing spot.

She plastered an overly bright smile on her face. "Definitely. More than alright. I'm excited to see what this is all about."

It wasn't a complete lie. Amira collected knowledge and skills the way other people collected coins, and she highly doubted she'd have another shot at this one. But she was also past the point of being able to lie to herself about things when they came to Dean. There was no way to fit this outing into the construct of meticulously crafted rules. She wasn't doing this because it would help the twins in some roundabout way, nor because it would help Dean become a more capable father. She'd asked him to take her fishing because she wasn't ready for them to part. She wanted to spend more time with him, doing something that he loved. Alone. Surrounded by nature. Where absolutely anything might happen between them.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't notice when Dean cut the truck's engine, nor did she notice him climb out of the driver's seat and come around to open her door. When he did so, she jumped and gasped.

"Well, that's something we're going to have to take care of right off the bat." Dean chuckled to himself and helped her down from the truck.

"What do you mean? What do we need to take care of?"

"That jumpiness," he answered promptly. "Wade into the water putting off that sort of energy and you're liable to scare off all of the fish."

She rolled her eyes dramatically. “I think I’ll be able to keep my cool, thank you very much.”

After rummaging around in the truck bed, Dean strolled towards her, holding a bizarre-looking pair of rubber overalls. “For you.”

“Oh, God, seriously? You want me to wear *that*?” She groaned, but she couldn’t hide the fact that she was enjoying herself already.

He nodded, handing her the set he was holding up then grabbing his own. “I absolutely do. I’m not sure how much you know about fly-fishing—”

“Nothing,” she interjected with a laugh. “That’s how much I know. Not a single thing.”

He laughed with her and climbed into his set of waders. “I was kind of getting that impression. Fly-fishing isn’t like normal fishing. We aren’t just going to stand on a dock and cast into the water.”

“No,” she said slowly, looking around and realizing there wasn’t any dock to stand on even if she’d wanted to. “It doesn’t look like we will be. So, then, what do we do?”

“We’re getting in the water.” He grinned, then tilted his head towards what she now thought of as her fishing uniform. “We’re going in waist deep. So, while you don’t have to wear the waders if they’re not to your taste, you’re going to be soaked through if you don’t.”

That was the end of the argument as far as Amira was concerned. She had no desire to be drenched to the bone with river water, despite her interest in fishing. Besides, she’d asked him to show her what this was all about, but what she really meant was what it was all about for him. She wanted to experience his world, if only for a moment, and if this was part of that, she was going to do it.

She felt awkward moving around in waders that were too big for her and giant boots that squelched when she walked. Even so, she was happy as she followed Dean to the river. This really was a beautiful spot, unlike anything she had ever seen.

They were parked at one of the river's bends, and all she could see was the silver glint of water hurrying over rocks, the lazy wave of tall grass not subject to regular cutting, and large trees she could imagine Dean having sat under as a child. This felt like being given a glimpse of Dean's heart. The things that made him the man he was. Instead of scratching the itch of her curiosity, it only made her want to know more.

He took her arm to steady her as they moved into the water, which became deeper faster than she'd expected. If he sensed her slight unease at it, he was gentleman enough not to let on.

"The riverbed is uneven, and the current is strong," he said in a calm, reassuring voice. "But you'll level out soon enough. And in the meantime, I won't let you fall. Trust me."

"I do," she answered, hardly above a whisper. "I really do, Dean."

The actual process of him teaching her to fly-fish was far more physical than she'd expected. When he had them standing where and how he wanted them, he handed her one of the poles. Fishing off of a dock had always looked relatively simple to Amira. She'd seen her share of aging men parked in camp chairs on the end of docks with fishing lines that rarely moved and coolers of beer at their feet. This was a different ballgame entirely.

Dean demonstrated the casting technique first, flicking his wrist to make the lure dance along the water. Amira took the fishing rod in her hand; she soon discovered that mastering the movement was tougher than it looked. No matter how hard she tried, the lure sank.

"Let me show you," Dean said, walking towards her with surprising grace despite the current. "Is it okay if I sort of give you a hug? It's easier if we do it together."

A hug? Amira felt a shiver roll through her body...but she nodded anyway.

He came up behind her and encircled her in his arms, then took the fishing pole from her. "Put your hand on top of mine, so you can feel the rhythm of casting."

Amira swallowed hard. She was already nearly overwhelmed by the sensation of his chest pressed against her back. She placed her palm on his hand.

“You’re very stiff. You need to relax,” he cautioned. “Don’t fight the movement. It’s like dancing. You have to let me take the lead, though—and I’m guessing that’s not easy for you.”

She sighed. “You’re right.”

He chuckled softly. “Can’t say I’m surprised. Here we go.”

Dean brought his arm back, and within a few swishes, Amira could feel the rhythm settling into her body. As much as she wanted to focus on the feeling of Dean’s warmth against her, she also wanted to master the technique. When Dean finally pulled away to watch her she nearly messed up on purpose, hoping he’d jump back into position.

“How am I doing, coach?” she asked.

“You’re a natural.”

Amira turned to glance at him and wasn’t ready for the intensity in his eyes. He finally looked away. “Keep at it. I’m going to get my pole.”

They fished in silence until Dean suggested that they head back in for dry land. They hadn’t caught a single fish, but that hadn’t been the point for Amira at all. She suspected bringing in a good haul hadn’t been on Dean’s mind, either. He did have a faraway, almost sad look in his eyes now, though, and as they leaned against the trunk of the nearest grand tree, Amira reached for his hand. A jolt of electricity shot through her fingers all the way up her arm as she did so, but she did her best to ignore it.

“Hey,” she said softly, squeezing his hand so that he looked at her. “Where’d you go just now?”

He smiled, using the pad of his thumb to trace tiny circles on the top of her hand. “I’m right here.”

“You know what I mean,” she pressed. “Is it this? Being out here fishing again? I don’t think you’ve been out here since I

started working with you and the twins. Surely you must miss it. This was a big part of your life, right? Before?”

He laughed, but there was little humor in it. “Before everything changed, you mean?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I mean.”

He sighed, looking out at the river for a long, silent moment before he spoke again. “I do miss it. And if I’m being honest, I still dream about it sometimes.”

“What kinds of dreams?” Amira was tempted to hold her breath. Dean was the most charming man she had ever met, but he could be almost as closed off as she was when it came to talking about what made up the heart of him.

He turned those unnervingly bright eyes on her and she could see how much what he was about to say meant to him. “A different kind of five-year plan. One where I take care of what my father and brother would have wanted for the ranch but keep my business, too. I have this fantasy of building a little side business for fly-fishing. A supplemental thing.”

“Yeah? Tell me more.” His face lit up when she said that, and Amira couldn’t help but grin at him. It was infectious. Both the happiness so clearly attached to this dream for him and the fantasy five-year plan itself.

He laughed and shrugged. “I always thought this would be a perfect place to build some little cabins, have customers come out and stay for a few days. Nothing super fancy, mind you, but a little more upscale than having everyone sleep in tents.”

“Sounds nice,” she agreed, looking out at the river and sighing contentedly. “Who wouldn’t want to wake up to this every morning?”

He nodded, clearly pleased that she saw his vision. “And you’ve seen the kitchen in the main house. It’s enormous. Perfect place to rustle up food for anyone who came to stay. I could really do it up in style—have this be a place that couples might want to try together, or families. Not just guys who are okay with roughing it, which was what used to be my clientele.”

“That sounds great!” She let go of his hands and sat up on her heels. She’d asked about his dream because she wanted to know him better, but now she couldn’t stop seeing all of the ways in which it was perfect. For him, and in the long run, for the whole Walters family. “Why does it have to be a fantasy plan, Dean? Why not make it a reality?”

Dean shrugged, the wind visibly going out of his sails. “The pieces are all there, sure, but the money isn’t. And it wouldn’t be about the ranch, anyways. I’d be doing it for me.”

“But why couldn’t you be doing it for both?” Amira insisted passionately. “You and the ranch? You’re hopelessly intertwined as it is. And you could make it work with the plan you’ve got, if you made a couple of tweaks to that five-year plan you’ve been working on.”

He chuckled, eyebrows raised. “Oh yeah? A couple of tweaks, huh? I didn’t realize you were moonlighting as a financial planner, Amira.”

“Very funny,” she said impatiently, “but I’m serious. You could table some of the major infrastructure overhauls for the time being, keep the plans for cows, and have enough wiggle room to invest in the fishing business. It could work, Dean. It really could. What do you think?”

He grew very still, the only part of him moving his eyes, which seemed to be studying every inch of her face. For a second, Amira was worried that she had seriously overstepped and now he was angry. Then, he scooted forward, closing the small amount of distance that remained between them.

“I think you’re a hell of a woman, Amira,” he said, his voice low and husky. “And I think I can’t keep myself from doing this for one moment more.”

He took her face in both hands and kissed her then. It was different from their first, very unexpected locking of lips. Amira only felt a moment of hesitation coming from Dean before the kiss turned into something more. It was long and slow, the kind of kiss that made it feel as if time were moving at a different speed. His hands moved from her face up to her hair, his fingers tangling in and tugging just enough that it hurt

in a delicious way. Amira shuddered, and she knew that she would not be able to stop this. She didn't *want* to stop it. She was tired of forever being in such firm control. She was ready to throw all of her rules out of the window, and all of her caution right along with it.

And then the alarm on her phone went off, signaling that it was time to return to the main house and relieve Carol. Amira shuddered again, but this time it had nothing to do with pleasure.

Dean groaned and let her go reluctantly. "What's the opposite of being saved by the bell? Because I think that's what we are."

"Come on," Amira said with a laugh that sounded a little too strained. "We've got to get back. But don't think I'm letting this discussion go."

Dean stood and pulled her up with him. "Don't think I'm letting the rest of it go. Forget the talking."

Amira laughed again, but as they hurried for the car, she hugged her arms around herself tightly. For the first time, maybe ever, she was wondering what it would be like to just let go. To throw all of her rules and guidelines out of the window and let herself just live. What if, this time, at the end of two months, she didn't move onto the next family? What if she decided to stay?

It was quite possibly the best kiss of Dean's life, and it had been pretty PG, all things considered. But it was all he could think about the following day, no matter what he was doing or who he was talking to. Unfortunately, it wasn't a day that left a lot of time for daydreaming. The more he wanted time to slow down, the more it seemed to speed up. Every aspect of his life felt like it was going into overdrive, from repairs on the ranch to endless calls from Vivien to complain about the Strawberry Festival, as if he didn't already know how time-consuming it was. So far, he'd done a good job of not reminding her of that point. Besides, she was doing an excellent job of getting things set up. There was nothing actually wrong, whether she wanted to acknowledge it or not.

Just like there was nothing wrong at the ranch, even though the work was running him ragged. He was already wiped by the time he let himself through the front door of the little cabin he still shared with Amira and the twins. He was counting on them going down for their naps soon. When they were sleeping, maybe he would finally talk to Amira about where things stood between them. When he stepped through the front door, however, it quickly became clear that this was not the time for a "what are we doing?" conversation.

First of all, it wasn't just Amira and the twins in the room. Carol was there, too, trying to distract Caleb from his sister, who was wailing loudly in Amira's arms.

"Woah there," Dean said slowly, taking trying to make sense of the scene. "What exactly did I walk into here?"

Carol glanced over her shoulder and waved a hand casually to signal it was nothing to worry about. "She just took a bit of a tumble, really. If you could even call it that."

Dean raised his eyebrows. "A tumble? How'd she manage that when all she can do is wave her arms and legs around?"



“Because,” Amira answered, dipping her head to kiss a glaring red mark on the side of Caitlyn’s head. “She’s doing more than waving her arms and legs as of five minutes ago. You, sir, are the proud father of a girl who knows how to roll over.”

Dean was shocked by the strength of his reaction to the news. He was more amazed by his babies with each passing day, in awe of how quickly they were growing, and sad to have missed this major milestone. It made him painfully aware of just how quickly time was passing and how precious every moment of it was.

“But is she okay?” he asked, hurrying across the room and going down to one knee beside Amira. “That looks like a nasty bump. Do we need to take her to a doctor or something?”

Carol and Amira glanced at each other, then laughed. Carol placed a motherly hand on his shoulder and shook her head. “No, Dean, she doesn’t need a doctor. It’s not as bad as all that. They’ve just got fair skin, your little ones. When they take a tumble, it’s going to look worse than it is for a bit. It’ll pass soon enough. What you should do now that they’re on the move, though, is get this place babyproofed.”

“Seriously?” he asked doubtfully. Rolling over was a big deal, but it seemed a long way off from running a marathon. He’d thought babyproofing didn’t happen until kids started walking. “Are we there yet?”

Amira hopped to her feet and held a hand down for him. “We certainly are. Once they figure out they can move on their own, there’s no slowing them down. They’re going to start progressing with mobility quickly now.”

Carol glanced between them. “Why don’t you two head out for supplies now? I’ve got time to spare, I can hang out with these two busy cuties for a little longer.”

“Works for me,” Dean said quickly. Any excuse to get some alone time with Amira.

Two hours later, he found himself weighed down by several large, bulky bags of babyproofing materials with Amira walking by his side.

“Hungry?” he asked.

Amira laughed. “What do you think?”

“Right, *always* hungry. What about here?”

They’d ended up outside the nicest Italian restaurant in town. It was a whole different vibe than the barbeque joint they’d visited last time, which was just fine by Dean. He was in the mood for something a little more private.

She raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Really? A place with fancy white tablecloths and everything?”

He shifted the weight of the shopping bags and took her hand firmly in his. “That’s right. And some place where half of the town won’t be sitting close by trying to listen in to our conversations.”

“Sounds like heaven to me.” She giggled, then stopped as he opened the door with an extravagant bow and led her inside.

It had been a very long time since he’d taken a woman out on a nice date, and even longer since he’d cared so much about what she thought. This felt like uncharted territory. It didn’t help matters that those warm, dark eyes of hers were focused in so intently on his face, either. And right now, they appeared to be full of mischief.

“Alright, spill it,” he finally said when the wineglasses were full and the waiter was long gone from their secluded corner booth in the back of the restaurant. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

Her eyes dropped to the delicate glass before her, one fingertip lightly tracing the rim. “I was just thinking about how different you are now.”

“Am I? Different how?” He didn’t disagree with her. Sometimes, it felt like he could hardly remember the man he’d been before Amira had stepped out of her car and into his life. But he was desperately curious to hear what difference it was that she was seeing.

She laughed, allowing the fingertips of her free hand to run lightly across his knuckles. “So many ways. Do you remember

the first time I tried to get you to swaddle Caitlyn?”

“You mean when you told me to torture my tiny little girl and contort her into a burrito? Yes, I vaguely recall.”

She giggled and rolled her eyes. “Or how about when I showed you the proper way to fasten a diaper? You were skeptical about every single thing I tried to teach you. You fought me at every step.”

“Yeah,” he agreed softly, his mood turning more serious. “I was kind of a mess, wasn’t I?”

She shook her head, her fingers still dancing across his skin. “No, never that. You were just a little lost, that’s all. Your world had turned upside down, and it was hard for you to trust a stranger telling you which way to go. It’s all perfectly normal. And in the end, you took to daddy boot camp like a champ.”

His jaw clenched involuntarily at that word. The end. He knew she didn’t mean that this moment was *their* end. Not yet. Her contract still had several weeks to go—it wasn’t like she was packing her bags tomorrow. But her departure date was getting closer all the time, and he still hadn’t come up with any ideas for how he could convince her to stay.

“And now?” he asked, taking her hand and running his fingers over the delicate skin of the inside of her wrist. “What do you see when you look at me now?”

Her eyes found his again, shining in the flickering light. “I see a good father, Dean, who loves his children and who is committed to doing everything possible to keep them safe and happy. I think you’ve learned so well that soon you won’t need me anymore. I have a feeling you’re good at just about everything you really set your mind to.”

He didn’t know what to say. He wanted to say too much. He wanted to tell her that nobody had ever made him feel the way she was making him feel now. The way she’d been making him feel ever since she’d landed on his doorstep. Like he was capable of anything. Like she appreciated him for exactly who he was, without a shred of disappointment over who he *wasn’t*.

With the ranch and then with the twins, he'd spent so much time feeling like he wasn't measuring up. But only with Amira had he felt like someone truly had faith that he could learn and adapt and do what needed to be done. That meant more to him than any childcare lesson she had taught him. He wanted to take her face in his hands and make her understand, once and for all, that there would never come a time in his life where he did not need her anymore. Where he didn't want her. The longer he knew her, the more convinced he was that it was true.

"Besides," she continued with a light laugh, although Dean didn't miss the slight tremor there. "I never had any doubts about you at all. Well, actually," she said with a teasing smile, "there maybe have been a *few* doubts right at the start—but I was always sure that you had the ability to be a great dad. And look at you now!" she said happily. She held up her glass for him in a toast. "I must have been a very good teacher."

Dean nodded, moving closer to her in the booth so that his leg was pressed against hers. "That's right, Amira. You've been an excellent teacher. And you're an even better partner."

He actually heard her breath catch in her throat. She leaned in closer to him in a way that made him think she wasn't even aware she was doing it. She was so close now that he could have counted each individual lash lining her lovely eyes. She stopped just short of a kiss, though, as if part of her was still holding on to that ridiculous set of rules she'd made for herself.

"It's really nothing," she whispered, clearing her throat and then trying again. "It's what I do, right? Helping people is kind of my thing. I—"

"No." He couldn't let it go. Not this time. He couldn't let her stop him from saying what he needed to say. "It's more than that, Amira. For me, it's a hell of a lot more than that."

He didn't know which one of them closed that last fraction of distance and he didn't care. All he cared about was that her lips were on his again, this time parting so that he tasted the sweetness of the wine on her tongue. They were in a cozy little

booth in the back of a restaurant he had walked by a hundred times, but they might as well be in a different country. They might as well have been on a different planet for all he cared. There was only his hand on her thigh, moving ever so slowly up, his fingers toying with the hem of a dress he wanted desperately to rip right off of her here and now. In that moment, she was his, and he was going to do everything in his power to keep it that way.

Amira felt like she was floating through the next day. With every move she made, she felt the ghost of Dean's touch. When she licked her lips, she imagined she could still taste him. Every time she thought about her unexpected date with Dean the night before, it made her shiver. Her rules were well and truly thrown out the window now. She should be panicking. Instead, she felt like she was walking on air.

It had been a very long time since she had felt anywhere close to this happy. Her evening with Dean was the best date she'd had in years. But it was more than that. Take this moment, for instance. She was in the main house this afternoon, the twins dancing merrily in the brand-new bouncers purchased during last night's babyproofing spree. The house was wired up with some pretty impressive speakers and she was playing one of those online playlists cultivated for little kiddos. Every time she glanced in their direction, both Caitlyn and Caleb favored her with the sweetest smiles. Everything felt perfect.

At the moment, she was alone with the twins. Dean was out in the fields. Carol had promised to come by later, ostensibly to help get the main house back in order. Amira had a feeling it was really so that she could spend more time with the babies, which filled her heart with joy. It was good to see the three of them bonding. It would make things easier, after.

"Nope!" she said to the twins and to the room in general. She shook her head firmly, as if doing so would ward off those kinds of thoughts. "We'll have to deal with that eventually, but not today. Today, we're moving furniture."

They'd moved the furniture to refinish the floors, and now it was time to put it all out again—and maybe rearrange it a bit. Dean had given her carte blanche to arrange the room as she saw fit. He'd helped her get the bigger pieces of furniture in place, things she couldn't move on her own. Aside from that,

though, he told her she had free rein. To put her touch on things and give the place new life, he'd said.

Now, she stood surveying her work. It was starting to get close to time for family dinner, and she wanted to have everything pretty much put in place by the time people arrived. She was excited for the space, almost as if it belonged partially to her, and she wanted the rest of the family to be happy about it, too.

Her phone, stowed in her back pocket, began ringing. She retrieved it, saw Bethany's name on the screen, and smiled. "Hey, lady, how's it going? Been a little while."

"You're damn right it has. Don't think I haven't noticed you dodging my calls." Amira flushed a little, feeling guilty. Her friend wasn't wrong. She *had* been avoiding chatting lately—probably would have sent the call to voicemail just now if she hadn't been feeling so light and happy. It was just that Bethany knew her too well for it to be possible to keep the developments with Dean a secret from her. And Amira wasn't sure how ready she was to talk about it. She wasn't even sure what "it" was, and although she didn't consider herself a superstitious person, there was a tiny part of her that was worried about ruining things.

She cleared her throat. "I know, I'm sorry. It's just that things out here have been really keeping me on my toes." Hoping to avoid questions about Dean, she went on to explain some of the new developments since the last time they had talked, including how the twins had grown and the progress they'd made.

"That all sounds great," Bethany said. "But why do I get the sense that you're talking around something? Such as, say, a certain cowboy? How *are* things going with the boss man?"

"He...uh...things are..." Amira stammered, stumbling over the words as she tried to think of what to say. Her shoulders slumped as she realized she wouldn't be able to get away with anything but the truth. "We kind of went on a date last night."

"Really?!" Bethany squealed so loudly that Amira actually pulled the phone away from her ear. "That's most definitely

not within the acceptable boundaries of the patented Amira Davis rulebook.”

Amira laughed, her face on fire. “I didn’t mean for it to happen. I’m not even entirely sure what we’re doing. Which, if I think about it, freaks me out.”

“Then don’t think about it,” Bethany responded promptly. “I have a feeling that doing a little less thinking would be good for you for a change.”

“I just...like him,” Amira said quietly. She wasn’t sure if she was talking to Bethany or to herself. Maybe it didn’t matter. It felt good to say the words, either way. “I’m not saying I think it’s going to turn into anything, but I do. I like him very much. I’ve never met anyone like him before.”

She could practically hear Bethany smiling over the phone. “Well, I didn’t think I’d say this after the way you were talking a few weeks ago, but I think maybe you taking that job was the best possible thing that could have happened to you.”

Amira opened her mouth, whether to agree or the opposite she wasn’t sure. Before she got anything out, though, she heard the front door open and the sound of footsteps. “Hey, we’ll talk about this more when I visit, okay? Which I am going to do once the contract is over, just like we planned. But right now it sounds like people are getting here for family dinner, so I should go.”

“Family dinner?” Bethany cried loudly. “You’re there for family dinner?! Good Lord, Amira, you—”

“What? Bad connection, gotta run!” Amira hung up the phone before Bethany could finish. She didn’t have time to explain the dynamics of how family dinner worked in the Walters household. Besides, Vivien was marching into the room, her children in tow, and she did not look particularly happy. When she got a look at what Amira had been up to in the great room of the main house, she looked even less pleased.

Amira took a deep breath and smiled. “Hey, Vivien. It’s good to see you. I’m just finishing up in here, and Dean should be



along any minute. Want me to fix you something to drink while you wait for everyone to get here?"

Instead of answering, Vivien scowled. Amira had to hand it to her; she really could cut a formidable figure when she wanted to. Which apparently, she did, at the moment. With her hands on her hips, she marched into the middle of the room and turned in a slow, deliberate circle.

"Kids?" Vivien said in a voice Amira couldn't imagine anyone disagreeing with. "Run on into the kitchen and start putting the plates out. We want everything to be where it's supposed to be when people are ready to sit down to eat."

The comment wasn't subtle, at least not to Amira, but it was effective. If there was any doubt in her mind as to why Vivien was unhappy, the direction to her children made it clear. Dean was alright with Amira redecorating things. Vivien, on the other hand? Not so much. She had never been a fan of Amira's. That had been clear from the start. And it didn't seem likely to change any time soon.

"Really, Vivien," she tried again, careful to keep her voice neutral and her expression friendly. "I don't mind getting you something to drink. I think there are a couple of bottles of white wine in the fridge, and Carol made some iced tea, too. I'd be more than happy to pour you something."

Vivien smiled, but there was nothing particularly friendly about it. "That's so sweet, Amira. Really. But let's not worry about drinks right now. Instead, I'm wondering if you could walk me through what's going on in here."

"Sure! Of course. What's on your mind?" Amira suppressed a sigh.

Vivien made a point of giving the room another long, lingering look and frowning before giving her answer. "You saw this place before, right? Before the termite people. Before the floors were done. You saw it, right? Because you were here for family dinner prior to all that, weren't you?"

"Yes," Amira said matter-of-factly. "I was."

"Then you realize that this is all wrong."

Amira clasped her hands in front of her. “I know it’s different, Vivien, yes. But I was talking to Dean, and—”

Vivien cut her off. “I don’t know what kind of conversation you had with Dean, or what you think he might have said, but I know this house better than anyone. I know exactly where everything belongs. This just isn’t right.”

Amira was losing patience fast, but still, she tried. “Look, I know change is hard, but sometimes it can be a good thing. Dean said he thought it might bring new life into the house. Make it easier for everyone to move forward.”

“Well, Dean was wrong,” Vivien retorted. “Just like everything in here.”

Amira prided herself on being a professional, but even she had her limits. Her hands fell to her sides, and as if of their own volition, balled into fists.

“Vivien, did you ever ask yourself whether keeping everything exactly how it used to be was a good thing? Things have changed. Your family has changed. Keeping it all as...as some kind of shrine to the past isn’t healthy for anyone. Especially not for Dean, who is going to be the one living here. Don’t you think he has the right to be comfortable in his own home?”

Vivien scoffed, growing alarmingly red in the face. “Are you telling me you think you know my brother better than I do? You think you know what’s best for Dean?”

As if right on cue, the front door opened at that moment and Dean came striding towards her. Amira had never been happier to see him. When he reached her side, he gave her a kiss on the cheek and rested a hand on her hip. It was a gesture implying a level of physical familiarity not usually shared between employer and employee. The whole thing appeared casual, but Amira had a feeling it was a pointed gesture. Dean was a smart man and he certainly knew how to read a room. Especially a room that had his sister in it.

“You two talking about me?” he asked with a devilish grin. He pulled Amira in closer and kissed her again, landing on her forehead this time. “No wonder my ears were burning.”

Vivien's hand returned to her hips. Amira was a little surprised they weren't permanently attached there. "We were, as a matter of fact. She was showing me the 'improvements' she made around here. I was just questioning whether you were actually on board. It's a lot, Dean."

"You're right," he agreed. "It *is* a lot. We're very lucky to have her, don't you think? Did you know she nannied for some famous designer? Looks like she picked up a lot while she was there. It wasn't exactly fair, me asking her to take this on in addition to everything else she's doing. But she's just kind of amazing like that. Far as I can tell? She can't help herself."

Vivien's mouth dropped open. Amira was tempted to cover her ears. That was how sure she was that Dean's sister was going to start shouting. Instead, Vivien turned on her heel and stalked off towards the kitchen to help get things ready for dinner.

"Don't worry about her, huh? She can get sensitive about family stuff, but she'll come around." Dean turned Amira to face him and lifted her chin for a kiss.

She nodded her agreement, closing her eyes and smiling at the kiss. As for the rest of it? She wanted to believe him. She really did. But she had met people like Vivien before. She understood that Dean's sister thought she was protecting her family and their history. As far as Vivien was concerned, Amira was going to be able to do no right.

“Hey, there, Boss,” Frank called out from his post alongside the horse paddock. “I was wondering where you’d gone. You know we don’t have to do this today, right?”

Dean raised a hand in greeting. “I do indeed, but we’re both here, so we might as well, right? No sense in wasting an opportunity.”

Frank shrugged. Dean chuckled and joined him by the fence. Truth be told, he wanted to wrap this up quickly. After too long, it was finally moving day from the cabin to the main house. He wanted to get over there and help Amira, but he needed to check in about the five-year plan first.

“I know you’ve got the move today,” Frank commented. “Let’s get this done and get you out of here.”

“Sounds good to me. So!” Dean said, folding his arms across his chest and forcing himself to focus. “Tell me where we are on this.”

Frank nodded. “I’ve reached out to the company your brother and father had flagged for insemination of the herd.”

“Alright, that’s a good start. Did you talk to them about our budget? Do they have a good idea of what kind of bid they’ll be prepared to take?”

“They do,” Frank answered. “And they seem like they’ll get on board.”

Dean nodded, and then followed up with some additional questions about how the service would work, what it would include, how the scheduling would play out. Frank had most of the answers, but there were some questions that he clearly hadn’t considered, and he looked frankly impressed with Dean for having considered all the angles so carefully.

“Didn’t think you knew that much about this side of the business,” he admitted with an apologetic smile.

Dean just shrugged. Yeah, it wasn't his favorite part of ranch work, but it was one that his father had heavily emphasized when he'd been training Dean to take over, so Dean had paid attention, done his homework, and made sure he understood it. He didn't have to like every part of his job in order to be good at it.

Frank considered Dean thoughtfully. He did it for long enough that Dean was squirming uncomfortably by the time he spoke. "Your father would be proud of you, Dean. You know that, don't you?"

"Where did that come from?" What he should have said was thank you. It was the best compliment Dean could think of receiving. But he was so caught off guard by it that he said the first thing that popped into his head.

Frank shrugged and cleared his throat. "Just watching you handle this stuff. I know this isn't your thing, Dean—all the work that goes into improving the stock."

"It does sometimes strike me as a little unnecessary when our cattle are already the best in the state," Dean admitted. "But I know that Dad thought it was important." More important than the areas that seemed more valuable to Dean, like investing in the ranch's infrastructure.

Frank nodded. "Yeah, this was his passion, that's for sure. It's what he saw as the future of the ranch. And he'd be glad to see you carrying it on, just like he would have if he was still with us. You're doing a fine job. Asking all of the right questions. Delegating where you need to. You're a good leader. I think Ray would have seen that, too."

Dean left Frank shortly after that with the next steps tentatively in place. The foreman's words meant more to him than he'd let on, and they stuck with him now. Dean's father had been a hard, exacting man. A man of few words and even rarer praise. He'd also put a lot of faith in Frank while he was alive. If Frank said Dean's dad would be pleased with how Dean was handling things, it was probably true.

And yet, what Frank didn't know was how little interest Dean actually had in the whole thing. Not the ranch. He cared very

deeply for that. He was well aware that the Walters ranch was the legacy his father had passed to him, and the one he would pass to Caleb and Caitlyn when the time came, should they choose to take it. It was the content of the five-year plan itself that couldn't capture his attention. Try as he might to adapt himself, the plan just didn't feel like him. He didn't feel like the breeding program his dad had been so excited about was really the best way to invest their resources. He could get the job done, but in his head, he knew that he was just going through the motions. Nothing about this plan for the future pulled at his heart strings.

No, his heart was somewhere else, and as he approached the door to his little cabin, it was all too clear where. As he pulled up the truck, he saw Carol and Amira in the front yard. Marcus, the high school football player they'd included in their babysitter rotation, was carrying boxes out and setting them down according to Amira's organizational system. Caleb and Caitlyn were bouncing merrily in the contraptions Amira had convinced him to buy in town the other day.

"What've we got here?" Dean grinned at the little group as he climbed out of his truck and slammed the driver's side door.

Amira looked up, her eyes meeting his, and smiled that smile of hers that made his heart skip a beat. "Well, would you look what the cat drug in? I was starting to think you were going to put all of the heavy lifting off on Marcus here."

Marcus' head popped up at the mention of his name. He glanced at Amira and blushed. "Don't let her fool you, Mr. Walters. This lady of yours is plenty strong enough to handle all of this on her own."

Now, it was Amira's turn to blush. She made a point of fiddling with the box in her hands, hefting it onto one hip and walking it to Marcus' truck. Carol, on the other hand, was grinning as she looked from Amira to Dean, and back to Amira again. Dean had a feeling she liked to fancy herself a matchmaker of sorts. It would have annoyed him if not for the fact that he was more than happy to be matched with Amira. He was willing to take all of the help he could get, well-meaning, slightly meddlesome foreman's wives included.

The idea of packing up an entire household and moving was a daunting one, in theory. In actuality, it was shocking how little there was to move. Everything they owned between the four of them fit in the beds of the two trucks. It helped that the bigger pieces of furniture could stay in the cabin—the main house had plenty of couches, beds, and dressers already. The bulkiest things were those belonging to Caleb and Caitlyn, then the boxes and boxes of documents Dean had brought in to help prepare him for his meeting with the business manager. Looking at what actually belonged to him was something of a shock to Dean. He'd been digging in his heels this entire time, insisting that he would continue to live the life he had built for himself on his own terms. Now, he realized that might not have been much of a life to begin with. It was like he'd been frozen before Amira came, treading water while refusing to admit he was standing still. Now, his life was moving forward again, and he had Amira to thank for it. He had her to thank for a lot of things.

The truck was silent as they drove from the cabin to the main house, save for the sound of Caleb and Caitlyn's happy babbling from their car seats in the back. Dean glanced at Amira, then he reached for the hand lying in her lap and took it in his, squeezing gently. He half-expected her to break the contact after a moment or two, but she didn't. Instead, she held his hand more tightly, turning her smile out towards the land passing them by. If Dean had been happier than he was in that moment, he was having a hard time remembering when.

He was a little worried that Vivien would be at the main house waiting for them when the trucks pulled up. The whole family knew it was moving day, and this was exactly the kind of thing Vivien would want to be present for. Her car was absent when they pulled up to the house, though, for which Dean was grateful. He felt guilty about it, really. He loved his sister. They had a complicated relationship, but he wanted that to be better. Maybe now that he was pulling his head out of the sand, it could be. He would just have to get her used to having Amira around, because he certainly hoped she wasn't going anywhere. He needed Vivien to realize that he had room in his heart and in his life for both of them.

They got the boxes inside, thanking Marcus for his help before he left to meet up with friends. Carol agreed to stick around and watch the twins while Amira and Dean got everything sorted. That left just the two of them standing in the large living room with a small pile of boxes and a world of possibilities.

“Well? What do you think?” He looked at Amira, suddenly a little nervous.

She stepped further into the room, considering. “That depends. What are we deciding first?”

“I guess we could go with sleeping arrangements,” he said. “This is a big house with more bedrooms than we can possibly use. You’re welcome to pick out whichever one you like.”

“Where will the twins be?” she asked, always practical. “I should be close by, in case they need something in the night.”

“Um...they’ll actually be with me,” he said. “The master bedroom has a nursery built off of it. It just seemed to make sense for now.”

“So wait,” she said, frowning a little. “Does that mean I’ll have to go through your room to get to them? Or does the nursery have a door into the hallway, too?”

“It has a hall door,” he assured her, and wondered if he should leave it at that. But what the hell—nothing ventured, nothing gained. “But you’re welcome to come through my room, if that’s easier. You’re welcome in there...any time you like.”

He knew where he wanted things to go with Amira, and it didn’t involve a one-time thing followed by the two of them slinking off to their separate bedrooms. It felt too early to suggest the two of them share a room right off the bat, but he wanted to make sure she knew where he wanted her to be. What she decided to do with that information was up to her.

When she turned to face him, he wondered if he was about to get shut down—but she just gave him a shy smile. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she said softly. “Maybe I could take the room next to yours? It would be good to be...close.” She looked away, focusing on one of the boxes. “I’m just glad there are



several bedrooms upstairs. I've been in houses where I was on a different floor from the babies in my care, and running up and down stairs in the middle of the night is no picnic, let me tell you."

"I can believe it," he said, going along with the subject change. She knew where he stood on the bedroom subject, and she didn't seem upset about it. That was good enough for now. "Those stairs are something, let me tell you. I used to love sliding down that banister. My mom was forever telling me I was going to crack my head open."

She elbowed him playfully in the stomach. "And let me guess. You didn't listen."

"No, ma'am," he agreed with a chuckle. "I did not. I've got the scar on the inside of my lip to prove it."

"Of course you do," she laughed. "I bet it wasn't the last time you did, it, either."

He shook his head, giving her a playful grin. "It wasn't. Me and that banister have a complicated relationship, for sure. But I'll tell you what. It looks impressive when it's all wound with garlands and lights for the Christmas season."

"I bet it does," she said softly. "I bet this whole place is simply beautiful."

He swallowed hard. The question was still unanswered as to whether she'd be around to see the place then. He knew what he wanted the answer to be, but part of him knew he was playing with fire. The longer they went on acting like a legitimate couple, the harder it was going to be on him if it all fell apart. But for right now, he couldn't find it within him to care. He was happy. He was happier than he had been in a very long time.

Friday night was the first night of the Strawberry Festival. According to Dean, the festivities kicked off with the giant potluck dinner in the church's main hall. Amira was under the impression that practically everyone in town was going to be there, which meant she was going to get more stares from curious locals. It made her feel a little like an exhibit in the zoo, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. What did have her nervous was seeing Vivien tonight. The two of them hadn't crossed paths since the unfortunate confrontation about Amira's redecorating. Amira was kind of dreading seeing her again. Especially with everyone from town there to watch it happen.

"Nervous?" Dean asked as he guided the truck into a parking spot along Main Street. The church's parking lot was already completely full and there was a steady stream of people walking down the street towards the potluck as well.

Amira laughed, hoping it sounded carefree. "Who, me? No way. I never get nervous, Dean. I know my way around a potluck."

Still, as they approached the church doors, Amira's heart started hammering harder in her chest. She wondered if it might have been better for her to sit this one out. This was Vivien's night. The debut of all of the hard work she had put into the Strawberry Festival. Amira didn't want her presence to take away from the woman's enjoyment of her success.

And it was most definitely a success. The place was packed, and everyone seemed to be having a great time. At the head of the room, Amira saw Vivien, her face flushed and radiant. Clearly, her first major event was going off without a hitch.

The crowds parted a little and Josie came hurrying towards them. Her eyes were wide and to Amira, she looked a little harried. "Well, this is certainly a turnout! And fair warning,

people have been hounding me left and right about the babies, wanting to be added to your babysitter rotation.”

Amira cringed at the look on Josie’s face. It was exactly what Amira had been worried about. Obviously, Josie would have loved to be asked to watch the babies. Amira could see the hurt in the woman’s eyes. She was likely hoping that Dean would realize his mistake and tell her that she had first dibs. Unfortunately, he wasn’t picking up on the same vibe.

“Well, I think we’ve got it covered for now, actually, but it’s nice to know we’ve got more resources available if need be.”

“Yes,” Josie said, her voice even thinner than it had been moments before. “I suppose it is. Now, your sister was looking for you. Go say hello, will you? I think she’d appreciate your feedback after that mess last week.”

Amira cringed again as Dean gave her a kiss on the cheek and headed into the crowd towards Vivien. Josie hadn’t been at the house during her little showdown with Vivien, but of course she’d shown up not much later, ready to help prepare the family dinner. The meal had been more than a little strained. Amira was sure Josie had heard Vivien’s side of the story and wondered what the older woman thought. Amira liked Josie very much. She hated the idea of the older woman disapproving of her behavior or misreading her intentions. It was a good reminder of why she created her rules in the first place.

She shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, painfully aware of the attention she was getting without Dean there to act as a buffer. She was worried that when she looked at Josie, she would see naked dislike there, but she had to look anyway. At the moment, she was the closest thing to a friend Amira had.

“Josie?” she said tentatively. “I want you to know, I’m sorry about what happened at the house. I honestly didn’t mean to step on anyone’s toes.”

To Amira’s surprise, Josie smiled and linked an arm through hers. “Please, you’ve got nothing to be sorry for. Vivien is my daughter, and I love her, but she can be a bit on the controlling

side. That house needed to have new life breathed into it, and you did a lovely job. It looks beautiful.”

“Thank you. Really. I’m glad you think so.” She was surprised at how touched she was by Josie’s genuine warmth.

Josie patted her hand warmly. “You’re very welcome. Now, let’s see if we can keep back the masses with ourselves and the little ones intact.”



The potluck passed in a blur, and Dean was relieved when it was over. Not that it went poorly—quite the contrary, in fact. Vivien had run a tight ship. There was enough food to feed everyone and send some leftovers with people as well. Dean was confident that his sister would take care of everything else for the festival just as beautifully as she had this, which meant one less thing for him to worry about.

But as nice as the potluck had been, he was glad to be at home with the people he most wanted to be spending his time with. It was already the witching hour for Caitlyn and Caleb. They were fast asleep by the time the four of them returned to the house. Amira had been worried that sleeping in the truck would affect them going down for the night, but that proved unfounded. Amira and Dean, each cradling a baby close, transferred them to their cribs without so much as a whisper of waking.

They moved into the living room and Amira settled onto the couch while Dean poured them each a glass of wine. He felt like he had hardly spoken to her all night. Not that he hadn’t seen her. He hadn’t been able to keep his eyes off of her, finding her across the room no matter where she was or who was around her. He’d been proud of how easily everyone took to her, and he’d loved watching her and his mother become friendlier. But selfishly, he’d been waiting to get her home and have her all to himself basically since they’d left the house.

He’d wanted her since the first time he’d laid eyes on her, and that desire just kept growing stronger. His hand shook as he set her glass down on the coffee table in front of her. When he

settled down next to her and she rested a hand on his thigh, he was so keyed up that he jumped.

“Easy there, cowboy,” she said with a laugh, snuggling in closer to him. “Does something have you spooked?”

He cleared his throat, taking his time before answering. Finally, he turned to face her, taking her hands in his. “Truthfully? Yes. You do, a little.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Me? But why? What did I do?”

“It’s nothing you did—it’s just who you are. You’re amazing, and I want you so damn much.”

He had no way of knowing how she’d respond to that. The lines between nanny and employer had been blurred for a while, but by ignoring it, they’d bought themselves time. Now, he was putting it all on the line. If they crossed this line and the night ended the way he wanted it to, there was absolutely no way they could ever go back.

She didn’t say a word. Instead, she moved to take his glass out of his hand, her eyes never leaving his. Her fingers brushed against his, her leg pressing against his as she moved in even closer. She was wearing a sweet little sundress and as she moved, it rode up so that her entire thigh was exposed.

“Please,” she said, the words coming out in a breathy sigh. “Please, Dean, just kiss me. It’s all I can think about. It’s the only thing I want.”

Dean pulled her in towards him in one fluid motion so that she landed on his lap, her strong, supple thighs on either side of him as she pressed her body firmly against his. Her hands moved to his hair, and he closed his eyes, leaning into her soft touch. God, he needed this. He needed *her*. He hadn’t realized just how much until this very moment, but now it was the only thing that mattered in his world.

She kissed his forehead lightly, then moved down and kissed each of his temples. She moved down further still, finally finding his mouth. The kissed they’d shared before had held at least a sliver of hesitation, but there was none of that now. Her

lips parted when they found his and she gasped as he teased his tongue into her open, waiting mouth.

“I want you,” he gasped, pulling back to look at her beautiful face, to drink her in. “Do you know how much?”

She shifted her hips in his lap and gave him a wicked smile. The kind that made his jeans feel too tight. “Show me.”

He stood up, lifting her into his arms. She gasped and wrapped her legs more tightly around his waist, arching her back as he started up the stairs towards the master bedroom. Dean let out a husky laugh, trying to talk, walk, and kiss her all at the same time. “Just watch.”

“Please,” she said breathlessly, shutting her eyes when his lips found her delicate neck. “Oh, God, please, Dean. I need it.”

He pushed the bedroom door open with one foot, glancing at the nursery door to make sure it was firmly shut before setting her on the bed. He took a moment to say a little thank you to the universe for the nursery’s white noise machine that Amira had talked him into on their baby shopping spree. Then his full attention was back on her. How could it not be? She had taken the elastic band out of her hair so that it fell loose and slightly messy around her shoulders. Now, she looked at him with wide, shining eyes, her arms up in the air.

“Yes, please,” he said. She shimmied her dress up higher so that it rested up around her hips and he took the hem in his hands, pulling it easily up over her head. He tossed it into the corner of the room.

He bent to kiss her again, deeply, running his hands over her newly exposed skin. Everywhere his hands landed, she shivered, his calloused fingers painting swaths of goosebumps across her rib cage, her taut belly, the perfect swell of her breasts. She reached for his shirt, trying to unbutton it and pull it off of him at the same time. From where she sat on the edge of the bed, with him standing between her parted legs, she could accomplish neither, and he laughed.

“Would you like me to take this off, ma’am? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Oh, yes,” she said breathlessly. “Very much, definitely yes.”

Dean was pretty sure he'd never gotten out of a shirt faster in his life and it still didn't feel fast enough. He shuddered when she put her hands on him, exploring his skin and the light trail of hair leading her fingertips down to his belt buckle. She fumbled a little when she got there, and he guided her fingers, helping her undo the clasp. The zipper, she managed just fine all on her own.

“Are you sure?” he asked then, watching her face intently. It took everything in him to stop and ask that question, but he had to. He had to be sure that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

She flashed that devious grin again and grabbed him by the hips. “I'm more than sure. I want you. Now.”

She scooted back on the bed, laying herself down as he lowered himself on top of her, pausing only for long enough to fumble at the bedside table and get a condom. When he finally guided himself inside of her, she gasped, clinging to him and biting down on his shoulder to keep from making too much noise. He wanted to take his time, to savor every moment, each touch, but the pulsing need in him was too urgent. They moved together faster and faster, her hips coming up to meet each thrust as if they were made to be together this way. It was a high Dean could only keep riding, until he saw stars and his entire body shook with waves of limitless pleasure. The entire world contracted, and he was aware of nothing but his own bliss and Amira writhing and bucking beneath him, crying out again and again. When it was over, he collapsed onto the bed next to her and she nestled into the crook of his arm. The fit was perfect, as if she was always meant to be there.

*This*, he thought to himself as he drifted off to sleep, taking in the sweet, clean scent of her hair. *This is all I want. If I can just keep this, I can shoulder all of the weight in the world.*

Amira was good at establishing routines, and doing so quickly, with minimal fuss. Children needed routines to feel safe and secure, familiar rhythms to see them through their days. The first thing Amira did when she took a new job was to settle the family into a schedule that worked.

The Walters ranch was no different. She got up when Dean did, at the first light of dawn, so he could help with the twins' morning feeding. Then she burped the kids while Dean made breakfast for the adults, which they ate together while Caitlyn and Caleb watched and giggled. When breakfast was done, Dean went off to work, and Amira packed the twins up for their morning walk.

The routine was as familiar to Amira as the back of her hand. She'd set up breakfast routines with dozens of families. But it was the unexpected, unplanned moments that made her heart race—such as when she was warming the twins' formula and Dean's elbow bumped hers, resulting in a spark of static that made them both laugh. When one of the twins spat up on Dean's arm, and Amira dabbed his shirt clean without even thinking. When he kissed his babies on his way out the door, then bent to kiss her, and she forgot how to breathe.

"I'm stopping by the store later," he said, tucking a loose strand of hair back behind her ear. "Anything we need?"

Amira blinked, dazed. She could still taste his kiss, sweet from French toast, and she still felt the heat of his lips against hers. It wasn't fair, asking questions and expecting an answer from her, when she was still floating up on cloud nine. Cloud nine smelled of babies and coffee and sugar, and it felt like a warm hug, one she wished would last forever.

"Diapers," she managed, when she'd gotten her breath—and her mental capacity—back. "We're on our last pack."

Dean's eyes widened. "Really? Didn't I just get three packs?"



“And you’ve got two babies. What can I say?” As if on cue, Caleb screwed up his face. He let out a low burble, the one Dean called his brown warning, and clenched his tiny fists as tight as they would go. “Maybe get six-packs this time. Buy out the whole store.”

Dean chuckled at that and reached out to smooth his hand over Caleb’s downy hair. “It’s okay, little man.” He grabbed his jacket and headed out the door. Moments later, Amira watched his truck pull away, past the gap in the new curtains they’d picked out together. Helping Dean move, helping him decorate, had almost felt like...moving in together. She’d let the fantasy take her as they hung the curtains, picturing herself opening them on fall leaves, then snow. On the spring of a bright new year, the twins starting to crawl.

Caleb gurgled again, and Amira wrinkled her nose. She carried him to the changing table she’d helped pick out, patiently fielding Dean’s questions on which table was safest, which was easiest to clean. That was just one more thing she loved about Dean, that he was thoughtful, that he asked the right questions. A lot of new parents just followed trends, or they picked what looked easiest, or what matched their décor. Dean wasn’t like that. Dean...

Her thoughts stuttered to a halt. *Just one more thing she loved about Dean?* When had the L-word snuck into her head?

“I *appreciate* him,” she muttered, wiping Caleb clean. “I appreciate your daddy. Yes, I do. Yes, we do. You know what else I appreciate? All this fresh country air. Want to go for a walk once you’re all clean?”

Caleb kicked and squirmed. Caitlyn giggled from her carrier. Amira checked her diaper when she was done with Caleb’s, but Caitlyn was dry, as Amira had guessed she would be. One of Caitlyn’s routines was saving her bathroom breaks for places with no bathrooms, like halfway through a walk. She’d grin and chortle as Amira changed her, as though she understood and took pleasure in the idea of Amira having to makeshift a changing station and then carrying her dirty diaper all the way home.

Amira swaddled the twins and they set out, heading for Amira's favorite trek—the first one Dean had shown her, and easily the prettiest. It also ran by the river, which would make a nice spot for them to stop and take a break—and change Caitlyn's inevitable dirty diaper.

She took out her phone and snapped a photo of the sunlight dancing on the water, the dark shapes of fish lazing underneath. She took photos of Caitlyn and Caleb, as well—for Dean, she told herself, so he could share in their day. Not for herself, so she'd remember this place and these moments. She lay on her back with the twins on her chest, and gazed up dreamily at the endless blue sky.

Caitlyn started fussing, and Amira sat up and changed her. By the time she was done, the sun was hiding in the clouds. Amira frowned up at it, then down at the twins.

“What do you two think? Does it look like rain?”

Caitlyn blew a raspberry. Caleb's eyes went round. Amira laughed and secured them back in their pouches, Caitlyn strapped to her front and Caleb to her back. The rain held off just long enough for her to make it back to the house, scurrying up the porch steps as the first drops began to fall. One of them splattered on Caitlyn's nose, and she looked up, startled, mouth wide with surprise. Amira sensed this moment could go one of two ways—Caitlyn laughing or bursting into tears.

“Down came the rain and washed the spider out,” said Amira, and thumbed the droplet away. Caitlyn chose laughter, and Caleb joined in. Amira reached into her pocket and dug out her key, and turned it in the keyhole, and her lips went tight. The door wasn't locked. Had she forgotten to lock it earlier? She thought back to when she'd left, and she was certain she'd remembered. She recalled how she'd dropped the key after turning it in the lock and had then had to bend to retrieve it, with Caleb fussing at the sudden dip. Amira turned to check if Dean's truck was back, but the driveway was empty. Maybe he'd parked around the side?

Amira opened the door, but she didn't go inside. She stood in the doorway and peered down the hall. "Dean? Are you in here?"

No one replied, but the house didn't feel empty. Amira felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck.

"Carol? Is that you? Josie? You here?"

A soft sound drifted down from somewhere upstairs, a sound Amira knew only too well. Someone was crying and trying to hide it, someone who'd probably thought they'd be able to get their tears out all alone. Someone with their own key, so that meant family.

"Vivien? You up there? Is it okay if I come up?"

Nobody answered. Amira started up the stairs. She could clearly hear sniffing now, and someone rustling around. Trying to straighten up, probably, before Amira barged in. She paused outside the nursery door, not wanting to intrude on a private moment but not feeling right about just walking away. She knocked softly instead, and called out again.

"Hello? Someone in there?"

"It's me," came a choked voice. "Vivien. You might as well come in."

Amira let herself in. Vivien was curled in the old rocking chair. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't want to disturb you. I just wasn't sure who—"

"Well, it's me. You've caught me." She laughed bitterly. "*Caught* me, like—like I'm some intruder. Like I'm trespassing in the house I grew up in. Like I don't belong here, and somehow you do? Did you pick out these cribs? That new changing table?"

Amira ignored Vivien's barbed questions. She could see the woman was upset, and lashing out. "I just wanted to check and make sure you're okay. Can I get you something? Make you some tea?"

Vivien's lips twisted into a scowl, but whatever retort she'd been about to fire back, she let it go on a long, harsh exhale.

“Maybe just...do you think I could hold one of the twins?” She stretched out her arms, and Amira’s heart broke. This room had been a nursery before she and Dean had moved in, an old crib along one wall, a rickety changing table against the other. They’d moved out all the old stuff and put it in storage—old bookshelves, old mobiles, old toys in their box—all but the rocking chair tucked in the corner. All Vivien’s memories, if Amira guessed right. She unstrapped Caitlyn and let Vivien take her, and sat down across from her on the new bench Dean had bought.

“Was this where you grew up?” she asked, her voice gentle.

Vivien sniffed, settling Caitlyn on her shoulder. “And where I raised my kids, right here in this room. I’d come in here and rock them to sleep in this chair. Or just rock myself to sleep, if I was having one of those days.”

“And you saw all the changes, and—”

“No. That’s not it.” Vivien drew in a deep breath and rubbed Caitlyn’s back. Amira unstrapped Caleb and bounced him on her knee, waiting to see what Vivien would say next.

“I won’t say I love what you’ve done with the place, because I don’t,” Vivien said, finally. “But that’s not what upset me, or why I’m here. It’s—can you fish my phone out and tell me what you see?” She nodded at her purse, discarded on the bench. Amira tugged it over and pulled out Vivien’s phone. Almost immediately, it buzzed in her hand, and a voicemail notification popped up on the screen.

“You’ve missed a few messages,” she said carefully.

“I’ve missed a *million* messages.” Vivien buried her face in Caitlyn’s sweet-smelling hair. “It’s the Strawberry Festival. It’s all piling up. I’ve got the planning committee calling me nonstop—which red says “strawberries,” for the welcome banner? How many tarts and how many pies? And then there’s the dance...it all has to be perfect. Our venue fell through, and I can’t find a new one. The committee’s going crazy, calling nonstop—”

“Let me help,” said Amira. She said it without thinking, the words tumbling out before she could stop herself. Vivien’s eyes narrowed.

“How would you help?”

“However you need me to. What can I do?”

Vivien held Caitlyn closer, rocking in her chair. “Got a time machine?” she asked. “Everything’s changing, moving too fast. That’s why I ran back here to have my meltdown. I just wanted to feel safe again, like my life made sense. Like my home hadn’t gone anywhere, even if—even if—” She blinked back fresh tears, and Amira understood. Vivien had lost her brother and her father and the house she called home, all in the space of two years. The Strawberry Festival probably felt like all she had left to hold on to, a thread of tradition mooring her to her past. Of course she needed it to be perfect—and of course she had taken on too much.

“You could take over the dance,” said Vivien, with the ghost of a smile. “I’ve done the hard parts, the music, the decorations. All you’d have to do is book the venue and manage the setup. Oh, and find chaperones, and space for the kids. And—”

“I’ve got it,” said Amira, and reached for Vivien’s hand. She took it and squeezed, smiling a little when she felt Vivien relax. “Just add me to that group chat that’s blowing up your phone. I’ll talk to the committee, and you’ll see. We’ll make magic.”

“I had my doubts about you,” said Vivien, with a shaky laugh. “But I’m trusting you with this. If you drop the ball on me, I’ll —”

“Smash a pie in my face?”

“Strawberry-rhubarb. The messiest kind.” Vivien locked eyes with Amira, and they both burst out laughing. “I’m joking, of course. But I’ll bake you a pie. Hell, I’ll bake you ten pies. Seriously, you’re saving my life here.”

Amira’s heart glowed at that, and she felt warm all over. It felt good to be needed, and to have a new friend.

“The refreshment tables go down the *back* wall,” said Ethel. “That’s how we’ve always done it, year after year.”

“Not this year,” said Wilma, another of the *Grand Dames*. “The kids’ll be back there, running in and out. They’ll knock over the punch bowl, and we’ll have a sticky floor. I can’t think of much worse than a sticky dance floor.”

“But the room will be lopsided, with the refreshments to one side. We’ll do it like always, with—”

Amira nudged Josie, who had emerged from the back room with a box of red streamers. “I think we’ve got a war brewing. The Battle of the Snack Tables.”

“They’ll figure it out,” said Josie, and raised a brow as Ethel’s voice rose an octave. “Or maybe they won’t.”

“Maybe you should step in?” Amira took the box from her and tipped her a wink. “You have experience, right? Wrangling the *Grand Dames*?”

Josie hesitated a moment, then drew herself up. She slapped on a big smile, strode across the room, and slid between the combatants before their claws could come the rest of the way out. “You’re both right,” she said, her tone warm and cheery. “How about a compromise? We’ll have the punch table on one side of the room, and the strawberry cookies can go on the other. Then the sides match, and people will circulate more, having to go from table to table.”

Ethel and Wilma both rounded on her, and Amira braced herself for a two-front onslaught. But first Ethel smiled, and then Wilma nodded.

“Thank God you’re back,” she said.

“Good thing,” said Ethel. “Wilma would’ve had everything all out of whack, streamers on one side, folks on the other...”

Amira tuned out their bickering and set to work on the streamers, draping the DJ stand in swags of bright red and white. Grand Dames aside, things were coming together. She'd found a great venue in a local ballroom dance studio, the owner eager to rent her space cheap in anticipation of the publicity the festival would bring. The studio had a beautiful green room in back, which made the perfect setting for Amira's impromptu daycare. She had reached out to the babysitters she and Dean had recruited for the twins, and they'd jumped at the chance to earn some extra money by managing the kids, keeping them entertained while their parents cut a rug.

"You're doing a great job," said Josie, drifting back to her side. "This space is perfect, and the decorations look great."

"The decorations are all Vivien." Amira brushed sparkles off her sleeve. "Honestly, she deserves most of the credit overall. All I've really done is tie up loose ends." She leaned on the table to survey the room. Vivien had gone all-in with the strawberry theme, and the walls were festooned with red, green, and pink. Foil strawberry cutouts hung from the ceiling, casting bright shards of color across the walls and floor. The cutouts looked handmade, and Amira suspected Vivien herself had sat up all night, working her hands raw getting them perfect. It made her feel tired, just thinking about it.

"You're frowning," said Josie. "Everything okay?"

Amira laughed, a little tightly. "I was just thinking, this is a *lot*. Not just the dance, but the whole festival. It's too much for one person to take on themselves. What is it with this family and trying to do it all? Vivien with this festival, Dean with the ranch..."

Josie's smile widened. "Why *not* try, when you know you've got backup? You're never alone here—that's the beauty of this place. There's always somebody to catch you if you fall. Someone behind the scenes, keeping an eye on things just in case."

Amira stared at her, surprised. "You've been here all along? Making sure the big dance goes off without a hitch?"

“Not me,” said Josie. “It’s been you, this time.” Her lips quirked, and she winked. “Welcome to the family.”

Heat rose in Amira’s cheeks, and she felt her mouth go dry. She fumbled for some response, but none came to mind, and by the time she’d untied her tongue, Josie had walked away. *Welcome to the family*—what had Josie meant? Did she think Amira was staying? That she and Dean were...what? Boyfriend and girlfriend? Partners in crime? Amira felt dizzy as she realized she could see it: breakfasts with Dean stretching year after year, watching the twins grow and learn to talk. Teaching them to read and write, swim, and ride bikes. Wedding bells, maybe. A battalion of children, enough to fill the house. Birthdays and Christmases. Laughter and tears. The images came unbidden, one after another, and Amira bit her lip to stop herself smiling. It wasn’t the future she’d planned for herself. And as wonderful as it seemed in her imagining, she was sure the reality would be messier, more complicated. She’d set up her life around *not* letting things get messy, not letting herself get attached to something she couldn’t keep. Trying for more here would be a huge risk—especially since Dean hadn’t said he wanted it, nor had he asked her to stay. He might yet lose interest once he’d found his groove with the twins. When her usefulness ran out—

“Amira? Red-striped or green?” Ethel waved two handfuls of bunting at her. Amira hurried to help her, glad for the distraction. She buried herself in the business of turning the dance studio into an enchanted strawberry patch, and before she knew it, the day had flown by.

The others had left and she stood alone in the middle of the glittering room, head cocked to one side. Something was missing, but what?

“Looking for these?”

Amira whirled, stifling a yelp. Dean stood framed in the doorway, pushing the twins in their new double stroller. He was trying to balance two big boxes on the handles of the stroller, without great success. Amira darted forward to catch the box on top before it could topple.



“What are these?”

“Your disco balls.” Dean set down the other box and bent to check on the twins, both sweetly sleeping in their turtle onesies. “Vivien called in a panic because the store said they’d deliver them, but then their driver got sick. I told her I’d go pick them up.”

“Disco balls.” Amira pulled out her pen knife and cut the first box open. She laughed in delight when she saw its contents: a bright pink disco ball, the biggest she’d ever seen. “How do you install this? Just hang it from the ceiling?”

“You’ve got to mount the motor so it’ll spin. Don’t worry, I’ve got it. You take a break.”

Dean went in the back and came out with a ladder. Amira watched nervously as he climbed up with the motor, and leaned back dangerously to affix it to the ceiling. She came up behind him and held onto his legs, feeling silly as she did it. If he fell, he’d just flatten her. She couldn’t hold up his weight. Still, she held on, and Dean chuckled fondly. Soon, the first motor was up, and Amira passed Dean the ball. He screwed it into position and flipped the switch, and it rotated slowly, showering them both in pink light. Amira laughed happily and clapped her hands.

“I thought it would look cheesy,” she said. “But it looks...”

Dean raised a brow. “*Really* cheesy?”

Amira slapped at him. “Enchanted,” she said. “I mean, look at this place. It’s just lights and foil paper, and about a thousand yards of streamers. But it feels like we’re floating on some... pink disco cloud.”

Dean smiled at that. “I feel like I’m back at my tenth grade school dance.”

Amira’s face must have fallen, because Dean’s did too. He jumped down off the ladder, his brow creased with concern.

“I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong? I know you’ve worked hard on this. I wasn’t trying to mock you.”

“It’s not that,” said Amira. “Just...remember I mentioned I was sick as a kid? I never went to a school dance, not even my senior prom.” Her eyes stung and she blinked, surprised by how much it still hurt to remember all the life she’d missed out on. So many milestones and teenage rites of passage.

“It’s never too late,” said Dean. “I mean, we’re way past high school, but we can still...hold on.” He dug out his phone and tapped a few times on the screen, setting it on the ladder as a song began to play.

Amira smiled. “Is that ‘A Moment Like This’?”

“They played it at my prom.” Dean held out his hand. “Come on, let’s dance.”

Amira felt self-conscious, but she took his hand. Dean pulled her close to him and set his other hand on her hip. He swayed with her slowly, shuffling his feet, head angled towards her so their foreheads almost touched. Her whole body tingled, and she ached for a kiss. She leaned in closer so her lips grazed his ear.

“What kind of dance is this?”

“The slow kind,” said Dean, his voice a deep purr. “The kind where you dance so close the world melts away, and it’s just the two of you. The dance you’ll remember when you’re old and gray.”

Amira shivered, so close to Dean now she was breathing his air. Pink disco lights danced across his face, highlighting his cheekbones and the bow of his lips. He was right about one thing. She’d never forget this dance as long as she lived. No matter what happened between her and Dean, she’d always have this moment, this memory. She looked up and saw strawberries cut from red foil, and spinning pink stars spread across the ceiling. Her lips parted in a gasp of delight, and Dean surged in and claimed them, his mouth hot on hers. The kiss couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, but for Amira, time seemed to stop. She hung in that moment and felt it stretch out, filling her heart with pink disco light. She thought she might burst with it, but Caleb cut in, burbling loudly as he came awake.

“He wants to dance too,” said Dean, breaking the kiss only enough for the words to come out, not retreating an inch. His lips moved against hers, and Amira felt him smile.

“We should all dance,” she said. She pulled back slowly and let go of Dean’s hand, and she felt him watching as she went to the stroller. He was smiling when she stood with the twins in her arms, and that smile only grew when he took Caitlyn from her. The two of them danced, holding the babies aloft, and the twins shrieked and giggled and waved their arms around, trying to grab at the dancing lights.

“I needed this,” said Dean, when they ran out of steam, and found seats on the floor with the twins in their laps. Amira glanced at him and saw he looked tired.

“Long day?” she asked.

“The longest,” sighed Dean. He leaned back and closed his eyes. For a time, he was quiet. He rubbed Caitlyn’s back slowly, as though gathering his thoughts. “It’s not just today,” he said. “I’ve been struggling a while now. Trying to see where I fit. The ranch was Dad’s dream, and Jackson’s as well. It was never mine, but now...I don’t know. I can’t let their dream die, but I don’t like the thought of killing mine, either. I want to try and honor all of it, but what if I can’t? What if it’s too much, and it all falls apart? Mom and Vivien would be heartbroken if I lost the ranch. If I—if...what?”

“Nothing,” said Amira, realizing she was smiling. “I’ve just never heard you say that much, all in one mouthful.”

Dean laughed. “I guess not, huh? Guess I just had to get it all out there.”

“I’m here for you,” said Amira. “I understand how it hurts, feeling like you’re letting everyone down.”

“I can’t believe *you*’ve ever let anyone down.”

Amira’s smile curdled into a grimace. “I always felt like I was. Growing up, I mean, I always felt like a burden. No one expected anything from me, as sick as I was, and I always wished they would. I wished Dad would get mad at me if I got a bad grade, or that Mom would make me do chores to earn

my allowance. I wanted to feel useful, like I was a *good* part of their lives that made them happy instead of just something that made them anxious and stressed. I wanted to feel needed, but...”

Dean’s hand had found hers, and he twined their fingers together. “Is that why you do what you do, scooping up frazzled parents and setting us on our feet? Is it so you can feel needed?”

Amira frowned. She’d never thought of it that way, but she guessed Dean was right. She *did* feel useful, doing what she did. Being where she was needed most, for the time she was needed. Was she doing it for the families, or to fill the hole in her heart?

Caleb squirmed in her arms, and she bounced him on her knee. Maybe she and Dean both had some thinking to do about what they really wanted.

Dean was out in the back fields mending gaps in the fence when his phone buzzed in his pocket, an annoying *burrurr*. He almost ignored it, then he remembered the kids. He wouldn't easily forgive himself if the twins needed him, and he blew them off for an old broken fence.

"Hello?"

"Dean, how are you doing?" He'd picked up without checking the caller, and was surprised to hear Francis on the other end. "I'm just passing through town, and I thought of you. Didn't feel right not to say howdy."

Dean frowned. "Passing through? You're not staying for the festival?"

"Festival? No, I was fishing a couple of towns over. Tried a new guide, but I've got to be honest. He wasn't you. The trip was a bust. I barely filled a cooler, and he wouldn't stop gabbing."

Dean made a sympathetic sound. "Sounds like a pain. As long as you're in town, though, you should check out the Strawberry Festival. It's a lot of fun, and they've got pie."

Francis made a humming sound. "Strawberries, huh?"

"And if you're still here on Sunday, I'll take you fishing."

"It's a nice offer," said Francis. "But I don't want to impose. I'm sure you're busy, with your new babies and all."

"You wouldn't be imposing. You could come by for breakfast and meet the kids, then we'll head out while the fish are still biting. I'll still be home in time for tummy time."

"In time for *what*, now?"

Dean thought about explaining, and just shook his head. Caitlyn and Caleb were infinitely fascinating to him, with the tiny changes they went through from day-to-day, but he didn't

guess Francis would share his fascination. “It’s a kid thing,” he said. “They’ve got their routines.”

“If you say so,” said Francis. “Okay, sounds good. I’ll check out the festival and swing by first thing Sunday.”

Dean hung up smiling. Fishing with Francis sounded like a great relaxer. He might even take the opportunity to pick the man’s brain a little for advice on the five-year plan. Francis was a hugely successful businessman, after all. But despite having that to look forward to, the day dragged on long, Murphy’s law out in force. A water pipe burst under the cow shed, forcing an emergency call to the plumber. With the water out, Dean had to fill the cows’ troughs by hand, and one of them stumbled and trod on his foot. His work boot kept her from crushing his toes, but he still wound up with a nasty black bruise. He was an hour late getting home to the kids, and missed out on tummy time, and story time too.

Dean was still off his groove when Sunday rolled around, feeling haggard and run-down from a week of playing catch-up on not enough sleep. The fishing went well, with the caddis flies hatching and the fish rising to get them, but Dean’s thoughts kept drifting back to the ranch. The plumbing didn’t go out every week, but there was always *something*—a downed fence, a foot-and-mouth outbreak. Some fresh disaster only he could handle.

“You’re distracted,” said Francis, when they stopped for a break.

Dean pulled a face. “What makes you say that?”

“I’ve filled a cooler, and you’ve caught one fish. That, and you’re sitting there staring into space.”

“It’s just been one of those weeks,” said Dean. He picked a dead leaf off his waders and flicked it aside. “Hey, I was wondering, could I run a few things by you? I could really use your business expertise.”

“Go ahead,” said Francis. “What’s on your mind?”

“It’s the ranch.” Dean scratched his chin. “I’ve come to sort of a crossroads, and I’m not sure what to do. I’m about to lock

into a new five-year plan, and I've got a pretty good one ready to go. But that's Dad and Jackson's plan, and...I don't know. Everyone's telling me it's the right way to go. But five years is a long time. A big commitment. I have my own ideas I want to try out. If I go with Dad's plan, the budget's locked into cattle improvement—insemination, strengthening the stock. There won't be money left over to update the infrastructure, which is what I think the ranch really needs.”

Francis tilted his head thoughtfully. “I can't say I know much about the cattle business, but unless you're having quality issues with the stock you have, I'd say focusing on infrastructure makes sense. No sense having a great herd of cattle living in a barn that's falling apart, or relying on outdated systems or equipment. If infrastructure's what you want to go with, I think you should go for it. Do what feels right.”

Dean exhaled through his nose. “If I was doing what felt right, I'd still be running a fly-fishing business.”

“Well then, why aren't you?” Francis shot back. He sounded genuinely curious. “I know you have the ranch, but you've got people who work for you, right? What's stopping you from taking a bit of a step back—keeping up with the ranch, but picking back up your fly-fishing business, at least on a part-time basis? Have you considered what that might look like?”

It was ridiculous to even think of not running the ranch full-time and giving it his complete focus, of course. It was what his family expected of him—what Dad would have wanted, what Jackson would have done, if he'd survived. It was Dean's duty to carry the load. But still, if they were just talking hypotheticals...“It's actually funny you should say that, because I *had* been thinking about maybe doing something a little different. Maybe look into setting up some guest cabins for dude ranching, tap into the tourist business.”

Saying it aloud felt almost embarrassing, like he was revealing too much of himself. But Amira had been so encouraging when he'd brought up the idea, and he wanted to get a sense of what Francis thought. The older man was so much more experienced than Dean in business matters. If he thought it

was a bad idea, then that would be that—Dean would put the idea away for good. But if Francis thought it had potential, maybe it was something Dean could seriously consider later on, down the road. Once he'd gotten a better handle on running the ranch and could, perhaps, find a way to carve out some more time for his personal interests.

Francis nodded slowly, as though mulling that over. "How's this area for tourism? You see a lot of traffic?"

"You saw the Strawberry Festival," said Dean. "We have that every year, and every year it gets bigger. Vivien was just telling me there were folks who came down from Canada to see it, picking our little festival for their family vacation. And dude ranching is big here. It does pretty well. And there are trails on this property that are perfect for hiking, and for trail riding—I've already got the horses."

"And you've got the river," said Francis. "The fishing here's great."

"That it is." Dean leaned back on his hands and watched the river go by, slow and lazy in its banks. "If I built a few cabins, I could sell fishing vacations, everything included. The folks I used to get would stay in town, or they'd rough it like you used to, bringing out a tent and sleeping in the woods. But if I could offer a bed-and-breakfast, don't you think that would sweeten the deal?"

"Sure would for me," said Francis, stretching. "These bones of mine aren't getting any younger."

"I'm not thinking of it right away," Dean hastened to add. He didn't want to give Francis the wrong idea. "The ranch needs me too much at the moment. But later on, maybe. If...if you think it's a solid idea."

Francis just shrugged. "It sounds solid to me, but ranches aren't really my area of expertise. Talk me through it—how does an operation like this run?"

Dean ran through the numbers with him, explaining what went into the ranching business as simply as he could manage. Francis had plenty of questions. It wasn't until he noticed how



dry his throat was that Dean became aware of how long he'd been talking.

"Anyway, that's about the gist of it," he concluded, kicking himself a little for running on like that. Francis had been polite enough to act interested, but he couldn't possibly want to know all the nuts and bolts of running a ranch. Why would he? It had nothing to do with his life. Time to change the subject. "How's your family doing?" he asked. "Your daughter get married?"

"She did," said Francis. "But not in Hawaii. She got sick of all the planning and threw in the towel. Had the wedding in my backyard, out by the willows."

"Congratulations," said Dean. "Willows, sounds pretty."

Francis puffed up a little. "The photographer came up afterwards, and asked if he could rent my yard for engagement shoots. He's done two already, and booked two more." He nudged Dean's arm; a quick, rough jostle. "Speaking of wedding bells, what's with you and that nanny?"

Dean nearly choked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I saw you two at breakfast, making goo-goo eyes over the syrup."

"We weren't—"

"You were. You're doing it right now, grinning from ear to ear with your face all lit up just from thinking about her."

Dean turned his head away to hide his smile. Breakfasts with Amira had gotten him through his tough week, and today's had been special: she'd cooked for him so he could feed the twins. She'd sensed his distress at losing out on kid time with all the ranch issues lately, and switched up their routine to give him what he needed.

"I swear, the two of you looked almost...domestic." Francis jostled him again. "Come on, you can tell me. Has she got you broken?"

"I wouldn't say 'broken,'" said Dean. "I'm still in one piece."

"But she's special, right? More than a fling?"

Dean frowned. He'd known Francis a long time, going on ten years. They hadn't been close at first, but they'd talked, exchanged gossip. Francis knew Dean had been single through all their acquaintance, a fling here and there, but nothing more serious than that. No one like Amira.

"She's good for me," he said slowly, choosing his words with care. "Having her around here makes my life better. Not just with the kids, but better all round."

"She's your lucky penny," said Francis. "Better sew up your pocket so she doesn't fall out."

Dean laughed at that, but Francis was right. He had a hole in his pocket—Amira's two-month deadline—and if he didn't patch it, she'd slip right through.

"We should get back to fishing," he said, his voice gruff. "Morning feeding frenzy won't last forever."

They waded back into the water and fished a while more, but all Dean could think about was the Strawberry Dance. Tonight was the big night, and maybe it was his chance. He'd make it a night Amira would never forget, full of dancing and laughter and all the romance she craved. All the fun she'd missed out on, growing up as she had. He needed to show her how good life could be here with him on the ranch, how good he could be for her, how far he'd go to put a smile on her face.

He paused mid-cast, and his fly fell short. How far *would* he go for her? What did he want?

He wanted a chance, he thought. More time with Amira. Time to get closer and see how they fit, and what kind of future they could build together. He'd show her tonight, how great it could be.

She'd see it, he told himself, but a tiny, doubting voice spoke up in his heart: *if you're so sure she'll choose you, why not just ask? Why not come out with it and ask her to stay?*

Because this was more romantic, dancing the night away. And maybe he *would* ask, once the dancing was done.

“T here you are,” said Josie, bustling across the street to catch up to Amira. She looked like she’d been running, flushed with exertion. She was glowing, actually, and smiling widely.

Amira smiled back. “Did you find everything?”

“Right here.” Josie held up her bags, her expression triumphant. Amira thought she seemed happier given something to do—Amira had sent her to pick up some games for the kids to play at the dance, and Josie looked to have aced the assignment. “What about you?” she asked. “Did you find a dress for the dance?”

“Also right here,” said Amira, and held up the garment bag so Josie could see. “I guess I’d better run home and get ready.”

Josie shook her head. “Why don’t you come over and get ready with me and Viv? Come on, don’t say no. I promise it’ll be fun.”

Amira *had* been about to offer an excuse—it was the kind of family-focused activity she’d always avoided with other families she’d worked for—but the look on Josie’s face made her rethink her objections. She couldn’t bring herself to disappoint her.

“All right,” she said, and the next thing she knew, she found herself in Vivien’s house, being fussed over by both mother and daughter.

“This strap’s loose,” said Vivien, plucking at her new dress. “I’d better stitch it up for you, or you’ll have a wardrobe malfunction.”

“A what?” Josie’s brow knit in puzzlement.

“I’m saying her dress will fall off.”

“Remember that Christmas yours split up the back?” Josie pinched Vivien’s arm. “You bent over to grab a gift, and it

went *rrrrrip!*”

Vivien groaned deeply. “When are you going to stop telling that story? I’d just had a baby. If I’d gained a few pounds—”

“It wasn’t your weight. It was that cheap stitching.”

Amira tried not to giggle at their familiar banter. Through all their sniping, she could see the affection between them, the wealth of shared history that held them together.

“You should borrow my earrings,” said Vivien. Amira thought she meant Josie, but Vivien held the pair of earrings up to Amira’s face and nodded firmly. “Yeah, these are perfect. They’ll bring out your eyes.”

“You want me to wear them?” Amira’s voice caught in her throat. She felt her eyes prickle with the threat of tears. The earrings were gorgeous, silver strawberry vines, set with red enamel berries and tiny white flowers. Vivien was right—the red *did* call attention to her deep brown eyes. And the jewelry matched perfectly with her new dress. But more than how they looked, she was moved by the gesture—by being treated like family. Like she was someone they were *glad* to have in their family. Was this what she’d missed out on, growing up as she had, under a cloud of worry and limitations? Moments like this, simple and sweet? Her mother’s eyes had never sparkled like Josie’s were now, full of excitement and anticipation. Instead, they’d always been clouded with worry, deep lines of concern knit into her brow.

“They’re beautiful,” said Amira. “But I couldn’t—”

Josie and Vivien drowned her out, insisting she could, and not only that, she absolutely had to.

“They’ll look perfect on you.”

“Red’s really your color.”

Amira blinked to keep a rogue tear from spilling over. She was being silly. Josie and Vivien were just excited because she was new. She was a novelty, an out-of-towner, here for her very first strawberry dance. Their enthusiasm didn’t mean they were actually making her part of the family in any kind of permanent way. It didn’t mean they’d be happy if she stuck

around. She could imagine the questions, if she overstayed her contract, suspicion replacing the warm smiles dancing in their eyes. *What are you still doing here? Dean's fine. What's the point?*

“Okay, my turn,” said Vivien, and grabbed Amira’s hand. “Can you do a heart braid? I want to do something cute with my hair.”

Amira had done plenty of braids on the little girls she’d watched over the years, including the double French braids twisted into a heart shape. She nodded, still unsure she could trust her voice.

“Perfect,” said Vivien. “I found this green bow that looks just like leaves. If I pin it above the heart braid, it’ll make a strawberry.” She plopped herself down in front of the mirror, and Amira set to work braiding her hair. Josie found a pair of red ribbons for her to weave in, completing the impression of a strawberry. Mother and daughter chatted and laughed as she worked, and Amira couldn’t help but let herself imagine a life where she stayed—a life where she was wanted here, and this was her home. A life where family traditions included her.

Vivien exclaimed, delighted, when Amira held up a mirror to show off her completed hairstyle, and in that moment that future felt almost possible.

Amira was still riding her pink cloud when they arrived at the venue, floating in on a wave of lively dance music. Dean was there to greet them, dressed up for the night, in a new pair of Wranglers and a stiff-pressed shirt, with a silver-clipped bolo tie clasped at his throat. He tipped his hat when he saw her, and without thinking, Amira dropped into a curtsy. Dean held out a rose.

“I got you this,” he said, his tone almost bashful. “The Boy Scouts were selling them at their booth in the square. Raising funds for their summer camp. I thought you might like one.”

“I love it,” said Amira, and reached out to take it. Dean pulled her close instead, and pinned it to her dress. He leaned in to do it, his knuckles grazing her skin, and Amira felt eyes on her from what seemed like the whole town. Someone sighed softly

—“Look! So romantic...”—and Amira felt color blaze in her cheeks. It *was* romantic, like something from a movie. Amira didn't want the moment to end.

“I'd better do a lap,” said Vivien. “Make sure everyone's having a good time.”

Amira stepped back reluctantly. “You need any help?”

“No, no, I've got this. You two have fun.” Then she was gone, and Dean took Amira's arm. She felt like she was dreaming as he led her across the dance floor, toward the punch table set up along one wall. He had to know everyone was watching, but when he turned and smiled at her, she saw only pride in his eyes, like he was happy to show her off as his date.

“Strawberry punch?” he asked.

Amira just nodded. Her mouth had gone dry.

“It should still be safe, this early in the night. Once it gets dark, you have to be careful. You never know who's lurking with a bottle of rum.”

“There'll be no rum,” said Ethel, sidling up from behind them. “Not as long as I'm watching, so you two behave.”

Amira and Dean both laughed at that. He ladled some punch into a cup for her, then filled one for himself.

“I should check on the twins,” she said, once she'd taken a sip. Dean laid a soothing hand on her arm.

“They're fine. They're with the sitters in the playroom you set up.” He smiled, broad and easy. “Everything's perfect, see? Look around you. This is all you, and it's our best strawberry dance yet.”

“It's gorgeous,” said a woman Amira didn't know, though she thought she'd glimpsed her through the window of the salon, setting the Grand Dames' hair in preparation for tonight. “Whose idea was the playroom? Was that you? Billy's loving the games—he's a champion at Twister.”

“They've moved on to some word game now,” said another woman—a young mom, apparently. “I just checked on

Spencer, and he's having a blast. Fighting with Ewan over whether *absitively*'s a word."

"Let's dance," said Dean, once the moms had run off. He took her punch from her and set the cup on the table, then spun her into his arms as an upbeat song struck up. Amira squealed without meaning to and covered her mouth. Dean dipped her so deep her hair skimmed the floor, and somebody whistled, off to one side. Amira went with it, dancing till she felt dizzy, letting Dean twirl her all around the dance floor. When a slow song came on, he took her in his arms. Amira let her head rest softly on his shoulder. It felt natural to hold him, and to be held, like she'd been made to fit his embrace.

When the song ended, Dean kept hold of her hand. They went hand-in-hand to check on the twins, and he only let go when Caitlyn reached up for a hug. Dean scooped her up and Amira took Caleb, wiping a smear of lipstick off his plump cheek.

"Looks like your mom's shade," she said.

Dean chuckled. "Yeah. She can't get enough of them."

Francis arrived at the dance just as Amira and Dean were leaving, getting the twins home before their high spirits could dissolve into overtired tears. He'd obviously been enjoying the strawberry festival—he had a big stack of pie boxes to check at the door, and two bags overflowing with souvenirs.

"You weren't kidding," he said, slapping Dean on the shoulder. "This festival's a blast. I'm coming back next year, and I'm bringing my wife. She'll love all this dancing, and the pie baking contest. She's got a recipe passed down from her ma...well, wait till next year. You'll see for yourself."

"Sounds good," said Dean. "We're just heading home, but the dance always runs late, so enjoy yourself."

Francis grinned. "I'll do that. Always have been a sucker for good country music." He paused as he turned to head inside. "Call me tomorrow, and we'll meet up. I have an idea to run past you I think you might like."

Amira watched him go. "I wonder what that was all about?"

“I guess I’ll find out tomorrow,” said Dean, then he leaned in and kissed her, just a brush of his lips to her forehead. “Come on, let’s head home.”

Amira followed him to his truck, walking on air. The night had been perfect, better than her wildest fantasies of sparkling prom nights. He’d held her hand in front of everyone, they’d danced cheek to cheek, and now *let’s head home* felt like a promise. Like it could be her home as well as his.

She screwed up her courage as they buckled the twins into their car seats, unsure exactly what she wanted to ask him. *What are we, maybe, or do you think this is something? Do you see us, you and me...*

Caleb made a *pthbbt* sound. Dean wiped his face.

“Little brat spit on me. Who taught you to spit?”

Amira laughed, and the moment slipped through her fingers. They kissed the twins and drove home and tucked them into their cribs, Caitlyn clutching her yellow blanket, Caleb snuggling his green one. They’d gotten better at sleeping and staying asleep—Caleb drifted off more easily now, whether it was quiet or not, and Caitlyn had outgrown her need for constant chatter.

“They change so fast at this age,” Dean said, as though reading her mind. “Something new every day. Blink and you’d miss it.”

“You won’t, though,” said Amira. “You’re a great dad. You’re there for them. You—what’s with that look?”

“Just feels good to hear it, that I’m doing okay.”

“You are,” said Amira. “And not just as a dad. You do so much for your family, and for this town. And you’re sweet, and you’re funny, and tonight was a blast. Dancing so close to you, I—” She stopped talking abruptly. Had she said too much? But the way Dean was looking at her, she guessed she’d said just enough.

Dean’s eyes had gone heated, his lips slightly parted. He lifted both hands to cradle Amira’s face, then leaned in and kissed her, a slow, deep, possessive kiss that sent her heart racing.



“The kids,” she whispered, when he pulled back at last. Dean didn’t let go of her, just crowded her back through the door to his bedroom. He pulled it shut behind him with a soft click before he pushed her up against it and took her lips once more. Amira tried to keep quiet, but a low moan escaped, and Dean responded with a deep-chested growl. She could feel the heat of his body pressed against hers, and the steady rhythm of his pounding heart.

“I’ve been thinking about this all night, since I saw you in that dress.” His hand slid off her shoulder and down her side, tracing the generous curve of her hip. Her body caught fire when he palmed her ass, a delicious warmth surging up in her belly.

“I need you,” she whispered, and she heard his breath hitch. An instant later, he swept her up in his arms, and laid her out gently across his big bed. The last rays of sunset caught in his hair, and cast him in gold like some blazing Greek god. Amira pulled off his bolo tie and he pushed down her strap, and she worked on his buttons as he fumbled with her zip. It caught halfway down and she grabbed it, frustrated, and tugged it so hard she heard stitches tear. She wriggled out of her dress and Dean cast off his shirt as she leaned up to nip at his powerful shoulder.

“You feel like silk,” he murmured, and ran his hand up her thigh. His palm felt rough and calloused on her bare skin. She leaned into his touch, wanting more and more. More of his touch, so rough, yet so gentle. More of his scent, earthy and clean. More of the sounds he made when she nipped at his ear, the animalistic noises that meant he was losing control.

His fingertips traced the lace edging her panties, then slipped underneath them to cup her soft mound. She bucked into his touch eagerly, and her hip brushed the rising swell of his cock. It throbbed against her and she reached down to stroke it, the skin hot in her hand even through his boxers.

“Amira...” A shudder ran through him, and her name came out broken. He took her in his arms and they let their bodies take over, Dean devouring her with kisses, Amira wrapping her legs around him. Somehow, she managed to push down his

boxers, and he pulled her panties out of the way and produced a condom from somewhere. When Dean plunged inside her in one long, straight thrust, Amira threw her head back and bit her lip hard, a soft cry escaping through her clenched teeth.

They rode as one to breathless heights of pleasure—so high she felt dizzy, so sweet her heart sang. They made love till the sun was gone and stars scattered the sky, and Dean made her see fireworks over and over, until they both collapsed sated, tangled in each other's arms.

“Dean,” Amira whispered, between sleep and waking, and then her dreams rushed in and swept her away. “I’m yours.”

Dean met up with Francis early the next day, at the diner on the corner across from the bakery. He figured he'd pick up some pastries when they got through, a surprise for Amira and a thank-you for all her help in organizing the dance. She'd come through for Vivien more than she knew, and kindness like that deserved gifts of sugar.

"I love diner coffee," said Francis, inhaling deeply. "There's just something about it the pricey stuff can't touch."

Dean regarded Francis with curiosity from behind his own mug. He hadn't expected to see the man again before he headed home, and now he seemed...not nervous, exactly, but not his usual self. There was something about his manner that made it seem like he was here for a business meeting instead of coffee with a friend.

"I can't stay long," Dean said, hoping to break the tension and move things along. "The festival's put me behind on all kinds of chores, and I need to be home for—"

"This won't take long," said Francis, and set down his mug. "I have a proposal for you, and I'd like you to hear me out, even if your first instinct's to tell me to take a hike."

Dean frowned. "I'll listen, sure. But I've got to warn you, if it's no, it's no. I'd feel bad letting you run through some long-winded pitch when I know I'm against it in the first fifteen seconds."

Francis laughed. "Tell you what, then—I'll give you the basics, my elevator pitch. Then you can tell me if I need to keep going."

Dean nodded tightly, knots tightening in his stomach. Francis leaned back and drew a deep breath.

"I want to buy your ranch," he said. "After we had our talk while we were fishing, I crunched some numbers, and I think the best way for you to handle all the needs of the ranch, and

your personal dreams, is to bring in outside financing. That way, you'd be able to cover the costs of the breeding program that your father and brother wanted, the infrastructure upgrades that you believe the ranch needs, *and* have the seed capital to build those cabins you were talking about so that you can start back up your fly-fishing business and offer vacation packages. What do you think?"

Dean sat staring blankly. His brain had shorted out at *I want to buy your ranch*.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You want to—you *what*? You'd buy the ranch? But you don't know anything about ranching."

"I'd hire a new foreman to run that side of the operation day-to-day. You'd still be around to keep an eye on things, of course. After all, you'll be living there in the ranch house, running your new business. But most of the ranch's daily operations would be taken care of by my people so you'd be free to focus on your fly-fishing business and your family. Meanwhile, I'd take both your five-year plans and combine them into one. Your father's plan was a good one, but so is yours. With my capital and connections, I can take both of them and upgrade this ranch into something really special."

Dean grabbed his coffee and took a deep swig. The rush of caffeine did little to clear his head. Sell the ranch—sell Dad's legacy? The land that had been in their family for so many years? Vivien wouldn't forgive him, and neither would Mom. But he couldn't deny that Francis's pitch was tempting. Fly-fishing was what he loved—and more than that, it was a business that made sense to him. One where he didn't feel he was constantly straining to step into his father and brother's footsteps. Even before the ranch had officially fallen into his hands—back when Dad had gotten his diagnosis and had started running Dean through ranch owner boot camp—he'd always felt that he wasn't the right fit. This could be the solution, the chance to lift that weight off of his shoulders.

"I need time," he finally managed. "I need to think about this."

Francis nodded. "I thought you might." He retrieved his briefcase from under the table, and pulled out a thick folder,

which he slid across to Dean. “This is *my* five-year plan. You should look it over. If it’s a no, that’s fine. No hard feelings. But if you’re open to it, we should talk more.”

“Yeah—yeah, we’ll talk.” Dean scooped up the folder and got to his feet, feeling a little like he’d been hit by a truck. He staggered out onto the sidewalk, feeling too dazed and confused to be able to tell if he was happy or sad. *Shocked*. That was the only thing he felt for sure.



The twins were having a fussy day, feeding off each other’s angst. Caitlyn was gassy, with a touch of colic, and her dismal crying had Caleb stressed out. Once Caleb got started, Caitlyn cried louder, till Amira’s whole head rang with their express-train wails. She walked Caitlyn patiently and sang little songs for Caleb, but the twins kept on screaming, so loud Amira shrieked when she turned and saw Dean sitting at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. She hadn’t heard his truck pull up, or the front door.

“Where’d you come from?” she asked, when her pulse had slowed down.

“Town,” Dean answered, vaguely. He stood and lifted Caleb from his bouncy seat. “I meant to bring you some pastries, but I guess I forgot.”

Amira stopped pacing for a better look at Dean. He seemed sort of shell-shocked, his gaze faraway. “I’m sorry for the noise,” she said. “It’s Caitlyn’s tummy. She’s not feeling so good, and that’s upsetting Caleb.”

Dean shook his head. “It’s okay. They’re good.” He tickled Caleb under his chin. Caleb stopped crying to bat at his hand. Dean kept on tickling him, working down to his belly. “Some days, you’ve got to cry. Isn’t that right?”

Caleb made a sniffly sound. Dean booped his nose. Caitlyn had quieted when Caleb quit howling, and was rubbing her damp face on Amira’s shoulder. Amira rubbed her back gently, hoping the quiet would hold. The way Dean was looking, she thought he might need it.

“I could get you an aspirin,” she said. “If you have a headache.”

Dean glanced up. “Huh? Oh, no, it’s not that.” He perched Caleb on his knee and bounced him up and down. “It’s... you’re not going to believe this, but Francis wants to buy the ranch.”

Amira laughed, startled. Buy the ranch? As if! The ranch was Dean’s home, his future, his *roots*. He wouldn’t just sell that, any more than he’d sell his right hand.

“I’m not kidding,” said Dean. “He has a five-year plan, and everything. He’s done a ton of research, and his ideas are... good.” He shook his head slowly, like he couldn’t believe what he was saying. “He could turn this place into something way beyond what Dad ever dreamed it could be. He’d also fund my idea for vacation fishing packages, with cabins on the ranch.”

Amira’s head spun. Caitlyn grumbled in her ear. She realized she’d stopped moving and started walking again. “You’re actually considering this?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s a whole lot of money.”

“All your memories are here.” Amira wanted to scream at him, *what are you thinking?* The ranch *was* his home. He couldn’t sell it. He’d been working so hard on his own five-year plan, working to build a future for his children. He couldn’t just walk away from that, from the future they’d—

Amira stopped dead, eyes wide with shock. *She* was the one who didn’t want to walk away. She didn’t want to say goodbye to Dean, and all the dreams she’d built around him—and she *had* been building dreams. Getting attached. Letting herself picture a future where she never moved on—a future here on the ranch, with Dean. What would happen to that if he let the ranch go? How would it change things? In her experience, change usually signaled an *end*. The end of a contract. The end of a family needing her. The end of her having a place to belong. What did change mean to Dean? Would there still be a place for her in whatever came next?

“It comes down to what’s best,” said Dean. “For the ranch, for the kids, and yeah. For me.” He held out his finger for Caleb to grab. “Ranching isn’t in my blood like it was in Jackson’s. I don’t have the feel for it. It isn’t my passion. I’m learning the ropes, and I’m getting better. I’m stepping up, just like Dad wanted. But am I really the best one to run it? Maybe it would be better off in someone else’s hands. Someone with the resources to take it further than I ever could. Is it best I keep going, or is it time to move on?”

Amira stood silent. Even when she tried to push aside her personal feelings and anxieties, she still wasn’t sure what he needed to hear. She’d seen how the five-year plan stressed him out, and how he struggled with the leadership of the ranch. But wouldn’t he regret selling his family’s legacy?

“Amira?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “If you kept going, would you be doing it for you? Or because it’s what your dad would have wanted?”

“That’s what I’m asking myself.” Dean frowned. “I’m so new to all this—ranching *and* fatherhood. The twins’ll be walking before I can blink. I’d love them to grow up like I did, feeling a real connection to the land, but they can have that even if I’m not the one running the ranch, right? It’ll still be their home, just not quite in the same way.” He stopped and thought about it. “But is there a chance they’ll come to resent that? Will they think I’ve sold their legacy out from under them? Or will they think I did what was best for our family?” He stood up with a grimace and began to pace. “No matter what I do, there’s upsides and downsides. Come on, what does your gut say? What would you do?”

Amira could see he wanted an answer. But she couldn’t give him one when her heart was screaming *don’t sell* for all the wrong reasons. She couldn’t think straight through the turmoil in her own head.

“This is your life,” she said at last. “I can’t choose for you.”

Dean huffed, frustrated. Amira thought he might keep pushing, but he just shook his head.

“I should get going,” he said. “The chores don’t stop.” He set Caleb in his bouncy chair with a stuffed toy to hug before he grabbed his jacket and headed out. Amira stood staring at the door he’d just walked out of, and all she could think about was how it would feel, closing that door for the last time ever—leaving Dean and the kids and the ranch all behind her.



“This is more complicated than I thought it would be,” said Amira. “Who knew a seating arrangement could be so... involved?”

“It’s not just a seating arrangement,” said Vivien. She leaned over Amira to switch two cards around. “The craft fair brings in more profit than the rest of the festival combined. But nobody’ll buy a table if they don’t feel confident they’ll be able to make good sales. We have to arrange the tables so they make *sense*.”

Amira wasn’t sure she understood. “Make sense how?”

Josie stopped teasing Caitlyn with a brightly colored rattle and squeezed in between them to peer at their chart. “Imagine you’re at the craft fair,” she said. “You’ve promised yourself you’ll stick to a budget—one fancy new doodad, and that’s it. Well, our job’s to convince you that isn’t enough. So we lay out the stalls so they tell a story. If the first stand sells recipe books, the next is kitchen supplies. Then might come tableware, then fancy vases, then gardening stuff, then—”

“Okay, I get it.” Amira held up her hands, laughing. “I have another question: what’s a cowbake? I tried looking it up online, but I couldn’t find anything.”

Vivien and Josie exchanged amused glances.

“The cowbake’s our tastiest festival tradition,” Josie explained. “We barbeque beef and bake strawberry treats, and have a big dinner—that’s the cowbake.”

“But you don’t bake a cow? Or, the cows don’t try baking?”

Vivien laughed. “You have so much to learn. But don’t worry, we’ve got you. Now, back to this chart...”

Amira bent back to her task with a smile on her face. Cheery conversation rippled around her, a lively debate over mesquite versus hickory. Half the town’s women had gathered in the

local craft store for an afternoon of gossip and festival planning, and the atmosphere reminded Amira of summer camp movies—crowded tents rocking with laughter, lasting bonds sealed over shared secrets. Caitlyn and Caleb sat at the center of the action, taking it all in with wondering eyes. One woman bent over them and straightened Caleb’s onesie.

“When mine was this age, I couldn’t wait till he grew out of diapers. Couldn’t wait for him to *talk* to me, instead of just scream. Now he’s in college. It all goes by so fast.”

Amira frowned at that. She didn’t want to think about the passage of time, or about change, or saying goodbye. Today, she just wanted to be here with the twins, planning the craft fair that would finance...well, something. There still seemed to be some debate about whether the funds would best serve to reroof the church, or to buy new playground equipment for the park.

The door chime went off, and Amira looked up. She was surprised to see Dean in the doorway, balancing a stack of bakery boxes in the crook of one arm.

“Brought you ladies some fuel,” he said.

“No coffee?” said someone.

“Oh, hush,” said Josie. “That’s sweet of you, Dean.”

Vivien frowned at him. “What are you doing in town? Don’t you have work to do out on the ranch?”

“I’m picking up wood to fix the hayloft. Not that I need to explain myself to you.” He raised a challenging eyebrow, and Vivien laughed. The boxes of pastries made the rounds of the tables, but Amira ignored them for the moment and went over to join Dean by the twins, checking in about their schedules for the rest of the day while he kissed and cuddled his babies. When he headed out, she returned to her chair, snagging a bear claw along the way.

“You two are so cute together,” said Ethel, and bit into a Danish. “And what a dish that man is! If I were twenty years younger, I tell you, I’d—”

“Twenty! Try fifty.”

Amira didn't see who'd said that, but she laughed with everyone else. Ethel pretended to be put out by the teasing, but Amira could see she was enjoying herself.

"You really do make a great couple," said Laura, the owner of the craft store and Vivien's close friend. "You know how you can tell? When a couple goes dancing, if the man leans his head up against his lady's. If he does that, he doesn't care how he looks. He just wants to be as close to her as he can get. That's how you know you've got a keeper. If he stays stiff-backed, he isn't the one."

"That doesn't sound scientific," said Josie.

"Maybe not, but it's true." Laura nudged Amira. "So, was it love at first sight, or did you make him win you over?"

Amira ducked her head to hide her expression. She'd hoped this line of chatter would fizzle out on its own. "We're not—it's not like that."

Laura glanced at Vivien, then turned back to Amira. "But, the way you were dancing...and he was holding your hand. And didn't he kiss you at the end of the night?"

Amira felt heat rising up the back of her neck. "I like him a lot," she said, her tone calm and firm. "And we have plenty of fun together. But my contract's almost up, and then I'll be leaving." The words sounded wrong coming out of her mouth. The dance *had* been fun, as had everything that followed, but it had been more than that. It had been...special. Waking up the next morning cradled in Dean's arms had felt as natural as drawing breath. And their morning routine was a dance in itself, honed and perfected through repetition. If this was just fun, what would the real thing look like?

"Hold on—you're *leaving*?" Ethel looked incredulous. "But, you can't leave. You're one of us now. Part of the community."

"Don't try to tell us this has just been a job for you." Ethel wagged her Danish like a scolding finger. "My eyes might be old, but I still see just fine. And what I see when I look at you —"

Amira stood up abruptly. “I’m thirsty,” she said. “I’m getting a Slushie. Anyone else?”

“I’ll have one,” said Vivien. “In fact, I’ll come with you. I like to blend flavors.”

Amira nodded tightly, already hustling for the door. She had to get out of here, away from the chatter. The spotlight was too much, glaring on her, casting light on the questions she’d been studiously avoiding. She hurried across Main Street to the little Quik Mart, and back to the Slushie machine with its colorful flavors. Vivien didn’t say anything as Amira filled her cup with orange, but when it was her turn, she had plenty to say.

“I like the cream soda kind, but it’s too sweet. But cut it with the cola flavor, and it’s just perfect.” She filled half her cup with bright pink slush, then topped it up with cola and stirred the flavors together. “That’s how it goes sometimes—two flavors are better together. You’re good for Dean. And I think he’s good for you.”

Amira pressed her lips together. She’d hoped Vivien would let it drop. “Dean’s amazing,” she said. “But we signed a contract, and it was only for two months. That’s what I do—I come in and help parents get through challenging times like new babies, divorces, or cross-country moves. I set them up with a routine that makes the kids feel secure, then I move on. That’s how it works.”

Vivien made a *pff* sound. “That’s how it *has* worked, but you’re allowed to change gears. We’d all love to have you here if you wanted to stay.”

Amira opened her mouth, but she didn’t know what to say. She grabbed a pack of salted peanuts to go with her drink, and headed up to the counter to pay.

“Mom says it’s on the house,” said the girl behind the counter. “You guys bring in so much business with the strawberry festival, you get free snacks till the end of the month.” She glanced across the street. “Just your family, though. Not the whole committee.”

Vivien nudged Amira on the way out the door. “Did you hear what she said back there? You get free snacks because you’re family.”

Amira gulped her Slushie to keep from having to answer. The ice gave her brain freeze, and she clutched her sore head. If she wanted to stay, what would that even look like? Would she still be Dean’s nanny, or his girlfriend? What would she do when he didn’t need a nanny anymore? She didn’t have a backup skill tucked in her pocket. Nannying was it for her, and she loved it. She couldn’t just shut the door on that part of her life.

“You don’t have to decide today,” said Vivien, sipping her Slushie. “But I haven’t seen my brother this happy in a long time. If you feel the same way, you should give it some thought.”

Amira nodded. She could do that. She followed Vivien back across the street, and resumed her place at the busy craft table. The conversation had moved on to the final details of the cowbake.

Amira listened and took notes, but her thoughts kept drifting. Today had started sweetly, with the twins up early, gurgling and cooing in their cribs. When Amira went to get them, Dean was in there already, pulling silly faces to make them squeal. His eyes lit up when he saw her, and he beckoned her over.

“I think they’re gearing up to start talking,” he said. “Caitlyn just made a sound that was almost ‘dada.’”

“A little early for that.” Amira chuckled. “They should say their first words around their first birthday.”

“Not my baby geniuses. They’ll talk any day.” He tickled Caitlyn. “C’mon, say it again. ‘Dada. Da-da.’”

Caitlyn burped loudly. Dean cracked up laughing. Amira reached for Caitlyn and scooped her up.

“All right, baby geniuses. Let’s get you some breakfast.”

They’d headed downstairs then, to the kitchen she’d helped decorate, the wildflowers she’d picked blooming in their vase. And Amira had felt something she couldn’t quite place—a

sense of belonging and impermanence all at once. Like nostalgia for good times she'd yet to leave behind.

She felt it again, looking around the craft store, at the smiling faces of her new friends. She *had* become one of them, without even meaning to. But it wasn't meant to last—whether she wanted it to or not.

Dean pulled up at the ranch house just behind Amira, hopping out of his truck as she unloaded the twins. She looked up at the sound of his arrival to give him a friendly wave and a smile.

“Hey,” she said, as he strode up to meet her. She looked flushed, he noticed, her cheeks rosy-pink. She’d had a long day, he guessed, much as he had.

“I’ll take Caitlyn,” he said, and picked up a carrier. Amira laughed.

“That’s Caleb.”

Dean peered into the carrier. “Huh. So it is. He’s got her teddy bear.”

“He wouldn’t let it go, so I just let him have it.” Amira took Caitlyn’s carrier and they headed for the house. Dean thought she’d head inside when he opened the door, but instead she lingered in the doorway.

“I was thinking we could talk,” she said. “About your plans for the future.”

Dean’s smile froze, then faded. He knew what that meant. Amira wanted to talk about what he’d been dreading, the end of her contract. Saying goodbye. He wasn’t ready for that. He’d been working on a big speech to persuade her to stay, but with everything else going on, he hadn’t got much farther than “Please don’t go.”

“I need to work on my five-year plan,” he said. “The bank needs to see it soon, if they’re going to approve my loan.”

Amira brightened visibly. “So you aren’t selling?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Dean. “But as long as there’s any chance I might not sell, I need to do this. Maybe laying the numbers out will help me decide.”

“That makes sense.” Amira took Caleb’s carrier and backed into the house. Dean tried to read her expression and found he couldn’t. Then the door swung shut behind her, leaving him alone. Was she angry with him for considering Francis’s offer? Maybe she thought he was being irresponsible, passing the buck on the ranch rather than taking charge, the way his family and the town expected him to. Or maybe she was just tired from a long day of planning, and didn’t care much whether he sold up or not.

He pushed his worries aside and headed out to the paddock. Tonight was family dinner, but he had a while before the house filled with people. Time to find his foreman and go over his plans.

Mark was in the paddock when Dean arrived. He looked like he was ready to wrap up for the day, checking in with the ranch hands before heading home. Dean caught his eye to let him know he’d be waiting, and leaned on the fence to gather his thoughts. He’d always found peace out here, at one with the land—but today, that inner quiet proved elusive. Dad would have known exactly what to do. He’d have made his decision and never looked back. Dean had never needed his advice more than he did now.

“Evening, Dean,” said Mark, strolling up to join him. “Plumber dropped off his invoice. I left it in your office.”

Dean only grunted. Mark shifted where he stood.

“How are you coming with that five-year plan?”

Dean let out a long breath and shook his head. “Improving our stock or upgrading our infrastructure, either way, we’re looking at a big up-front outlay. That means a big loan, and that means big risks.”

“I thought we’d decided on insemination,” said Mark.

Dean didn’t look at him. “I’m still weighing my options. But whichever road we take, we’re looking down the barrel of a lean five years.”

“Ranching’s a slow business. You need to take the long view.”



Or he could take Francis's offer right now. He could restart his fishing business, invest in the cabins and everything else to make it a full-scale tourist business, and still have enough money left over from the payout to start college funds for the twins. They'd have a strong safety net, their futures guaranteed.

"It's good you're taking this seriously," said Mark. "But you've got to remember, perfect doesn't exist. There's no plan you can dream up that'll guarantee success. You have to go with what feels right. What you know you can do."

Dean nodded along, but he'd stopped listening. Vivien had arrived at the big house, and she and Frank were unloading their kids. Mom was still heading up the long drive, but she'd have dinner started by the time Dean made it back.

"I should get back," he said. "The tide's coming in."

"Ah, family dinner night." Mark clapped him on the shoulder. "Go on. Enjoy it. I'll finish up here."

Dean trudged wearily back to the house. The day hadn't been too busy, as ranching days went, but he hadn't slept well last night. His thoughts just kept knocking around in his head, refusing to settle into any sort of sense. He wished this puzzle came with an easy answer, one that would please everyone. But whichever way he looked at it, no such answer emerged.

He let himself into the house and headed for the kitchen, passing Frank and his kids playing tag in the front yard. Vivien was hard at work chopping potatoes. Josie was playing peekaboo with Caitlyn and Caleb. Dean looked for Amira, but didn't see her.

"Where's Amira?" he asked.

"I told her to take the night off," said Mom. "She was looking a little tired after all the excitement today, so she's gone upstairs to get some rest."

Dean frowned. He'd just talked to Amira an hour ago. She hadn't said anything about not feeling well.

"I should go check on her," he said.

“No, let her rest. Help your sister instead—why don’t you make the salad?”

Dean started to protest, but Vivien tossed him a cucumber. He caught it and let himself be herded to the counter—the same counter he’d sat on when he was small, watching his mom cook, or sometimes his dad. They’d both been good at it, but their styles had been different. Mom had been adventurous, trying all kinds of cuisines. Dad had stuck to the basics, but given them his own spin. His barbeque had been legendary, especially his secret sauce. The thought of that sauce made Dean’s chest go tight. Dad had left him the recipe, but he hadn’t had the heart to ever make it himself. It would be too sad, eating Dad’s barbeque without Dad there to share it.

Dean hoped the smell of dinner might tempt Amira from her room, but she didn’t come downstairs, and Dean didn’t disturb her. Mom and Vivien chatted through dinner, reliving the highlights of today’s planning session. Apparently, Amira had been something of a star, winning everyone over with her enthusiasm. Vivien’s kids had their own conversation going on, something Dean couldn’t follow about video games. Caitlyn and Caleb dozed through the meal, but they stirred and began to fuss as the family headed out. Dean went to check on them.

“Hey. You two hungry?”

Caitlyn blew a spit bubble. Caleb stuck his fist in his mouth. Dean kissed both of them on their chubby cheeks.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll make up your bottles. Then we’ll head upstairs and check on your—on Amira.” Dean’s stomach did a slow roll. Had he just almost called Amira their mom? Yes, yes he had. He rubbed his dry eyes. He needed a good night’s sleep, and a long walk in the woods. Quiet to clear his head, that was the ticket.

He readied the twins’ bottles and filled a plate for Amira, ham and potatoes and the last of the salad. Then he strapped the twins to his chest and headed upstairs, Amira’s plate in one hand and the twins’ bottles in the other. He didn’t have a hand

free to knock on her door, so feeling mildly foolish, he kicked it lightly.

“Come in,” said Amira, muzzy with sleep.

Dean frowned at the doorknob and nudged it with his elbow. The door didn’t open, and he cursed under his breath. He tucked the bottles under his arm to free his left hand, and turned awkwardly to grab the doorknob. The bottles sloshed and shifted, and he squeezed them tight to his side. The door swung open to Amira’s soft laughter.

“Got yourself a handful, huh?”

“I fixed you a plate.”

Amira got up and took it from him, and set it on her nightstand. She took Caitlyn as well, and one of the bottles. Dean sat in the rocking chair and she sat on the bed, and the room filled with the wet sounds of the twins eating their dinner. Dean studied Amira, concerned, but she looked all right to him—a little tired, a little thoughtful, but otherwise okay.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Better after a nap.” She looked up and smiled. “It’s a lot, isn’t it? The festival, I mean.”

Dean nodded slowly. He got the feeling she didn’t just mean the festival. It almost seemed as if she was waiting for him to say something, but for the life of him, he couldn’t think what. Had he forgotten something? Flaked on a promise?

“I can burp both the kids if you want to eat,” he said.

“Thanks,” said Amira. “I am kind of hungry.” She handed Caitlyn over and reached for her plate. At the first bite of ham, she closed her eyes with pleasure. “Mm—mmm. So good. I love when the edges go all crackly and brown.”

“Me too,” said Dean, and began to relax, but then Amira sighed and set her fork on her plate. Dean licked his lips. “Something on your mind?”

“My exit date. Our contract’s almost done.” Amira stared at her plate, and Dean thought she looked sad. “I know it’s a

touchy topic, but we need to discuss it—what your plans are, how you mean to go on. The ladies in town have been saying I should stay, but I wouldn't want to assume..." She trailed off, frowning. Dean bit back the wild hope rising in his chest.

"You could," he said carefully. "I wish you would."

Amira looked up sharply, a smile tugging at her lips. "I could? You'd want that?"

Dean nearly laughed—of course he would. He'd want that and much more, everything she could give. More nights like the dance, more tender mornings, waking up to the warmth of her in his arms. More bustling breakfasts with her and the twins. But springing all that on her might scare her off. She was talking about her contract—he should answer along the same lines, reassure her that she had a job for as long as she wanted it.

"I need you. We all do." Dean jiggled Caleb on his shoulder. "There's so much going on right now, and you've been a godsend. Whatever time you can give us, however long you can stay, let's just say I'd be happy for it." He flashed her his most charming grin.

Amira's face went tight, and a storm cloud seemed to pass behind her eyes. But it was nothing more than a flash before her expression settled into an unconvincing half-smile.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, and set her plate aside. "I have a friend I'd like to visit when our contract's up, but maybe after that, I can carve out some more time." She got to her feet and headed for the bathroom.

Dean sat patting Caleb, waiting for him to burp. He couldn't stop thinking of the way Amira had looked at him. Was he overthinking it, or had something just shifted between them?

“I have a surprise for you,” said Dean, pulling out Amira’s chair for her as she sat down for breakfast.

“A surprise? Is it blueberry pancakes?” She seemed to have recovered her good spirits, no longer looking as strained as she had the night before, but Dean wanted to do something nice for her before broaching the subject of her staying again. To show her how much he appreciated all she did.

“Yes to the pancakes,” he said. “But that’s not the surprise. This is something better. Something you’ve been wanting to try.”

Amira looked puzzled for a moment, then her face lit up. “We’re going riding? That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Damn right we are.” Dean grinned. “I’ve cleared my whole day for it. We’ll just need to call a sitter.”

“We could call Josie,” said Amira, reaching for the syrup. “I know she’s been wanting more grandma time.”

Dean shook his head, piling pancakes on her plate. “She’s been so busy, with the festival and all. An hour with the twins is one thing, but a day seems like too much to ask—it would wear her out. I thought I’d ask Carol, as she’s here anyway.”

Amira looked like she might want to argue the point, but she tucked into her pancakes instead. Dean had learned she was a sucker for the blueberry kind. One bite could melt her like butter in the sun. Dean smiled as she settled in to eat her breakfast. He wanted to make the day perfect, one they’d always remember.

They set out at sunrise, the dew still on the grass. Amira hadn’t ridden before, but she took to it easily. When her horse snorted, she burst out laughing. When it stopped abruptly, she shrieked but then quickly caught her balance as she laughed at herself and her instinctive reaction.

“It takes some getting used to,” she said. “I keep thinking she’ll speed up, and I’ll slip off the saddle. Or she’ll stop suddenly and I’ll fly over her head.”

“You won’t,” said Dean. “She’s a calm horse, and you’ve got a good seat.”

Amira glowed at his praise, her face lighting up. Dean could see she was enjoying herself, despite her jitters. He set an easy pace heading for the trails, slowing as the horses crested the first hill.

“See that old cabin by that group of trees?” He pointed down near the riverbank, half a mile away. The cabin was lit up by the sun, its windows reflecting the pale morning light.

“I’ve noticed that,” said Amira. “I was wondering what it’s for.”

“Storage, these days,” said Dean. “I keep fishing stuff there, and old gardening tools. But that cabin’s all that’s left of an old prospectors’ camp, folks who came out here panning for gold. They came out in 1860, at the tail end of the Pike’s Peak gold rush. They didn’t find much. Most of them moved on when their dreams came to nothing, but old man Jones kept that cabin and lived off the land. He’s still got great-great-great grandkids living in town.”

Amira’s brows drew together like she was doing the math in her head, maybe calculating how many generations of Joneses it would take to get from 1860 to now. Dean nudged his horse to get her moving again.

“I figured we’d ride the high trail into the hills. We’ll get some great views, and maybe we’ll see the ghost.”

“I’m sorry—ghost?”

Dean winked. “You believe in them?”

“I’ve never seen one. But that doesn’t mean I’d camp out up there if there’s supposed to be one.” She did an exaggerated shudder. “Whose ghost is it, anyway?”

“We had a bank robbery in town, in 1902. The robbers got caught and thrown in jail, but their friend broke them out, and

they holed up in these hills. When the sheriff came after them, there was a shootout, and one of them died up there, on the edge of the creek. They say you can still see him on a moonlit night, wandering the back trails, searching for his gold.”

“You tell that well,” said Amira. “I’ve got chills down my spine.”

“This land’s got a hundred stories. Someone’s got to tell them.”

Amira smiled at that. “All land’s got stories, but most are forgotten. It takes someone who loves a place to keep its legend alive. Someone who’s got the land in their blood.”

Dean felt her words warm him deep in his chest. “I guess I do,” he said. “Especially the river. All my best memories are down by that river, but there isn’t an inch of this ranch I don’t know as well as the back of my hand. You could point anywhere, and I could tell you some story—some legend, some memory, something that happened.”

“I’m jealous,” said Amira.

“Jealous? Of what?”

“How deep your roots go. I’ve never had that. I don’t have any place I’d really call home.” She frowned. “Even growing up, we’d move around a lot, trying new specialists across the country. When I try to remember my childhood bedroom, all I can picture is a mishmash of a dozen different places. I’m never even sure which memory goes with which place.”

“I don’t know,” said Dean. “That doesn’t sound so bad, being untethered like that. Free to start over whenever and wherever you want.” He pulled his horse up at the edge of the creek. “Roots come with baggage, a lot to live up to. Folks who came before you and built something special. It’s hard to live up to that, to know what they’d want.”

They followed the burbling creek into the hills, up where the air was clear and the view went forever. Dean helped Amira dismount in a wide, rocky clearing, and tethered the horses to an old gnarled tree. Amira tilted her head back and sucked in a deep breath.

“I’d almost forgotten what air smells like without all the cows.”

Dean laughed. “They are pretty pungent.” He dug into his saddlebag and pulled out his lunch sack, still cool from the ice pack he’d slipped inside. “I packed us a picnic. Hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” said Amira. She patted her fanny pack. “I brought food too, jerky and granola bars in case we got hungry.”

“Great minds think alike.” Dean pulled out an old quilt and spread it on the ground. He set out his picnic on paper plates—thick roast beef sandwiches with horseradish mayo, potato salad, and bottled root beer. He’d even brought butter tarts for their dessert.

“This is amazing,” said Amira. She sat down carefully and reached for her fork. Dean sat down next to her with his plate on his knee. They ate for a while in companionable silence, listening to the music of the natural world. Birds chirped in the bushes. Fish splashed in the creek. The wind sighed in the hilltops, high overhead. Dean had ridden this trail hundreds of times, and often stopped here to eat his lunch. But it all felt new again, sharing it with Amira, watching her take it in with wondering eyes.

“This place feels too peaceful to have a ghost.” She brushed crumbs from her butter tart off her jeans. “If I could picture heaven, it would look something like this.”

“Heaven, huh?” Dean watched the wind toying with her dark, lustrous hair. He pulled her towards him, and she leaned into the kiss, her lips hot and eager against his own. She tasted of sugar from her dessert. Her warm hands slid up to tangle in his hair, and Dean reveled in the feeling of being held to her.

At that moment, the breeze picked up, ruffling their quilt—and then picking up Amira’s plate and blowing it away. She scrambled after it, but it was Dean who caught it. He caught her as well, and spun her into his arms. She kissed him again, and they turned in a slow circle, dancing like teenagers under the blue sky.



Dean would have been happy to stay up here forever. But the horses were snorting, growing impatient. They knew the routine from all the times he'd done it before on his own—up the trail, stop for lunch, then back to the stable—where they'd get *their* lunch. He couldn't keep them waiting.

"We'll take the south trail back," he decided. "It's not as steep. Easier for a novice." They mounted up and started down the south trail, a meandering path that skirted the hills. Amira seemed more confident with the morning's ride under her belt, and sat relaxed in her saddle, enjoying the views. She exclaimed when the trail took them past the old chapel, half-hidden in the valley where the cottonwoods grew.

"I've never seen this," she said. "Can we get closer?"

Dean slowed reluctantly. He'd hoped to pass by the chapel without having to think about it, or what it represented.

"It's beautiful," said Amira, turning her horse up the path. "Oh, but it looks like some windows are broken."

"Yeah. We had a storm a couple of years back, tore up a big tree and did some damage. The whole north wall needs repairing, and those windows back there." He dismounted his horse and headed up the front steps. The doors creaked when he opened them, stiff from disuse. Jackson had loved this place, and he'd wanted to restore it. He'd figured that into his five-year plan, but Dean couldn't see how he'd have made it work—not with all the other things he thought should come first.

Behind him, Amira gasped. "Look at that window!"

Dean raised his eyes and tried not to flinch. The stained glass was still there, behind the altar, a cowboy hat and lasso above two gloved hands clasping. If the ranch had a coat of arms, that would be it, those two clasped hands enshrined in stained glass. The image represented family, and the power of tradition. Knowledge passed down from one generation to the next. Only, when it came to all that, Dean was an outsider. Dad had passed his knowledge straight down to Jackson, only turning to Dean when Jackson was gone.

Amira's hand found his. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, just...memories. Dad and Jackson used to come out here a lot, to talk about plans for the ranch. I...was never part of those conversations." Dean swallowed hard. He wasn't the one who should be running this ranch. That should be Jackson, but with him gone, maybe Francis was the best choice. He'd hire the right people, make sure things were done properly. Dean was doing his best, but he didn't have Dad's expertise or Jackson's passion. All he had were doubts—and the more he worked on his five-year plan, the more he collected.

"It'll be hard to sell this place," he said. "But I think I might have to. I'm not sure I can make it work without Dad and Jackson."

Amira held his hand tighter. "I'll stay longer, if that would help. If you need to work harder to see your plan through, or if you need help transitioning to whatever comes next."

Relief washed through Dean. "Thank you," he said, and the words came out hoarse. "That means a lot to me, so—thank you so much."

They stood in the doorway, shoulder to shoulder, hands clasped, looking up at the sun streaming through the stained glass.

Vivien's home was loud and chaotic. The family had gathered at Vivien's for dinner for a change, to celebrate the first meal cooked in her newly renovated kitchen, but now the meal was done, the crowd had dispersed. Caitlyn and Caleb were asleep in the guest room, and Vivien's kids were playing hide-and-seek. Frank had excused himself to work on his truck, which had been making a strange knocking noise.

"He always needs a project," said Vivien. "He wants to redo the den next, but I don't know."

"Sounds like a lot of work," said Amira. She thought Vivien looked tired. Apparently, Josie thought so too, because she frowned and shook her head.

"You've had enough banging around here to last you a while. Tell Frank he has a lifetime to get this place the way he wants it. Not everything has to be done right away."

Vivien gave a wan smile. "I'll tell him to get that truck running before he tackles anything else. Today it's a weird sound. Last week, it was the brakes. It's always something with that truck. I swear it's cursed." She took a sip of her coffee and seemed to revive. "Anyway, the reason I've asked you here—besides dinner, I mean—is...hey, Frank. Frank come in here."

Frank came in from the garage and took a seat next to Vivien. He kissed her on the temple, and she seemed to relax.

"We're coming up on two years since Jackson passed away," she said.

Dean's expression tightened, but he didn't respond. Amira nudged their knees together under the table, a gentle reminder she was there for him.

"We should do something," Vivien went on. "Some kind of memorial, now some time's passed. I was in too much shock at the time to set up anything more special than his funeral. He

deserves more than that. It would be nice to honor him now we can think straight.”

“Could be,” said Dean, but he didn’t sound sure. “What did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking a road trip,” said Vivien. “Like when we were kids and Dad would drive us somewhere. Remember that time we went to Montana? And we got caught in that freak snowstorm on Beartooth Highway?”

Dean frowned. “We can’t drive to Montana with two four-month-olds.”

“And you know our three would just fight all the way,” said Frank.

“I wasn’t saying we should go all the way to Montana, just pick some campground close by and spend the night. We could make s’mores and tell stories about Jackson, then we’d cuddle up in our sleeping bags and drive back first thing.”

“Jackson did love camping,” said Josie. “But Dean makes a good point. The twins are too young.”

Vivien threw up her hands. “Fine, fine, I hear you. What do you want to do?”

“Well, I don’t know. Until you brought it up, I hadn’t really thought of doing anything all that grand. I thought we’d have a dinner, and maybe share some thoughts. Plant a tree, maybe, out by the chapel.”

Dean considered it. “Jackson liked to have fun. A dinner feels too quiet. Same with a tree, especially out there where nobody goes. We should do something he’d have done. Something exciting. Ride on a roller coaster or...I don’t know. Something we haven’t done before, so it’s an adventure.”

Vivien fixed the whole table with a withering glare. “So those are your ideas? That’s all you’ve got? A dinner and a tree, maybe, or some vague adventure? And no to my road trip? That’s voted down, but—what, you’re expecting me to come up with something else? My plate’s full enough with the Strawberry Festival.” She slapped the table in exasperation, and Amira flinched back. She wanted to fix this, make it okay,

but she couldn't imagine where to begin. The family's grief was still raw, and it didn't involve her.

Frank cleared his throat and all heads turned his way. "Why don't we all take a break?" he said. "Dean and I can take the kids out for ice cream."

Dean frowned. "You can take them. We ought to figure this out."

"No can do," said Frank. "My truck isn't running."

"Go on," said Vivien, with a defeated sigh. "We're not going to get anywhere going on like we are. Let's all take a break, then we'll try again later."

Frank called the kids down, and they charged out to Dean's truck. Amira stayed back to help clean up the kitchen. She gathered up the stray plates and took them to the sink, but when she turned to ask Vivien if she wanted to wash or dry, she was surprised to see her still slumped at the table. Her shoulders were shaking, her head in her hands. Amira started towards her, but Josie waved her back.

"Sorry, honey," she said, and set her hand on Vivien's shoulder. "I can see that this means a lot to you, and we didn't —"

"It's not your fault." Vivien's voice was choked. "It's just all so much. The move, the renovations, the festival, now Jackson—I'd forgotten how close we were to that date, myself, till I got up this morning. I saw the calendar and...how could I forget?"

"You didn't," said Josie. "We have plenty of time. Let us make you some coffee. Then we can—"

"I just need my mom." Vivien turned and pressed her face to Josie's belly. Josie held her gently, and stroked her hair.

"It's all right," she said. "You're doing so well. The festival's going amazing, the best one yet. Everyone says so, even the Grand Dames."

Vivien pulled back. "Then, why didn't you want to do it with me?"

Josie's face fell. "What?"

"You think I haven't noticed you hanging back? Sitting on the edges, doing the bare minimum? I thought, when I took over, we'd be doing it together, but I've been out here like the Lone Ranger, dealing with everything all by myself. When I said I'd do it, I thought it would be *us*."

"Oh, Vivien—oh, honey." Josie reached for the tissues, and Amira pushed them her way. Vivien snatched one and blotted at her eyes.

"I don't get it, Mom. Why'd you back off?"

"I thought—oh, sweetheart..." Josie cleared her throat. "You're so independent, you and Dean both. I thought you didn't need me, and I didn't want to get in your way, so I gave you both space."

Vivien stared, incredulous. "You thought we didn't need you? I'm drowning over here. Of course I need my mom. I've never needed you more. As for Dean, he's got twins. You know he needs all the help he can get."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so." Vivien crossed her arms. "Dean tries to hide it, but I've got three kids myself. I know he's exhausted, and I know he needs you. Don't let him fool you. You've got to insist."

Josie sat down heavily. "You're right. I've been holding back so long, not wanting to intrude, but those days are over. Amira?"

"Yes?"

"Put me on that babysitters' list. I don't care what Dean says. I want my granny time, and no one's going to stop me."

Amira smiled. "Consider it done."

Vivien balled up her tissue and tossed it in the trash. "Well, now that's settled, shall we tackle this mess?"

Amira and Josie both groaned, but they pitched in gamely, and by the time the men got back, the kitchen was spotless. Dean

came up to Vivien as she rinsed out the sink.

“I’m sorry about before,” he said. “We can talk about doing something for Jackson. I don’t know about a road trip, but maybe camping on the ranch? You guys could take your sleeping bags up in the hills, and I could get the twins home in time for bed.”

“That could work,” said Vivien. “But there’s still time. We don’t have to decide on anything tonight. We should all think it over, then we’ll try again.”

Vivien went upstairs after that, to put her youngest to bed. Dean and Amira dropped Josie off at her apartment, then headed home themselves. Dean was quiet on the drive, and Amira thought he seemed stressed. She’d planned on broaching the subject of adding Josie to the babysitters’ list, but she wanted to do that when he was in a good mood. It was too important to risk him shutting her down like he had whenever she’d brought it up before.

The twins stirred and fussed a little when the truck rolled to a stop, but they settled back down when Amira and Dean scooped them up.

“Three weeks ago, they’d have been screaming for hours,” said Dean, as he tucked Caitlyn into her crib. “If I haven’t thanked you already, thank you for this.”

Amira brushed a speck of lint off Caleb’s sleeping cheek. “It’s just routine,” she said. “It helps them relax. They’ll still have days where all they want to do is scream, but the safer they feel, the less that’ll happen.”

“Still, I’m glad you’ll be staying.” Dean came up behind Amira and slid his arms around her waist. She leaned back against him, feeling safer herself. Protected in his arms. She loved that feeling.

“I was thinking, on the drive home, about what could be done for your brother’s memorial.” She turned to face him, wanting to look him in the eye. “I’d love to help out with that, however I can. Once you agree on what you’re doing, I’d be happy to \_\_\_”

“That’s not your job,” said Dean, pulling away. Amira’s eyes widened at his gruff tone.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t apologize.” Dean’s expression softened. “I didn’t mean to sound so harsh. It’s just, you’ve got plenty on your plate already. And you’ve been generous, agreeing to stay. You don’t have to take this on, on top of all that.”

Amira forced a bright smile so her hurt wouldn’t show. She’d thought it meant something when Vivien felt comfortable discussing Jackson’s memorial with her at the table. She’d felt like all of them—Dean included—had wanted her there, had viewed her as part of the family.

“I should get an early night,” she said. “Tomorrow’s looking busy, with the festival planning.”

“Yeah, I should get to bed, too,” said Dean. “I’ve had too many late nights lately.” He leaned down and kissed her on her forehead, but for once, Amira wasn’t tempted to steal a kiss on the lips. She squeezed his shoulder briefly and retreated to her room, where her travel bag poked out from under her bed. Had she made a mistake, agreeing to stay? A lot of parents hit a crisis of confidence as her departure date approached and asked her to consider extending her contract, but they all landed on their feet once she moved on. Her boot camp took two months, and not a day longer. She believed in her method, and in the parents she worked with. Until now, that belief had made her impervious to pleas to stay.

She sat down on the bed, suddenly exhausted. She believed in Dean too—she knew he didn’t need her, as a nanny at least. She’d agreed to stay because she’d felt *wanted*. Now she wasn’t so sure she hadn’t misread the signs. Had she agreed to outstay her welcome?

She lay down with her clothes on and curled around the pillow, knowing sleep wouldn’t come for her any time soon.



Dean picked Amira up from the festival just after lunch. She'd been volunteering at the craft fair's kiddie corner, keeping the little ones amused while their parents loaded up on artisan goods. She covered a yawn as she buckled Caitlyn into her car seat, and Dean frowned, concerned.

"Tough morning?"

"Not really," said Amira, leaning back in her seat. She pulled on her seat belt and closed her eyes. "We had a little incident with a shaken pop can, but your mom stepped in to help me clean up."

Dean nodded. He wasn't sure he was thrilled with Mom doing so much when this was supposed to be the time in her life when she could take it easy for a change, but when he'd tried to discourage her, she'd let him have it. She'd called him ageist, and maybe he deserved it. He guessed he wouldn't like it much either, if Caitlyn and Caleb grew up and decided they were in charge of what he could and couldn't do.

He did a double take as he turned up the drive to the ranch and spotted a dozen trucks parked by the house. Mom's was among them—was she throwing a party? It didn't seem like her, doing that without asking.

"What's going on?" asked Amira.

Dean shrugged. "Not a clue. Mom didn't say anything about this to you?"

"Last I saw of your mother, she was headed home for lunch. At least, I thought she was, but I guess she came here."

"I don't like this," said Dean. He found a space near the house and nosed his truck in. Once he was parked, he got out to help Amira with the twins. Caitlyn was wide-awake and babbling excitedly. Caleb was rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Amira reached out and touched his arm.

“Whatever’s happening, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Dean didn’t share her certainty, but he managed a smile. “At least it’s happening on a day without much going on. Mark’s doing the feed run, so my afternoon’s clear.”

They made their way up the steps, the twins cooing in their carriers. Dean paused with his hand on the doorknob and drew a deep breath. Whatever he was about to walk in on, he promised himself he wouldn’t freak out. He’d step up and handle it like Dad would have done.

“Here goes nothing,” he said, and opened the door.

“Surprise!” shouted what seemed like half the town’s women—including Mom, Carol, Vivien, their friends from church, and the wives of his ranch hands. They all crowded the couch, all beaming up at him, a sea of bright smiles. So, Mark had known about this, whatever this was. Freed up Dean’s day and not said a word of warning. Dean reminded himself to get revenge later.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s your baby shower.” Vivien grabbed his hand and Mom grabbed Amira’s. “Come on, you two. This is your day!”

“Wait, baby shower?” Dean tried to pull back. “Doesn’t that happen *before* they’re born?”

“Ordinarily, it does,” said Carol, manhandling Dean into the love seat next to Amira. “But yours came without warning, so your shower’s a little late.”

“But it’s better this way,” said Josie. “With a normal shower, you get newborn stuff—big piles of diapers, onesies they’ll grow out of in two minutes flat. You’ve already got all that, so your gifts are more creative.”

Dean wasn’t sure what to make of it, but judging by Amira’s expression, he suspected he was in for something. She sat stiffly beside him, staring straight ahead.

“I should make coffee,” she said. “Or snacks. Do we have snacks?” She went to get up, but Vivien bumped her back down.

“No, no, we’ve got all that. Like I said, it’s your day. Sit back, relax, and open some presents.” She thrust the first gift into Amira’s hands, a big, soft, lumpy thing wrapped in pink paper. Amira tossed it at Dean like a hot potato. She cast about, panicked, like she was searching for an exit.

Dean leaned toward her. “Amira? You okay?”

She nodded with a little too much enthusiasm. “Just surprised, I guess. Uh...there must be something I can do. Oh! We need a basket for all the paper.” She jumped off the couch like she had a spring in her rear end, and dodged straight past Vivien, out of the room. Dean went to go after her, but Carol piped up.

“Aren’t you going to open the present? That one’s from me.”

“Yeah—yeah, of course I am. Thanks for this, Carol.” Dean unwrapped the gift carefully, unsure whether Amira wanted to save the paper or throw it out. The room filled with *oohs* and *aahs* as its contents spilled forth, two big afghan blankets in yellow and green.

“She knitted those,” said someone.

“Sure did,” said Vivien. “Each of my kids got one as well.”

“They’re, uh...soft,” said Dean, still distracted. He focused on the blankets, not wanting to be rude. “Thank you, really, Carol. The twins are going to love these. I just wish they could talk, so I could ask who wants which color.”

“This next one’s heavy,” said Vivien, and handed him a box. Dean nearly dropped it, not registering her warning. Amira had returned with a wicker wastebasket, and was hovering near the door with it, looking as though she might flee any moment. Dean frowned. Didn’t she want to be part of this? He plucked the bow off the present and held it up for her to see.

“Are we saving these or throwing them away?”

“Uh...” She glanced behind her, then back at the bow. “That *is* really shiny. You might want it for Christmas.”

“Come over here, then. Let me put it in the basket.”

Amira came over slowly, and Dean half-expected her to just stand there, or dart away the first chance she got. But she sat

down next to him, on the edge of the love seat. She nodded at the present.

“Who’s this one from?”

One of the ranch hands’ wives put her hand up. “That’s from me and Devon. Our little ones loved them, so we thought we’d pass them on.”

Dean tore off the paper and opened the box. Inside were dozens of books, gently loved but still good. He took them out one by one and flicked through the pages, noting how the text got more complex the deeper he dug. These books would take the twins right through to kindergarten, from *Everybody Poops* to *We Don’t Eat our Classmates*.

“These are amazing,” he said. “The twins love story time.”

The presents kept coming, and Amira finally seemed to relax, smiling as she watched Dean unwrap them. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder why she didn’t join in. Hadn’t she just been saying how she envied his deep roots, and the connection he had to this place and this community? Well, here it was, her chance to connect, and she was just sitting there, barely joining in at all. Maybe she’d meant she’d like to put down roots *somewhere*, not necessarily here.

“These ones are for you both,” said Mom, interrupting Dean’s spiral. “A reminder to take care of yourselves, as well as the kids. It’s easy to get lost in that new parent whirl, and forget to carve out time to live your own lives.”

Amira stared at her gift, her eyes wide and startled. “For me? I couldn’t—”

“Of course you could. We’ve all seen how hard you work. You deserve a break too.”

“I...thank you, but I’m not...” Amira trailed off, and Dean’s mouth went dry. Just what exactly had she been about to say? Her words and her actions didn’t line up. One day, she was gushing about having found heaven; the next, she was trying to get away. He’d thought she wanted more when she agreed to stay, but maybe that had been a professional decision, for

the good of the kids—not because she truly wanted to be part of his life, his future.

“Open them,” said Mom, and clapped her hands. That seemed to snap Amira out of her daze, and she carefully unwrapped the present in her lap. Mom had made her a basket full of goods from the craft fair—bath bombs and lotions and beauty products, all handmade and delicious-smelling. Amira leaned down and took a deep whiff.

“This is incredible,” she said. “It’s really too much.”

“Nonsense,” said Mom. “You’ve earned every bit of it.” She reached into the basket and pulled out a bar of soap wrapped in paper. “Wash your face with this right before bed. I don’t know how it does it, but it’ll put you straight to sleep.”

“Open yours,” said Vivien to Dean. “I think you’ll like it.”

Dean already knew what she’d gotten him by the sound the package made when he lifted it. But he tore off the wrapping and grinned anyway.

“Thanks, sis,” he said. “A fisherman never can have too many lures.”

“Make sure you use those, take some time just for you. I don’t want to come back here a year from now, and find them all fresh, still in their box.”

“You won’t,” said Dean, and he meant it. The lures were a great gift, and he intended to use them as soon as he could.

The baby shower drew to a natural end when the babies started fussing, first Caitlyn, then Caleb, both needing changed. Amira took them upstairs, and by the time she’d changed them and soothed their crying, the party was over and the guests were heading out. Dean was in the kitchen, packing the leftover snacks into Tupperware containers for later. He didn’t turn around when Amira came down, unsure what to say to her, or how to say it. He wanted some clarity about where they stood, but he didn’t want to fight, and he didn’t want to risk scaring her away. He needed to handle this carefully.

“They’re sleeping,” said Amira.

“I was wondering,” he started, then ran out of words. Amira sat at the table.

“Wondering what?”

“I don’t know. You seemed nervous at the shower. Like it made you uncomfortable.”

“Oh, that.” Amira slumped forward, resting her elbows on the table. “I didn’t mean to make it awkward. It’s just, I’ve never been great at being the center of attention.”

Dean slapped the top down on a Tupperware box. “I don’t love it either, but it’s for the kids, right?”

Amira didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then she stood up and came over to the counter. “I hope I wasn’t rude,” she said. “It’s just, growing up the way I did, attention wasn’t usually a good thing. Half the time, it meant I was dealing with a flare-up again, and I needed poking and prodding. The other half—parties, all that kind of thing—there was always this undercurrent of trying to make it perfect, as if that could make up for everything else.”

Dean took a deep breath. What she was saying made sense. And surely she’d say something if it had really upset her to have everyone view and treat her as part of the family when she was planning on leaving once Dean’s life settled down.

“Come here,” he said, and opened his arms. Amira pressed against him as he pulled her close. At first he just held her, then he felt her pulse pick up. When she looked up, her smile was warm and full of promise. He kissed her sweetly, then with rising passion, and she rose to meet him, pressing her body to his. She fit perfectly against him, and he knew he had to have her. Had to remind her where she belonged, right here with him, in the circle of his arms.

He swept her up and carried her back to the den, and laid her down in the remains of the party, festive paper crinkling underneath her. Amira pulled him on top of her and wrapped her legs around his waist. He could feel how much she wanted him in the hitch of her breath, in her sunset-fire kisses and her nails down his back. More than her words, her body language

reassured him—how could she *want* like this and just walk away?

“I need you,” he murmured into her neck.

Amira arched up against him. “I need you more.” She unbuckled his jeans and he pushed her pants down. Her moans grew urgent as she freed his cock. She stroked him twice, teasing, then pushed him away.

“Protection, have you got—”

“Yeah, in my wallet.”

She dug in his pocket and pulled out his wallet, extracting a condom that she rolled down his length, teasing and slow. He reached for her warmth, letting his fingertips glide over her nub, then slide inside her. He watched her face as he stroked her. Eyes half-mast, lips clenched between her teeth. She finally repositioned herself and guided him inside her. Dean gasped at the heat of her, and the sense of becoming one. This time, Amira didn't try to be quiet, and Dean basked in the sounds she made, all for him. Every touch wrung a moan from her, every kiss a hot gasp. When she said his name, sparks raced down his spine.

He rode the wave of his need as far as it would take him, to a blinding orgasm, and he felt Amira follow, shuddering all over. She kissed him through the aftershocks and he stretched out beside her, and as he basked in the afterglow, an unwelcome thought crept in: had he and Amira just cemented their union? Or were they just making the best of things before time ran out?

“So, what’s the idea?” Vivien glanced past Amira, into the house. “And where are the kids?”

“Dean has them,” said Amira. “He took them to the doctor for their four-month checkup. I thought we could talk while he isn’t around.”

“Sneaky,” said Vivien. “Should I be worried?”

“No—no, I hope not.” Amira joined Vivien out on the porch. “I just had a thought I wanted to run past you, for Jackson’s memorial. I might be overstepping...”

Vivien grimaced. “Overstep all you want. Mom keeps shooting down all my suggestions, but she hasn’t come up with a whole lot, herself.”

“She’ll be here any minute,” said Amira. “But while we’re waiting, here’s what I had in mind. Dean took me riding the other day, and we stopped by the old chapel with the stained glass. The way Dean looked at that window—it means a lot to him, right?”

“It means a lot to all of us,” said Vivien. “What are you thinking?”

“Well, I couldn’t help but notice the stained glass has gotten damaged. And I happen to know how to repair stained glass. I thought we could bring the window up to the house, and I’d patch up the damage.”

“I love it,” said Vivien. “Oh, there’s Mom now.” She waved at Josie’s car coming up the drive. “Did you want to bring Dean in on this, or were you thinking it would be a surprise?”

“That’s part of what I wanted to ask you,” said Amira, as she watched Josie park. “You know him better than I do. Does he like surprises, or will he freak out?”

“Freak out about what?” Josie stepped out of her car and strolled over to join them. Amira and Vivien filled her in on



the plan, and she stood nodding slowly, thinking it over.

“I’d say, let’s do it,” she said at last. “Maybe it’ll be the reminder he needs of how much the ranch’s legacy means to this family. I’ve been holding my tongue, wanting him to be able to make whatever decision he thinks is best for him and the twins, but I swear, if he sells—I swear, when he told me, you could’ve knocked me over with a feather. I truly think he’ll regret it if he goes through with this. I know that running the ranch himself was never what he thought he’d be doing with his life, but he’s been doing so well at it, now that he’s starting to find his stride.”

“We’d best get on with it, then,” said Vivien. “It’ll be tough for just the three of us, taking down that window, and we’ll want to do it before Dean gets home.”

They all piled into Vivien’s truck and rode out to the chapel. Sunlight was streaming through the stained glass when they arrived, and the three of them paused to take in the sight. Even in its damaged condition, the window was stunning, a glorious tribute to the tradition of ranching, passed down from generation to generation within the family.

“Dad commissioned that window when he took over the ranch,” said Vivien. “Jackson and Dean were just babies back then, but he was already thinking about the day one of them would take over.”

“That’s what the hands mean,” Josie added. “A chain of family passing their legacy down the generations. Dean’s never seen himself as part of that tradition, but with the window restored, maybe he’ll see it.”

“He doesn’t need to *be* Dad to carry that torch. He needs to lead his own way, and I know he can do it.” Vivien’s voice rose, harsh with frustration. “Selling the ranch! I can’t believe he’s even—”

“Don’t get worked up,” said Josie. “This is something Dean needs to work through for himself. But that doesn’t mean we can’t give him a nudge.”

The three of them set to work loosening the putty holding the window in place. It wasn't a large window, or overly heavy, but the task still took time. Amira thought about Dean, and her own place on the ranch—if she even had one, beyond her contract. If Dean sold, there would be big changes ahead as Francis brought in new people to run things and everything got handed over. Plus, Dean would have his new fishing/tourism business to get off the ground. There would be a lot of upheaval for the family. She'd get them through the transition, and then...she wasn't sure. Maybe fixing this window would be her farewell gift to Dean, something to remember her by once she'd moved on.

She struck her thumb with her chisel and stifled a curse. Josie grabbed her hand and held it up to the light, but she'd hit right on the nail, and she wasn't bleeding. She'd have a nasty bruise, but nothing worse.

“No daydreaming,” said Josie. “That’s how you get hurt.”

“I wasn't,” said Amira, but she guessed she had been. Since she'd come up with the idea of repairing the window, she'd had two outcomes stuck in her head, one happy ending and one tragedy. In the happy ending, Dean saw the window restored and gleaming. He remembered what the ranch meant to him and decided not to sell it, and asked Amira to stay at his side, not as his nanny, but as his partner—in life and in love. To run the ranch with him, raise a family with him.

In the other version, Dean saw the window and was hurt and angry at her interference, the way that he'd been with the termite tenting. Would he see it as her interfering, going behind his back and trying to manipulate him into doing what *she* thought was best? Would he see it as overstepping, acting as if she was part of the family when she wasn't?

“He really loved this window,” said Josie. “Jackson, I mean.” She set down her chisel and dabbed at her eyes. “He loved this whole chapel. He'd come out here to think, or just to get away. When he was little and something upset him, I always knew where to look for him once he'd had time to cool down.”

“As an adult as well,” said Vivien. “I found him out here after his breakup with Sherri.”

“Ugh—don’t remind me.” Josie pulled a face. “I knew from the get-go that one would break his heart.”

“It really is perfect, though, restoring this to remember Jackson.” Josie reached out and touched the stained glass. “Hey, Amira?”

Amira blinked. “Yes?”

“You said you could fix this, but can you add something?”

“Add something? Like what?”

“Maybe a little fireman’s hat to honor Jackson. And a fish for Dean, and booties for the twins? Something for everyone, Vivien and her kids too. We could all brainstorm how we want to be represented, get the whole family in on it.” She trailed her finger along the window’s bottom panel. “You could fit them in here, where it’s just blue.”

“All the generations,” said Vivien. “That’s a beautiful idea. I can’t think of a better way to remind Dean of his place—right here on the ranch, surrounded by family. Both the ones he has with him, and the ones who came before.”

“And the ones still to be born, who will come after.” Josie turned to Amira. “So? Can you do it?”

“I can,” said Amira, and the words came out choked. Josie’s musings on family had touched her heart. She couldn’t think of anything better than being part of this family, learning their traditions and passing them on.

“We’d better finish up here before Dean gets back.” Josie picked up her chisel and got back to work. Amira and Vivien pitched in, and soon the window came loose. They wiggled it free carefully and carried it out to the truck, where they wrapped it in a quilt Amira had brought for the purpose. Josie added her jacket as extra padding, just to make double-sure the stained glass was safe.

They made good time driving back to the house, but not quite good enough. Dean’s truck swung onto the drive as Vivien

finished parking.

“Oh, no!” Josie exclaimed. “Bad luck.”

“I can take it home for now,” said Vivien. “I’ll sneak it back later when the coast is clear.”

“No way,” said Josie. “The road into town is full of potholes. All that bouncing and jouncing doesn’t mix with glass.”

“I’ll distract him,” said Amira. “You two slip the window in the back door. Hide it in the laundry room. Dean’s never in there.”

Josie and Vivien conspired back and forth between themselves, working out signals for when to move and when to hide. Amira smiled at their enthusiasm. She hopped out of the truck and hurried to intercept Dean, who’d already parked, and was wrangling the twins. Caleb was howling, and Amira blessed his little lungs. The noise would be a great cover for their stealth operation.

“Dean! You’re back! How can I help?”

Dean frowned suspiciously over Caleb’s head. “What’s Mom doing here? Why are she and Vivien sitting in the truck?”

“They dropped by to see the twins, but you were out. They were about to head to the diner for lunch, but now you’re back, they’re probably staying.”

Dean’s frown deepened. “Then, why—”

“What happened to Caleb?” Amira reached for him. “Poor little guy. His face is all red.”

“He had to get some shots,” said Dean, and bounced Caleb in his arms. “He was fine for the first ones—he was looking at Caitlyn—but then he got wise to the way they were handling him and freaked out.”

“Let me take him,” said Amira. “Why don’t you grab Caitlyn?”

Dean handed Caleb over and leaned into the truck. Amira waved at Vivien and Josie. They hopped out of the cab and raced around to grab the window, positioning it between them

like a patient on a stretcher. Amira could hear them squabbling over Caleb's cries.

"No, turn around."

"No, no, not *that* way."

Amira turned back to Dean in time to see that he'd unstrapped Caitlyn, and was about five seconds from turning around.

"Uh..." She'd never been a good liar, but she tried anyway. "Do you see Caleb's sock in there? He's only got one."

"Hold on," said Dean, and leaned in farther. The door bumped shut on his Wrangler-clad ass, and he let out an undignified squawk. Amira glanced over her shoulder and saw Josie and Vivien escaping, shuffling crablike around the side of the house toward the back door.

Dean pulled back slightly. "I don't see any sock."

"Uh, yeah—yeah, he's got it. It was hiding in his pants."

"Of course it was." Dean straightened up. He plucked Caitlyn from her car seat and hoisted her in his arms. "Where'd Mom and Viv go?"

Amira turned, as if she didn't know. "Inside, I guess? They must be staying for lunch."

"Weird," said Dean. "I didn't hear the front door."

Amira stood awkwardly on tiptoe to steal a kiss, over Caitlyn and Caleb's tiny heads. When she pulled back, Dean was smiling, all his suspicion apparently forgotten.

"Let's get lunch," he said, and Amira breathed an inward sigh of relief. Operation Window was officially a success.

Dean frowned to himself, heading up the porch steps, brushing dust off his pants from an afternoon of hay-baling. He'd put in a full day, sunrise to supper, but work on the ranch never felt done. Each day ended with some task put off for tomorrow, and an uneasy sense of falling behind.

Tonight, he just wanted to spend time with Amira and the kids, but Mom was here again, her car parked out front. She'd probably want to stay and eat, and by the time she left, the day would be over. Dean knew he should be grateful that she wanted to come over and pitch in—Caitlyn and Caleb loved her, and she did a lot around the house—but what he felt was drained. He needed quiet to recharge, and time to relax.

Dean kicked off his boots and let himself in. He could hear Mom reading to the twins in the den, but when he peeked in, Amira wasn't with them. A muffled thud let him know she was in Mom's old craft nook, a room that was hardly used since Mom had moved out.

"Amira?" He headed down the hall and reached for the door, but the instant he touched it, it slammed in his face. Almost like Amira had kicked it shut on him.

"Amira? You okay?" He jiggled the knob, but the door didn't open. He could feel something blocking it on the other side.

"Hold on," she said, and her voice sounded strained. "I just—I just dropped something. Give me a second."

Dean scowled. "What are you even doing in there?"

"Um..." Amira was shuffling, bumping around. "I thought, uh...The curtains in the nursery are looking sort of ratty. I thought I'd make some new ones, and there's fabric in here." She flung the door open. "Sorry about that. Did the door hit you?"

"No—no, I'm fine." Dean wrinkled his nose. The craft room smelled funky, a chemical tang. He peered past Amira,

searching for the source. “Did you spill something in there? It smells like...I don’t know. Windex and smoke.”

Amira sniffed the air, as though noticing the foul smell for the first time. “I think it’s mothballs,” she said. “The smell must have wafted out when I unrolled the blue linen.”

“Mothballs,” said Dean. He guessed that *could* be it, but Amira was acting funny, fidgeting nervously when he tried to meet her eye. She switched the light off in the craft room and stepped into the hall, tugging the door shut behind her. Dean noticed her fingers were black and grubby, like his fingers got when he worked on the truck. He opened his mouth to ask her about it, but Amira cut him off before he could get started.

“Your mom’s here,” she said, as if he hadn’t noticed. “She said she’d watch the twins and put them to bed, if you wanted to go out and try some sunset fishing. I heard the biggest fish only bite at night.”

Dean chuckled. “You heard that, did you? This night-fishing trip, would you be coming?”

Amira stepped closer. “I’d like to, if you’ll have me. I didn’t catch anything last time. I feel like I didn’t get the whole experience.”

“I don’t know,” said Dean. “You sure Mom doesn’t mind staying out late?”

“It was her idea.” Amira took his hand. “She thinks you need to destress. Take some time for yourself.”

Dean still had the sense something was off—something to do with Amira and that craft room—but an impromptu fishing trip did sound tempting. He always felt better hip-deep in the river, watching the world go by in slow motion. Maybe this was what he needed to set his thoughts straight, and get a handle on what to do next.

“All right,” he said. “I could use a break.”

Amira clapped her hands and ran to get ready. Dean stole one last peek into the craft room, but nothing seemed out of place, besides a few rolls of fabric piled on the table. He closed the door quietly and resolved not to worry. Even if Amira hadn’t

been completely forthcoming, how much mischief could she have gotten up to? He figured the most likely scenario was that she'd meant the curtains to be a surprise, and had freaked out when he'd busted her working on them.

He grabbed a bite of supper and played a while with the twins. By the time he was done, Amira was ready to go. They headed out to his truck and down to the river, and soon he was teaching Amira about the best night-fishing lures.

“Streamers work well once the sun starts to go down. They're big and they move a lot, squirming around in the water. Bigger dry flies are good, and some topwater poppers, depending where you're fishing, and what you're trying to catch.” Dean helped Amira bait her hook. “I didn't have time to swap our lines for the glow-in-the-dark kind, but it's still summer and sunset comes late. We ought to be through here before it gets truly dark.”

They waded into the river, and for a while, they fished in silence. Dean listened to the river and the droning of bugs, and the squabbling of birds settling down for the night. He loved this—he loved this place. Everything always felt easier on the river. It was a blessed relief when everything else seemed to have gotten so complicated.

If he did sell, if he chose to focus on fishing instead of ranching, he'd be building something simpler and more natural to him that was just his—something without the weight of expectations that came with the ranch. But it would also be something without the history and continuity of the ranch. Was he really ready to let all of that go, simply to make things easier? Just because something was hard didn't mean it wasn't worth the effort.

“Hey. You okay?” Amira had moved closer. “It's just, your line was jiggling. I thought you had a bite.”

Dean frowned. He hadn't noticed. “You snooze, you lose,” he said. “What's the past tense of that—'you snoozed, you losed?' Or would you say it's 'you snost, you lost?'”

Amira laughed, but Dean's teasing didn't distract her. She bumped their shoulders together. “Something's on your mind.”



“Something, yeah, everything.” He let out a long breath. “I can’t stop turning it over in my head, sell the ranch or don’t sell? I keep thinking I’ve decided one way or the other, then something happens, or someone says something...and then, there’s Jackson. This memorial thing. Mom and Vivien are going to want to talk about that, and I’ve got nothing. No idea at all.”

Amira looked thoughtful. “What did you do last year?”

Dean laughed without meaning to, a great noisy bark. “You do the math.”

Amira’s brow crinkled like she didn’t get it, then her brows shot up. “Are you saying, the twins—”

“I was just getting through it however I could, drowning the memories in a lot of cheap beer. And then one night, in a bar one town over, I found some comfort in a lady who was sweet to me when I needed it most. A year went by, and you know the rest. She didn’t want to be a mother, and here we are. Now it’s that time again, and I don’t know what to do. What do you do for someone who’s not here to see it? How do you honor him and make it count?”

Amira stood quiet beside him, maybe thinking that over. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and soothing. “I have faith,” she said. “It’ll all come together, and you’ll know what to do, about Jackson, the ranch, and all your—” She broke off with a squeal as her line went taut. “I’ve got one. I’ve got one! What do I do?”

Dean laughed. “Reel him in—no, not that hard. Don’t jerk the line, or you’re going to snap it.” He tossed his rod on the bank and moved behind her, and slid his arms around her waist. “Easy, now, give him play...”

“What does that mean?”

Dean slid his hand over hers to stop her reeling. “It means, give him slack, let him burn off some energy. Then he’ll come easier when you finally bring in the line.” The fish thrashed and leaped, and Dean let out a whistle. “Whoa, he’s a big one. He’ll take some finessing.”

Amira leaned back against him, and Dean helped her haul in the monster she'd hooked. She laughed when it splashed her, and Dean laughed with her. He grabbed his phone from his tackle box and took her picture, holding the fish up, its fat tail still flapping.

"So, do you want to eat it or let it go?"

Amira looked at the fish, its struggles now weakening. "Would you think less of me if I said 'let it go?'"

"Of course not," said Dean. He took the fish from her and cut the hook free, and tossed it back in the river with a resounding splash. They fished a while longer, but didn't catch anything else. Still, Dean couldn't help seeing that fish as a sign. It had bitten right as Amira said she had faith. Right as she'd said it would all be okay. Maybe it would be—stranger things had happened.

At home, Dean thanked Mom for watching the twins and then saw her off as she headed back to town. He and Amira checked on the babies and found them asleep. Amira leaned in close, and then pulled away.

"I need a shower," she whispered.

"Me too," said Dean. "If we wanted to save water..." He took her hand, and she didn't pull away. She let him pull her into his room, past his bed and his dresser, to the master bathroom. He turned on the water and pulled the shower curtain shut.

"Takes a while to get warm."

"I know." Amira smiled. "We can take our time undressing each other."

Dean's cock twitched at that, and he moved closer. Amira ran her palms down the front of his shirt. Her touch was light, and it made his skin tingle. His eyes fluttered shut as she set to work on his buttons. With each one she opened, she leaned in and kissed him, her lips hot and teasing against his bare skin.

"Your turn," he said hoarsely, when his shirt hung loose. He worked her buttons with far less patience than she'd shown for his, pushing her shirt down so it bound her at the wrists. Amira struggled briefly, but then she gave up, and moaned as he

leaned in to kiss the tops of her breasts, working his way along the line of her bra. When he felt her shiver, he sucked her nipple through the lace, and tugged it with his teeth, the gentlest of nips. Amira rewarded him with a sharp little cry.

“Pants off,” she said, when she’d recovered herself.

Dean grinned as he shimmied out of his jeans. Amira shook off her shirt, then her own jeans, and bent to peel off her river-damp socks. When she straightened, Dean took her hand again. He helped her into the shower, now hot and steamy, and got in behind her, pressing himself to her back. She arched and murmured as he kissed his way down her throat, butterfly kisses that made her skin rise in goosebumps.

“Wash me clean,” she said, and Dean obliged. He took the soap and worked up a lather, sudsing her from head to toe. Not an inch of her body was left unattended. She was beautiful all over, from the dimples in her elbows to her pear-shaped belly, the curve of her hips, her long, graceful toes. Dean slid his thumb under her foot to see if she was ticklish. Her whole body juddered and she let out a yelp.

“I knew you’d be ticklish,” he said.

“Two can play at that game.” She pulled him upright and went for his ribs, but Dean caught her hands and pinned them against the wall.

“Want to try that again?”

Amira giggled, pretending to struggle. Dean soothed her with kisses that quickly became frantic, her passion rising to match his own. Her left hand slid free and gripped the back of his neck. Her leg came up and hooked around his waist.

“I need you,” she gasped. “Inside me. Right now.”

Dean thought about drawing things out, making her wait, but his own need was cresting, turning his vision lust-red. He guided himself into her and felt her tighten around him, her exquisite wet heat impossible to resist. Amira covered her own mouth to stifle her moans, and Dean peppered her eyelids with kisses instead. Water streamed over their bodies and made their skin slick. Dean held Amira steady as he thrust in deep.

The hot water held steady through his climax and hers, then cut out suddenly mid-afterglow, sending them squealing and laughing from the shower, grabbing for towels to warm themselves up. Dean grabbed Amira and pulled her into his towel—and his arms—holding her close till her shivering stopped. He smiled into her wet hair, a slow, contented smile: here in this moment, he shared Amira's faith. Things would be all right, some way, somehow.

Amira adjusted the stained glass window on its stand. She'd set it up so she could see it with the light streaming through it, through the open window looking out on the yard. It looked amazing, even if she said it herself, cleaned and repaired, and with Vivien's additions worked in across the bottom. Dean was going to love this. How could he not? He'd been so stressed about coming up with something for Jackson, and now he wouldn't have to. This would be one less weight on his shoulders.

Outside, gravel crunched, signaling a truck pulling up. Amira tossed a cloth over the window, the better to surprise Josie and Vivien. The two of them came bustling in without knocking, and Amira's nerves kicked into high gear as she hurried to greet them.

"Where is it?" said Vivien, craning to see past her.

"I can't wait to see it," said Josie. "You're a treasure, Amira. Where did you learn to work with stained glass?"

"One of my previous families." Amira smiled. "The mother was an artist, and she worked with stained glass. I'd often help her once the kids went to bed." She led Josie and Vivien back to the craft room, and paused in the doorway to gather her nerve. "Now, *I'm* not an artist, so don't expect miracles, but I think it came out looking not bad."

"Quit stalling," said Vivien. "Is it under that sheet?" She grabbed for the cloth, but Amira caught her arm.

"Okay, grabby hands, give me a second!" She drew a deep breath and held it before letting it out in a rush. This was a new experience for her, being trusted with something so personal and important. Her heart felt exposed and fragile, as though it might break if she'd failed to come through.

"It isn't too late, if you want any changes." Amira reached for the cloth, but didn't pull it away. "I know this means a lot to

all of you, especially Dean—especially now, with so much going on. So I want it to be perfect, and—”

“Just show us, already!” Vivien grabbed out again, but Amira blocked her once more, needing to do this at her own pace. She lifted the sheet slowly, heart pounding in her chest. All she could think about was how Dean had looked, standing in that chapel, looking up at the sun streaming through the stained glass. He had so many feelings about this window, about the chapel and the land it stood on. For him, more than anyone, she needed this to be perfect.

“Oh, my God,” said Josie, and her eyes shone with tears.

Vivien stood staring, her mouth slightly open.

Amira’s heart plunged into the pit of her stomach. She couldn’t parse their expressions—was that astonishment or horror? She thought she’d done a good job, but so did a million five-year-olds bearing completely unidentifiable art for the fridge.

“It’s perfect,” breathed Vivien. “Did you clean it as well? The colors seem brighter than I’ve ever seen them.”

“Of course she cleaned it,” said Josie. “Just look at that light. And those little booties...oh, that’s so sweet.” She wiped at her eyes. “She’s got all of us in there—that dance shoe’s you, Viv. And look, there’s your kids, three little bunnies. And is that me and your father, the two diamond rings? It really does feel like the whole family’s back together.”

“I was going to say the same thing,” said Vivien. “Jackson would have loved this. I hope he’s looking down on us and seeing this right now. He ought to be part of this. He...” She trailed off, sniffing, and Josie hugged her close. Amira’s head spun with conflicting emotions, pride and relief, sadness and joy, and under it all, worry for Dean.

“Now I guess we need to decide where it should go,” said Vivien, when she’d caught her breath. “The den faces east. We could put it in there. The sun would shine through it first thing every day, like Dad and Jackson saying good morning.”

“Keeping their memories alive,” added Josie. She frowned at Amira. “What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’m just worried,” Amira admitted. “Dean made it pretty clear that coming up with something to honor Jackson wasn’t my job. I’m scared he won’t like it, or he’ll think I’ve overstepped. Or that it’ll just remind him of everything he’s lost.”

“You’re spiraling,” said Vivien. “Getting too deep in your head. I do that, too, get caught up in all the worst things that could happen, but you know what? They almost never do.”

“This is a beautiful memorial.” Josie smiled through her tears. “I love it, Viv loves it, and you don’t have to worry. Dean’s going to love it just as much as—”

“Love what?”

Amira whirled, a gasp caught in her throat. Dean stood in the doorway, trying to peer past her. Amira backed up slowly, arms out to her sides.

“Maybe now isn’t the time for—”

“Tell me. Love what?” Dean’s brow furrowed. “Is this what you were hiding when you slammed the door in my face the other day? When you said you were making curtains for the twins’ nursery?”

“I—well, it’s...” Amira’s throat went tight. She wished she hadn’t lied.

“Let me see,” said Dean. Amira didn’t move. She couldn’t. Vivien inched closer, helping shield the window.

“I’m not kidding. Let me see it.” Dean started forward, and Amira’s paralysis broke. She hurried to intercept him and clasp his hands in hers.

“It’s for you, for the house. For Jackson’s memorial.” She realized she was babbling, but she couldn’t stop. “I thought—well, *we* thought—”

“It was my idea,” said Vivien.

“All of ours,” said Josie. “Wipe off that sour puss and come take a look so you can see how wonderful it is.”

Dean glanced at his mother, but his frown stayed put. He dropped Amira’s hands and skirted past her to stand in front of the window, straight and stiff-backed. For a long time, he stood there, and didn’t say a word. The room went so quiet Amira could hear her own panicked breathing, and the soft creaking sounds of the house’s bones settling. Vivien looked like she was bracing for a fight, lips pressed together, hands on her hips. Josie was still smiling, but Amira thought she looked anxious.

Dean swallowed audibly in the suffocating quiet. When he finally spoke, it was just one word. “Why?”

Josie frowned. “Why what?”

“Why would you think...” Dean stepped back from the window and licked his lips. “Why would you think I’d want this in here? Want to be *in* it? That fish is me, right?”

“It’s to honor—” Vivien started, but Dean waved her off.

“Dad had that window made for him and Jackson, not me.” Dean’s voice was raw with undisguised hurt. “Did you really think you could just shoehorn me in, make me a part of it when I never was? These past two years, I’ve been losing myself trying to be what you wanted: Jackson’s replacement.”

Josie scowled. “Now, you just hold on. That isn’t—”

“I want this gone.” Dean pointed at the window. His hand was shaking. “I’m going out, and by the time I get back, this had better be out of here. Vivien can take it home, or you can, Mom. Or...hell, throw it in the garbage. I don’t care. I just don’t want it here.” He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. Amira chased after him, her head in a whirl. Of all the reactions she’d imagined from Dean—disappointment, irritation, confusion, sadness—even the worst hadn’t come close to this.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trotting to keep up with his hurried steps. “I didn’t know. I thought in the chapel, you were missing your brother, not—”



Dean rounded on her. “I *do* miss him. But I don’t want to be him. I never wanted that. I thought you understood.” He grabbed the keys to his truck and stormed out the door.

“Wait, no! Wait, Dean—let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” He turned away.

“I overstepped and I’m sorry, but talk to me. Please. We can figure this out, if you’d just—”

“Okay, fine.” Dean stopped in the driveway and leaned on his truck, his back turned to Amira. He drew in a deep, unsteady breath. “You want me to talk? I’ll talk. That window, to me, is a slap in the face. A reminder this ranch was never meant for me, no matter what Mom says. It was always Dad and Jackson, right from the start, two peas in a pod. Ranchers together. I’d try to join in at first, when I was little, but Dad would just...He’d give Jackson real chores. Real responsibilities. Me, I got games to play, little distractions. An old rope to untangle.”

“Well, if the rope needed untangling—” Amira tried to interject, but Dean just shook his head.

“I saw Dad throw it out later. He was just keeping me busy so I’d stop pestering him. So he could focus on the son he really cared about training.” He cleared his throat roughly and shook his head. “What that window says to me is none of this was ever supposed to be mine. All this time, I’ve been trying to figure out what Dad would have wanted me to do—and this feels like my answer. Selling it is the right call after all. He never wanted the ranch in my hands.”

Amira blinked hard to keep her tears back. “You don’t have to sell,” she said. “You could prove your dad wrong.”

Dean snorted laughter. “Prove him wrong, huh?”

“You could stay. You could try.”

“And would you stay with me?” Dean turned to face her. “Would you be here to support me? Here for the twins?”

“Well, I...” Amira didn’t dare break eye contact, in case Dean fled. But what she saw in his eyes was breaking her heart—

sadness, abandonment, a flicker of fear. “I’ll stay on as discussed,” she said. “A few weeks longer. But I have another family interested, other kids who need me.”

Dean scoffed. “Of course you do.”

“I’ve known this family since before I met you.” Amira kept her tone gentle, hoping to break through his anger. “I’ve worked for them before. They trust me with their kids. I can’t leave them in the lurch.”

“Why not?” said Dean. “You’re fine leaving me.”

Amira stood tongue-tied, unsure what to say. The truth—that their contract was ending, that she had other families who needed her—would just serve to anger Dean further. The truth under *that*—that Dean’s rejection of her gift had cut her to the bone—was too painful to think about, much less speak aloud.

“I don’t *want* to leave,” she said at last. “I’ve been happy here. I’ve felt...” *Wanted. Loved.* “I’ve felt at home here like nowhere else. But—”

“But what? You could stay if you’re happy. Tell me you’ll stay.”

Amira tried to hold Dean’s gaze, but his hurt burned too hot. Her hurt as well, at Dean’s harsh rejection. Bad enough, he’d rejected her gift, but he’d rejected her in the bargain. Rejected her efforts to be part of the family. She’d thought about staying because she felt wanted—but now she felt stupid and sad and cast off, an outsider who’d overstepped and been shown her place. If Dean didn’t want her, didn’t see her that way, then what was she here for? Why stay at all?

Amira looked down at her feet, unable to speak. She knew what she had to say, but the words felt sharp and spiky.

“Tell me,” said Dean.

“I can’t,” said Amira. “I’m sorry, but no. I can’t stay.”

“Then, what are you waiting for? Go on and leave now.” He got in his truck and sat staring at the wheel. “I’ve got my list of babysitters, and I’ve done your boot camp. I’ll be fine on my own till I can hire someone permanent.”

Amira stood frozen, unable to think. Had Dean just dismissed her? Was this their goodbye?

“I thought—” she started.

“You thought what?”

*That I could have a family here. That I could put down roots.* But she couldn't. She hadn't. Dean had made that clear. She'd let herself dream a while, but that dream was over. No sense drawing it out.

“Fine,” she said, dully. “You win. I'll go.”

Dean stared a moment, and Amira couldn't help hoping, praying this was the moment he'd change his mind. But he just scowled at her and turned away. “I'll let Mom know you're leaving, so she can watch the kids.”

Amira felt like he'd slapped her. “Dean—”

“Goodbye, Amira.” He slammed his door shut and hung his elbow out the window. “Thank you for everything, but this is goodbye.”

Amira stood in the driveway, her cheeks wet with tears, watching as Dean threw his truck into gear. She ached to call after him as he drove away, but only two words could win his forgiveness. Only *I'll stay*, and she couldn't.

She couldn't.

Amira almost hoped Bethany wouldn't answer the door. She knew she would—Amira had called ahead—but she wasn't ready to face the inevitable questions. *Your contract finished early? Did something happen with Dean? I thought you'd decided to extend the job for another few weeks.*

Bethany's kids rushed the door before their mom could get there, three sets of footsteps thundering down the hall. The two-year-old pressed his face up against the window, leaving sticky spit trails down the glass. He pulled a face when he saw Amira looking, and she made one back, playing along. Next thing she knew, the door flew open, and Bethany's older kids came charging out, Justin and Nina, three and four years old. Nina flung herself into Amira's arms.

"Aunt Mira!"

"Hello, sweetheart. Hey, Justin—no, careful." She reached down to keep him from grabbing her bag, packed to the brim with gifts for the family. Bethany's gift was breakable, and last time they'd chatted, Bethany had mentioned he was struggling with the concept of "gentle."

"Amira!" Bethany bustled to meet her, brushing flour off her skirt. "I lost track of time. Got caught up baking."

Amira took a deep sniff. "Mm...smells divine. Is that your pineapple upside-down cake?"

"Too right it is. I know how you love it." She pulled Amira into a gentle hug, and when she pulled back, she left Amira floury. "Come in, come in. Make yourself at home. The kids'll show you where you can put your bag."

Justin and Nina grabbed Amira by her hands, and half-dragged her into the sunlit front room.

"You can sit anywhere," said Justin.

“But not in the blue chair. That’s the pee cushion.” Nina glowered at Tobias, the two-year-old, who’d followed them in and was hovering by the door. Amira stood blinking at the chaotic scene. The kids had very clearly made the big room their own—their toys were everywhere, no surface left clear. A well-chewed pink pony sat on the mantel, between Bethany’s wedding photos and an antique clock. Coloring books lay strewn across the floor. Someone had trodden a crayon into the carpet, and Amira knelt to clean up the mess.

“Oh, no, just leave that.” Bethany hurried in, red-faced from the oven. “It’s easier to clean the whole mess once they’re done playing.”

“But, the wax will set in.”

“And my magic vinegar will get it out.” Bethany winked at her. “Go on, sit down.”

Amira rose slowly. The kids had started a rowdy game of tag, chasing each other around the front room. Their loud shrieks and laughter filled the air. Bethany seemed oblivious till Tobias tried to climb the bookshelf, at which point she caught him and set him on the ground. Amira stared at her.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, concerned.

Bethany looked puzzled, but only for a moment. “You mean the chaos? Oh, no, that’s normal. Don’t worry—it’s not as bad as it seems. They’re actually very helpful when it’s time to clean up.”

“But—”

“Being a mother isn’t like being a nanny.” Bethany smiled fondly at her rampaging kids. “It’s hard to explain, but it’s messier. Weirder. Your job’s not to come in and fix everything. It’s just to be there when your family needs you. To love them and guide them, and give them space to grow. I do teach them how to clean up after themselves because it’s a good habit to have, but I’m more chill about letting the mess sit for a while, if there’s no reason why things have to be straightened up right away.”

Amira frowned at that. She'd assumed that Bethany in her home would be just the same as the Bethany she'd seen in nannying situations—but that wasn't the case at all. She hadn't really thought about how much she, herself, might change if she was a mom instead of a nanny. But now she couldn't think of anything else. Giving Caitlyn and Caleb space to mess up, and watching day by day as they grew into themselves. She could see her and Dean teaching them how to fish, how to ride ponies, how to milk a cow. How to do long division. How to ask someone out. It was easy to picture herself sharing all their big moments, consoling them through their low points and celebrating the highs.

Bethany nudged her. "So, what do you think?"

"Huh?"

"Earth to Amira." Bethany chuckled. "I was saying you spent almost two months on that ranch. You must need some pampering. Want to do a spa day?"

Amira's muscles went loose at the thought of spa treatments, facials, massages, a luxurious mani-pedi.

"I'd love that," she said. "But what about the kids?"

"Mrs. Krantz from next door already said she'd watch them. She'll eat most of the cake, but it'll be worth it. Come on, don't you want a shea butter wrap? Your skin'll feel fresher than a newborn baby's."

Amira sighed deeply. "I want that so much, you have no idea."

"But?"

"No 'but.' Let's do it."

Bethany whooped with delight and ran to call her neighbor. Ten minutes later, there came a knock at the door, and the kids raced to get it. They swarmed Mrs. Krantz, but she only laughed, not at all bothered by their raucous onslaught. The noise and the chaos made Amira's heart hurt, but watching the kids play, all she saw was joy. Joy she wasn't part of, but maybe one day...

She pushed Dean out of her head and followed Bethany out the door. Soon, they were ensconced in two padded loungers, getting their feet rubbed while their face masks worked their magic. Amira breathed in an aroma she couldn't quite place, something eucalyptus-scented that made her cares float away.

"This is amazing. Thanks for bringing us here."

Bethany made a sleepy sound. "Any excuse," she murmured. "This place is my haven. My...what do you call it? You know, that place that's Superman's hangout?"

"The Fortress of Solitude?"

"Mm, yeah, that's it. Sweet solitude." She laughed. "Four hours is my limit, before I start missing the kids. But the staff here crams a lifetime of pampering into those four hours."

Amira just smiled at that, though she knew Bethany couldn't see her. They both had cucumber slices over their eyes—like open-faced sandwiches, she thought, and giggled. Avocado in their face masks, brown sugar scrub on their lips. Throw in the cucumber, and they were good enough to eat.

"So, what's next for you, now you're done on the ranch?"

"Europe," said Amira, and felt her mask crack. She was frowning, she realized, her stress creeping back in. "You remember the Johnsons, with their little girls? They're taking a three-month tour around Italy and France. I'm going along to keep the kids busy."

Bethany let out a low whistle. "Fancy," she said. "You'll pardon my saying so, but you don't sound that excited."

"Of course I am," said Amira, but she wasn't sure that was true. She *had* been beyond thrilled when she agreed to the trip—the Johnsons were lovely, and the trip sounded great—but now, when she pictured it, she only saw work. Not family. Not home.

"If you aren't excited, you don't have to go." Bethany's tone was gentle. "Couldn't you still back out of the contract? Find a replacement, if you feel bad?"

Amira licked her lips and tasted sugar. “I could do that,” she said. “But what would be the point? It’s not like I have anywhere else to be.”

“You could go home,” said Bethany. “Take some time for yourself. Everyone needs that, time to recenter.”

Amira shuddered at that. One of her cucumber slices slid down her cheek. She poked it back into place and tried to relax. The thought of going home made her feel almost ill. *Home*—could she call her place in DC by that name? She paid rent there, kept things there, and lived there sometimes, but the place was as bland as a mid-price hotel suite, all beige and eggshell, which was really just white. No one would be waiting there to welcome her home. No Dean, no Caitlyn or Caleb.

“I don’t know,” she said, when the silence stretched on. “There’s not much to do there, besides watch Netflix. I’d do that for a day or two, and then I’d get bored.”

“I suppose it’s easier just to keep yourself busy.”

Amira stiffened, catching an edge to Bethany’s voice. “Easier than what?”

Bethany laughed. “Are you really going to pretend you don’t know? Easier than thinking about what you really want.”

“And what do I want?”

“Shouldn’t you tell me?”

Amira pressed her lips together. Her face felt hot and prickly under her mask. Maybe Bethany was blessed with the gift of clear vision. Maybe the road of her life came with neatly marked signs, pointing the way to her heart’s desire. But Amira’s road was twisty, and lined with dark trees. She couldn’t always see where she was headed, let alone work out where she wanted to go.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” Bethany went on, apparently undeterred by Amira’s silence. “I think you’ve gotten used to life on the run, jumping from one job straight into the next. It’s kept you busy enough you never needed to think about what you actually wanted to come next. You just had to do what you do best, and you were great at it, but—”



“I’m still great at it.”

“*But*, I’m not done. These last two months, you’ve been different. Happy. Hold on a second. Let me grab my phone.”

Amira heard shuffling, and an indignant yelp as Bethany’s pedicurist was disturbed in her work. Then she heard phone sounds, tappings and clicks.

“Here it is,” said Bethany. “*You should’ve seen Josie at the craft fair today. She’s getting her groove back.* Heart emoji.”

Amira blinked. “What is that?”

“One of your texts. Here’s another. *Sorry I missed your call. We were out walking our trail. Call you back first thing?* Hear that? *Our* trail.”

“I just meant, the trail we walk every night. Fresh air before bed helps the twins sleep better.”

Bethany made a snorting sound. “You talked about that place like it was your home. Like those people were your family. You’ve never done that before. I thought maybe, you know...”

Amira bit her lip. “Don’t say it.”

Bethany ignored her. “It seemed like you were thinking of staying. You *never* do that.”

“Just a couple of extra weeks, to help Dean past the hump.”

“You keep saying that, but he’s past that already. He knows what he’s doing. He’s got his routine. I thought maybe your cowboy had lassoed your heart.”

Amira groaned. “That’s so cheesy.”

“Cheesy, but true?”

Amira’s stomach was doing backflips. She didn’t want to think about what that would mean, if Dean had indeed captured her heart. If she was in love with him, where would that leave her? Especially when she’d chosen to walk away—and he’d told her to go?

“No,” she said, but her voice shook. She said it again, more firmly this time. She’d tripped up, was all. Broken her own

rules. Things had gotten messy, but mess wasn't love.

"I know better," she said, mostly to herself. "Becoming a new parent is an intense time. Feelings run high, and they can get... misinterpreted. Dean wouldn't be the first dad to latch onto the nanny. To think he'd found love when it's really just relief. No, it's a good thing I left."

Bethany sighed, but said nothing more. Amira's eyes stung. She'd cried bitterly driving away from the ranch, and fresh tears threatened now. She blinked them back. She'd done the right thing—in her head, she knew that. It would just take time for her heart to get the message.

Amira had left a schedule on the fridge, pinned up with two bright red ladybug magnets—sitters to take him through the next two weeks. Dean stood and stared at it as the twins' bottles warmed. The kitchen felt empty without her around. Caitlyn and Caleb seemed to think so too. They were doing their best to fill the kitchen with joyous noise, Caitlyn hooting like a barn owl, Caleb banging his small fists on his plastic tray.

Dean fed them both at once, as he'd seen Amira doing, Caitlyn cradled in his lap, Caleb in his carrier. When he was done, he swapped them, and burped Caleb first. Both twins spat up on him, right on his shirt, and once again, he thought of Amira. She'd have reminded him to drape a towel over his shoulder. She kept one for that purpose, on a hook on the wall.

Carol showed up while he was changing his shirt, and was waiting in the kitchen when he came downstairs.

"Oh, hey," he said. "Aren't you early?"

Carol cocked a brow at him. "Actually, I was about to apologize. I'm a few minutes late."

Dean glanced at the oven clock and saw she was right. He should have left for the back fields ten minutes ago if he was going to have any hope of finishing the day's work and getting home by noon. The strawberry cowbake was this afternoon, and he'd promised Vivien he'd come help on the grill.

"Didn't you have breakfast?" Carol peered at the sink. "I thought there'd be dishes..."

"I did them already," lied Dean. He didn't want to admit he'd missed breakfast. That, without Amira, his routine just felt... off. "I'll be back around noon to pick up the twins. If you could have them ready, and their diaper bags packed—"

"Got it," said Carol. "Go on, we're good."

Dean let her shoo him out of the house. He ran through his morning chores feeling out of whack, like skipping breakfast had put a kink in his day. Everything he did felt rushed and off-kilter, like he couldn't quite catch up to where he should be. By the time noon rolled around, he was in a foul mood, and from the sounds of things, so were the twins. Their wails greeted him when he got out of his truck, and it was soon clear that nothing would soothe them, not hugs, not singing. He strapped them, still howling, into their car seats, and rolled into the cowbake half an hour late. Vivien descended on him, Mom hot on her heels, and they skirted around him to get to the twins.

"This is why you're late? Poor little mites!"

"What's wrong? You wet?" Mom scooped up Caitlyn and checked her diaper.

"They're not wet," said Dean, his nerves near frayed through. "They're not hungry, either, and they aren't sick. They're in a bad mood, is all."

"I wonder why." Vivien shot Dean a black look, which he chose to ignore. He wouldn't rise to the bait. Wouldn't let himself snap. They'd been working his last nerve since Amira had left, pushing for details on what had happened between them. Blaming him, judging by the tone of their questions. But *she'd* been the one who'd chosen to leave. He'd asked her right out to stay, and she'd told him no.

"I've got this," he said, already walking away. He'd get through the cowbake, get the twins home, read them a story and tuck them into bed. They'd miss Amira a few days, but kids moved on fast, especially at this age. A week from now they'd be settled in their just-Dad routine.

"We'll watch them," said Mom, hurrying to catch up. "Go get on the grill. The burger line's fixing to wrap around the block."

Mom was exaggerating, but not by much. The line stretched down the street, past the florist and the bakery and the old hardware store. Dean turned to tell Amira the beef came from his ranch, and remembered she wasn't there, and loosed a

quiet curse. The kids might soon forget her, but he wasn't sure he could move on that easily. He'd gotten used to having her around, someone to share a joke with, or a quiet moment. Someone to curl up with at the end of the day. He *missed* her, damn it, simple as that.

"Men are so stupid," said someone, as Dean tied on his cook's apron. He wasn't sure he'd agree with that as a general statement, but he felt pretty foolish, where he stood now.

"I know," came another voice—Ethel, he thought. "To think he'd find such a treasure and let her slip away!"

Dean stood up stiffly. Were they talking about him? He strained to hear more, but the crowd's chatter rose and drowned the conversation.

Dean felt self-conscious as he took his place at the grill. He could still hear the twins screaming from the bake tent, and that meant so could everyone else. The whole town could see him alone, flipping burgers. It went without saying that everyone knew Amira was gone. He imagined he could feel their eyes on his back, full of pity and judgment and unthinking blame. Of course they'd all cast him as the bad guy in this. Amira was wonderful, and she'd won their hearts. But she was the one who'd walked away. He'd asked her to stay, and she hadn't. She hadn't.

He busied himself with his grilling and tried not to listen to the whispers from the food line, little bursts and snippets that might or might not have been about him.

"—sorry for both of them, but he should have just—"

"—so *kind*. I'll miss her."

"—doesn't look happy, but who would, am I right?"

By the time the cowbake wound down, Dean was just *done*. The twins were still grouchy when he went to pick them up, but at least they'd stopped crying. That was something.

"Hey, Caitlyn, Caleb. You have fun with your grandma?"

Caitlyn peered past him and scrunched down in her carrier. Caleb kicked his heels up and made a *meh* sound. Vivien

handed him a red plastic bag.

“These are some teething rings, in case that’s their problem. They’re about the right age now for their teeth to start coming in.” She ruffled Caitlyn’s hair. “I don’t think that’s it, though. With teething, they drool. I think they’re just sad, missing Amira.”

Dean scowled. “Don’t say it like that. I asked her to stay.”

“I didn’t say it like anything,” said Vivien. “And I was there, remember? I heard what you said to her, and it wasn’t *please stay*. Don’t you make out like she just up and left.”

Dean opened his mouth to protest, or at least to chastise her for eavesdropping, but Vivien was already turning away, moving to join Mom at the pie table. Mom caught Dean’s eye, and he saw her lips twitch, puckering into the start of a frown. He stood holding the twins’ carriers in the chattering crowd, feeling more alone than he’d felt in years. Caitlyn made a burbling sound, and he let out a sigh.

“Okay then, kiddos. I guess it’s just us.”



Dean woke up the next day to more fussing, more wails—and this time, a lot of drool, too. Vivien had been wrong—the twins *were* teething—but Amira had left instructions for that. She’d left teething rings, too, better than Vivien’s, the kind you cooled in the fridge to help numb the ache. He settled them in their bouncy seats with a teething ring each, and left them gnawing and smacking while he worked nearby, tidying up the remnants of his doomed five-year plan.

“Quite a mess, huh?” He flapped a stack of papers in an attempt to make the twins giggle. It didn’t have the desired effect. “I thought I could make it work, but...yeah, guess that’s life. Sometimes you give a thing all you’ve got and it still falls apart. What do you say to that?”

The twins sucked and gurgled. Dean got to work, packing Jackson’s papers back into their boxes. He’d decided to sell

the ranch, or reality had decided for him. Whichever way he looked at it, selling seemed like the best option.

He lifted a stack of folders and the top one slid off, scattering papers all over the floor. *That* finally made the twins laugh, but Dean groaned in frustration. He got down on his knees to clean up the mess, reaching under the table to pull out Jackson's notes. These were an early draft, smudged and dog-eared, passed back and forth between Dad and Jackson. They'd scribbled in the margins, Dad in red, Jackson sometimes in black and sometimes in blue. Dean paused at the sight of their familiar handwriting, a lump rising in his throat.

*Can't avoid debt in the short term, Jackson had written. But what worries me is lack of margin for error. One bad winter storm, and we might find ourselves in the red.*

"That's what I said," said Dean.

Dad's spidery scrawl suggested he agreed, too. *Back to basics, maybe? Maintenance over growth? Which do we need more?*

Dean had asked himself the same questions. He hadn't come up with an answer. He was about to put the papers away when his name caught his eye.

*How about Dean's thing? Jackson had underlined that, like it was important. His business is growing. He has good ideas. We should pull him in on this, see what he thinks.*

Dean swiped at his eyes. They'd gone unexpectedly misty. Jackson had wanted to ask his advice? Jackson, who'd always been Dad's sole successor? The chosen one, destined to lead the ranch into the future?

"I wish you were here," he whispered to the papers. "Wish we could sit down and hash this out together." His chest tightened painfully, and Dean closed his eyes. All his life, he'd felt superfluous, Dad's extra son. But Jackson had wanted to ask his advice. Jackson had admired him, and his growing business.

*Or he was just frustrated, grasping at straws.*

But Jackson could have gone to a lot of people if he was feeling frustrated—to Mark, to the ranch hands, other ranchers

in town. Dean wouldn't have been his first choice unless... unless...

Dean rubbed his sore eyes. Maybe wanting to pull Dean in had been just a passing thought, a momentary whim that never led anywhere. He shuffled through the rest of Jackson's notes, scanning for his name, never expecting it to make an appearance—and it didn't. What Dean found instead made his breath hitch.

Jackson *had* talked to him, and he'd made notes. A full page of notes on Dean's fishing business and how he ran it, his plans for the future, how they fit with the ranch.

"I remember that," he whispered, just to himself. "I thought we were just talking. Just shooting the breeze."

Caitlyn let out a giggle, and Dean sat up straighter. Jackson had cared what he thought, enough to bring it to Dad. He'd wanted to work with him and his growing business. Why hadn't his brother told him? Why hadn't he *said*?

Dean sighed. How much easier would this have been, if Jackson had? But maybe he was asking himself the wrong questions. Maybe what he should be asking was, how long had he been seeing his family through the skewed lens of envy? He'd never felt like enough for them, but maybe he'd been measuring himself by the wrong yardstick. By what he thought they expected, not what they really needed from him.

"Dean? Dean, you in there?"

His head snapped up. "Vivien?" He crawled out, clumsy, from under the table, and spotted Vivien peering in the window. "Come in," he called. "Just cleaning up."

Vivien let herself in the front door. "I knew you had to be in there. What's going on? Are those the papers I need to sign?"

Dean glanced down at the papers he was still holding. As a part owner of the ranch, Vivien needed to sign off on the sale. Mom would need to do the same, but he'd talk to her later.

"Dean?" Vivien snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"Sorry," he said. "These are just...never mind."



“Never mind? You look like you just saw a whole graveyard of ghosts.”

Dean laughed, low and shaky. “I sort of did. These are Jackson’s notes for his five-year plan. He wanted to bring me in on it. Dad must not have let him.”

Vivien took the notes and skimmed through them quickly. When she was done, she let out a harsh laugh. “Well, that’s Dad for you. You know how he was.”

“Everyone’s got their jobs. No overlap, ever.”

“Even when we were kids,” said Vivien. “Remember me, with the tractor?”

Dean groaned—he remembered that; Vivien stealing Dad’s tractor and driving it through the fence, across the paddock, and through the barn wall. She’d jumped off just in time to keep from being crushed as the hayloft caved in.

“If he’d just taught me to drive it, that would never have happened. But that wasn’t my job, just his and Jackson’s. All he ever thought I should do was take care of the house.”

“And you’re so outdoorsy. That never seemed fair.”

“I’m not mad at him,” said Vivien, and her voice was small. “Not anymore, at least. That’s how his dad did things, and I guess it worked for him and his siblings. But the world’s moved on, and I guess we have too. I just can’t help thinking, if Dad had moved on, if he’d brought you in sooner, would we be standing here now? Would we be about to say goodbye to the family legacy he thought was in place?”

Dean only grunted. He’d been thinking the same. Deep down, he *was* mad, and disappointed, and sad. He loved this land, and all the memories that lived on it, even Vivien and her tractor ride. Every last one. Those memories were all part of him, even the ones that stung. But it wasn’t just the land itself—it was what it represented. The business that had been built over the years, the ranch work he’d wanted so badly to be a part of when he was little. When had that changed? When had he decided ranching wasn’t for him? *Was* it something he’d truly decided, or had he just chosen the easier path in not

fighting his dad? What did he truly want to be—and to do with his life?

“You’re doing the right thing,” said Vivien. She put her hand on his arm. “I know this is hard, but Mom and I understand. That’s why we’re not fighting this. You’re choosing the life that you want. We wouldn’t be much of a family if we tried to hold you back.”

Dean managed a nod, but his resolve was crumbling. There had to be a better way—a better future than this.

Amira sat on the bed, feeling somewhat...ornamental. The Johnson girls were running about their shared hotel room, picking out their outfits for their trip to the Louvre. Jenny held up a pink top for her sister's inspection.

"This? Or the green one?"

Lisa frowned. "The green one has sparkles, but pink goes with your pants."

"I could change my pants, though."

Amira watched them, and her chest felt tight. The first time she'd worked a vacation with the Johnsons, the girls had been small enough she'd still needed to dress them. Now they were rapidly blooming into young women, nine and eleven and fiercely independent. They didn't need Amira for much at all, except to carry their souvenir bags when they got tired, or settle a debate between cake or ice cream. Most of the time, they didn't even need her to watch them, as the family did most of their exploring together, Amira tagging along like an extra wheel.

"We're ready," said Lisa, presenting herself for inspection. She'd dressed up for the outing in her favorite red skirt, with a crisp white blouse to round out her ensemble. Jenny had picked the pink top, to go with her new black jeans, and embellished the outfit with a sparkly bracelet.

"You look great," said Amira. "Both of you, fantastic."

"Thanks, Amira," they chorused, and ran off again, this time in search of their phones. They'd been taking photos of the summer's adventures, with the idea of surprising their parents with a scrapbook when the trip was done.

"My battery's dead," said Jenny. "I forgot to recharge."

"You can share mine," said Lisa, and held out her phone. "Just send yourself your pictures at the end of the day."

Amira found herself smiling—these were good kids, sweet, warm, and generous, and always upbeat. She liked to think she'd played some small part in that, shepherding them through five summers of travel. They'd seen Rome together, and Athens and Annaba, and the green, misty secrets of the Scottish highlands. Lisa had been in her “why” phase for their trip through Scotland—why is it raining? Why don't we live in castles? Why do they call fries ‘chips?’ She smiled at the memory. She hadn't known all the answers to Lisa's endless questions, but the ones she hadn't known, they'd looked up together.

“This is a good one,” said Lisa, sitting down beside her. She held up her phone so Amira could see. “You keep ducking out when I'm taking pictures, or volunteering to be the one to take the picture instead, but I got you in this one. It's got all of us.”

“So it does,” said Amira, but her smile had turned strained. Lisa must have set her camera on a timer, to catch the whole group including herself. They were setting up a picnic on an outdoor table, laying out sandwiches and salads and drink bottles. Everyone but Lisa was absorbed in the fun, oblivious to the camera about to capture them for posterity. Jenny was swatting at a circling bug. Her mom was evading a kiss from her dad, laughing as she balanced a plate in each hand. Amira was sneaking a plum tomato off the veggie plate, frozen in time with her mouth halfway open. If she hadn't known better, she'd have thought she belonged in the shot, part of the family in her own right.

“I'll send you a copy,” said Lisa. “Or, don't you like it?”

“No, I do,” said Amira, shaking off her funk. “I'm just surprised, is all. I didn't see you take that.”

“It's called *candid photography*,” Lisa informed her. “That's when you take people's pictures, and they don't know. You get their real expressions that way, not just... ‘say cheese!’”

Amira nodded slowly. Her real face in that photo looked sort of tired—but she didn't want to say that and hurt Lisa's feelings. “That was a fun day,” she said. “And a fun picnic. I'd love a copy—of course I would.”

Lisa bounced up, satisfied, and ran to the connecting door to check on her parents. They were done with their showers and ready to go, and soon all five of them were piling into a taxi. The Louvre was fun, and they saw the *Mona Lisa*—*smaller than I thought*, was Lisa's considered verdict. Jenny thought it was *okay, but sort of beige*. Both girls preferred *The Horse Tamers*, and declared that they wanted a horse.

After the Louvre, they all went to dinner, and for a long walk through the warm Paris evening. Amira's legs were aching by the time they were through, and all she wanted to do was crawl into bed. She left the girls both in Lisa's bed, checking out their latest photos, and was halfway to her own room when a door opened behind her.

"Amira! Oh, Amira!"

She turned around. "Kate?"

The girls' mom stood smiling, leaning out of her room. "Chris went for a swim and I'm all alone. Join me on my balcony for a nice glass of wine?"

Amira thought about declining, but no excuse sprang to mind. And wine *did* sound good, to help her unwind. She followed Kate out to the balcony, and sat alongside her gazing out at the skyline.

"I love it here," said Kate. "All the history, the buildings, the narrow streets... I'd love to live in a house that was old when my grandpa was young."

"You wouldn't love that in winter," said Amira. "Think of the heating bills for a place like that."

Kate laughed. "Don't ruin it. Have some more wine." She topped up Amira's glass, and then filled her own. "I'm thinking next year, we might go see Vienna. The girls will love it there. What do you think?"

Amira opened her mouth, then closed it again. She couldn't blame Kate for assuming she'd come—she'd joined the Johnsons on their vacations five years in a row. But the girls were old enough now, they didn't need a nanny. She'd assumed Kate had noticed, much as she had, that it wasn't

really necessary for her to get hired on again, but here she was inviting Amira on next year's trip.

"Hey, Amira?" Kate rose on one elbow. "You've gone all quiet. Did I say something wrong?"

"No, no, you didn't." Amira sipped her wine. "I was just thinking...why am I here?"

"Why are you here?" Kate sat up and stared at her like she'd grown a second head. "I'm not sure what you mean. Why *wouldn't* you be here?"

"Well, the girls are older now. They don't really need me. You must have noticed how independent they are, how little I've been doing besides enjoying the trip."

"But..." Kate set her wine down and got to her feet. "We'll still need you for date nights, to babysit. And really, it just wouldn't be summer vacation without you. You've *always* come with us, since our first big trip. The girls love you. They look forward to seeing you all through the year. You're like...I don't know. Their summer aunt. You're family, so why wouldn't you come?"

Amira blinked. Kate saw her as family? She had to be exaggerating, burying the awkwardness under a blanket of praise.

"You're kind to say that," said Amira. "But I'm honestly happy to see the girls growing more independent. To see how well they're doing. The fact that they don't need me tells me you've raised two smart young ladies. You don't have to feel awkward, not needing—"

"Now, you just hold on." Kate's expression turned sharp. "I know they won't need a nanny forever, but you're not planning on vanishing from those girls' lives, are you?"

"Of course not," said Amira. "But you have to understand, I don't get involved with the families I work for. I don't come on vacations just because—"

Kate burst out laughing. "You don't get involved?" She plopped back down in her comfy lounge chair. "You had me

going for a moment, there. Not involved, ha...they've got actual aunts who are less involved than you are."

Amira sat gaping. "What do you mean?"

"Chris's sisters...well, the less said about them the better. But *you*, on the other hand. You stay in touch all year. You send cards for Christmas, and birthdays as well. And I know the girls text you when they want advice. We don't pay you for any of that, so why do you do it? What's in it for you, if you don't care? Not involved...oh, Amira, you do crack me up."

Amira took another long gulp of her wine. It burned going down, and she stifled a cough. She wanted to argue, but Kate wasn't wrong. She *did* keep in touch—not just with this family but with most of the families she'd worked for. She'd always told herself that was part of the service—follow-up care, answering questions—but most of the updates she got were purely friendly, photos of thriving kids, messy kid artwork. Texts to inform her of triumphant milestones, baby's first step, first word, first piano recital. Some families had kept in touch for years and years.

"Hey," said Kate, gently. "That's not a bad thing. We hired you *because* you care. Everyone says so. And we've kept hiring you because we like you. You're fun. The girls love you. What's wrong with that?"

Amira tried to think of how to explain in a way that wouldn't come off as ungrateful or unappreciative. She was glad that Kate liked having her around, glad that the girls felt she was someone they could rely on. But still... "It crosses the line, getting involved like that. Personal connections, I..." She trailed off, feeling stupid. Now that Kate had pointed it out, it was clear that she'd been crossing that line all along. Building relationships without admitting she was doing it. Hiding behind her strict two-month limit. She'd thought doing that would keep her from getting so attached that she'd get hurt when she had to leave it behind—but her rules hadn't protected her from pain after all.

Kate reached out and touched her arm. "This isn't like you. What's really wrong?"

Amira closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’ve *really* crossed the line. With a dad I worked for.”

Kate made a choked sound. “Not a married one, I hope?”

“No, a single dad—the mom’s not in the picture at all. He’s just...I don’t know.” She tilted her head back and opened her eyes. “I think I’m in love with him. He asked me to stay, and at the time, I thought...Well, we were in the middle of a pretty big fight, hurt feelings on both sides. I thought he wanted me to stay on just to help with the kids.”

“But now?” Kate prompted.

“Now that I’ve had some time to calm down and move past the hurt, it’s easier to see that that fight was just one moment in so many—and in the rest of those moments, he made me feel...loved.”

Kate leaned forward. “And how do you feel now?”

“Like maybe I made the worst mistake of my life. Like he might have been asking me to *stay*, really stay, and I walked away from that. I rejected him, and now it’s too late.”

“Have you talked to him since?” asked Kate.

“No. I’ve been scared. And I needed to focus on you guys, on the kids, on—”

“On the kids?” Kate raised a brow. “Didn’t you just get through telling me the girls don’t need you? You’re making excuses. What do *you* want? If you’re ready for your next chapter, you can’t let us stop you.”

Amira stared at her wineglass, unsure what to say.

“Love can be scary. I get it,” said Kate. “My life changed completely when I met Chris. But if you love this man, you can’t make excuses. You can’t hide behind rules.” She patted Amira’s hand again. “The beauty of vacations is, they give you time to think. I suggest you do that, and be honest with yourself.”

Amira choked back a rush of emotion, nerves and excitement: hope, love, and fear, all tangled together like a box of loose yarn. She hadn’t let herself consider going back to Dean.



Would he even want her, after the way they'd left things? But if there was even a chance, didn't she owe it to herself to find out? Didn't she owe it to both of them, and their future?

"I should get to bed," she said. "I have a lot to think about."

Dean stood on the porch, trying not to fidget. He couldn't remember when he'd last felt this nervous. The day he'd met the twins, probably—the day he'd brought them home. Though, what he'd felt that day had been closer to terror. He wasn't afraid today. Today, he was ready. He'd shoot his best shot and whatever came next...well, he'd deal with it, one way or the other.

A black truck slowed and turned up the drive. Dean couldn't make out the driver, but he knew who it was. He ran over his pitch one last time in his head, ticking off his talking points one by one. He'd practiced. He had this. His plan was damn good. All he had to do now was step up and sell it.

The black truck pulled up and Francis got out. He nodded at Dean, and Dean nodded back.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "I thought we'd walk and talk."

"Sounds good," said Francis. "I could do with stretching my legs."

They headed up past the paddock and the long cowsheds, out where the land stretched out with no end in sight. Francis kept up without trouble, matching Dean's easy pace, all the way to the hill overlooking the chapel. Dean stood looking down on it, and for once he felt peace. A sense of belonging, of coming home.

"I have a new pitch for you," he said, and his voice was steady. "I don't want to sell the ranch. I want you to buy in as a partner, with me continuing to run the place and keep the family legacy going. With your cash infusion, I could improve the ranch. I'd start with upgrades to our existing infrastructure, and hiring new staff so we'd be more efficient. In a couple of years, I could add lodging for guests, and restart my fishing business like we discussed. In return, you'd get a share of our profits, and a say in how the ranch evolves, going forward."

“Partners,” said Francis, his expression thoughtful. Dean resisted the temptation to keep rattling on, dressing up his proposal with extra fluff. He knew Francis well enough to know he’d fill in the details himself. It was part of his process, how he thought things through.

“How about your cattle?” he asked, after a while. “Would you go ahead with the insemination plans?”

“Not right away,” said Dean. “I’d start with that two years from now, once the initial renovations and upgrades are done. My new five-year plan’s laid out in stages, tackling one thing before I move on to the next.”

Francis nodded slowly, but Dean could see he wasn’t quite convinced yet. “And you’d be okay with this? With continuing to run the ranch? Last time we spoke, I got the impression your heart wasn’t in it.”

“It hasn’t been,” said Dean. “At least, not like Dad’s was. The parts of ranching that he focused on most aren’t really the parts that interest me. I intend to gradually pass those duties—like the insemination—over to the new staff. But overseeing the ranch as a whole is important to me. It’s what I want to do—what I want to leave in place for my children to inherit, if they decide that it’s the path for them.” He turned to Francis, his cool mask slipping. “Look, I’ll lay it out for you—here it is. I’m not the most business-savvy—that would be you. I’m more into fishing than I am into cows. But I love this land, and what my family’s built here. It’s my home and my heritage, and I can’t sell it, but I think with your help, I can build something great here, something that my dad would be proud of. Something my children will be proud of, once they’re old enough to understand it.”

Francis clapped him on the shoulder. “*There* it is. I knew you had it in you.”

Dean straightened up, hopeful. “Does that mean you’re in?”

“Hell, yeah it does,” said Francis. “I always knew you had ideas, but now I know you’re a leader. You’ve got that drive you need to get what you want. Maybe all you needed was to figure out what that was.”

“What I want...” Dean’s smile faltered, but he clasped Francis’s hand for a firm shake. “I’m excited about this.”

“Me too,” said Francis. “But, now that you’re taking charge and putting your life in order, isn’t it about time you all got back together?”

Dean dropped Francis’s hand. “What?”

“The Dean I know wouldn’t sit back and let love get away. You and Amira, you *know* that’s not done. So, come on, you’re a fisherman. How’ll you hook her back in?”

Dean waved Francis off with a deep groan. “Leave that to me,” he said. “I think I get it now, what she was trying to show me. Now, I just need to show her how much she means to me.”



Amira should’ve been exhausted. She’d gotten on a plane eighteen hours ago in Rome, then another in Munich and another in Denver, and now here she was in a rented Honda, driving across Colorado under a blue morning sky. She’d slept maybe two hours in the last twenty-four, but she’d never felt more awake in her life.

“I’m back to stay, if you’ll have me,” she whispered to herself. All through the journey, she’d been rehearsing, running through all the ways she could put her heart on the line.

*I’m done hiding, Dean. I’m done with my rules, with my lines in the sand. Those were my walls, but I’ve dropped them all now. I’m ready, I’m yours, if you still want me.*

Her pulse picked up as the roads grew familiar. Dean’s ranch was close now. She was nearly at her big moment. Unless—what if he’d sold already? Or what if he wasn’t there? Or what if he *was* there, and he was still angry with her?

That was the risk, she reminded herself. When you put your heart out there, sometimes it got broken. But if you didn’t, you might miss out on heaven.

She turned up Dean’s driveway and let out a long breath. His truck was parked out front. The whole place was exactly as

she remembered, the house and the yard and the fields beyond, the old dusty trails leading up to the hills. The fragrance of cut grass and warm earth. It all made her heart ache with fondness and longing.

“Oh, Dean,” she murmured. She was done running, but how could she show him that? How could she convince him she meant every word?

She got out of the Honda and stood breathing hard. Her hands were shaking, and she clasped them together. Dean would either welcome her, or he wouldn't. Dawdling out here wouldn't change his mind.

Amira closed her eyes and took one last deep breath. When she opened them, her heart skipped a beat. She'd thought the whole place was just as she remembered, but one thing had changed, one tiny detail. The peephole was missing from the front door, and in its place was a window, *the* window. The one that had pushed Dean over the edge.

Amira drifted toward it, as though in a trance. She didn't dare blink, in case she was dreaming. In case, when she closed her eyes, the window disappeared. But when she reached out and touched it, she felt the cool glass. She traced the blue fish she'd added for Dean, and the little booties for Caitlyn and Caleb. It was all solid. The window was real.

“Is somebody out there?”

Amira jerked her hand back. “Sorry! It's me.”

“Amira?” Footsteps approached, then she could see a dark shape through the glass. The door swung open, and it was Dean.

“Amira,” he said.

She stared at him, stunned, her speech all forgotten. “You hung the window.”

“I did. I overreacted. It was a mistake. I realized I wanted to be part of the family legacy after all,” he said, and his voice was hoarse. “I've missed you. I thought, when you left—can I hug you?”

Amira opened her arms. Dean hugged her tight. She caught a whiff of her own soap on his skin, the soap she'd left in her hurried exit. His arms around her felt like a homecoming, the warmth of his body a gentle welcome. But he hadn't said yet, if he wanted her to stay.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into his neck. "I should never have left."

"No—no you should have." Dean pulled away, and Amira's heart sank, but he took her hands and didn't let go. "You did the right thing, because I was a mess. I didn't know what I wanted or where I fit in. I was holding onto hurt feelings from years and years back, feeling left out from when Dad leaned on Jackson. This window—you were right. I have my strengths, too. I have my dreams for this ranch, and I'm going to pursue them. I'm going to lead, like Dad did before me. That's it, isn't it? What you were trying to tell me?"

Amira nodded, blinking back tears. "I knew you had that strength in you right from the start. From the first time I saw you holding your twins. You were so clueless, but so *determined*. You didn't know how to hold them, but you knew you loved them. You knew it was your job to make them feel safe. I knew from day one you could do anything, if you wanted it enough."

"I want this," said Dean. He let go of her hands and cupped her face in his palms, thumbing a stray tear off her cheek. "My dream for this ranch—I don't just want to make it mine. I want to make this place ours, yours and mine."

Amira stood tongue-tied. He was stealing her speech. Co-opting her grand gesture, and she loved him for it.

"You make my life work," he went on. "Not as my nanny—as you can see, we're fine." He gestured at the house behind him, maybe a little messier than when Amira had left, but not in a bad way. Not in a bad way at all. "You make me happy. You make me feel strong, like I could take on anything with you by my side. I know you've got your own life, and your rules, and your—"

“No.” Amira cut him off with a finger to his lips. “I mean, I do have my own life, but no to my rules. Those days are over. I’m done putting up walls. I want to be here with you, with nothing standing between us. I want us to build a new life. Together.”

Dean’s whole face lit up. “So, you’re here to stay?”

Amira smiled. Her old life was still waiting, if that was what she wanted—a new job every two months, a new family, new challenges. She could go back to it, or she could take one step forward, into the ranch house and into Dean’s life. Into a new life that they’d build together.

“I’m home,” she said, and she took that step forward. Dean grabbed her hand and pulled her into the house, letting the front door swing shut behind her. He swept her into his arms and kissed her like she’d been gone a year, instead of just shy of a month. His kiss set off fireworks deep in her chest, bright sparks of happiness that lit up her heart. Amira could have stayed like that forever, secure in the arms of the one she loved best, but a soft *ooh* behind her had her jumping back startled.

“What—Dean—” She spun around to find they had an audience of four; Carol and Josie cradling Caitlyn and Caleb, all of them smiling like cats full of cream. The instant Amira turned, the floodgates burst, the twins babbling and kicking and squirming to get to her, the women rushing forward, alight with joy.

“I knew it,” said Josie. “I knew you’d be back.”

“We all did,” said Carol. “Welcome home.”

Amira ran to hug her and Josie, and to kiss the twins. Caleb kissed her back, sloppy, a wet teething *mwah*. She’d missed him learning to smooch, but she’d be here for the rest. She’d be here to grow with her new family. Here, she felt welcome, and wanted, and loved. She didn’t know where this new road might lead, but she knew she’d be walking it with love on her side—and not just Dean’s, but Caitlyn’s and Caleb’s, too. She’d have Vivien and Josie, and the whole town, a whole new family ready to take her in their arms.

“I’m so happy,” she said. “So glad to be home.”

She couldn't wait to see what this new chapter would hold.



## EPILOGUE

The noise was unbelievable, and Dean was loving every minute—kids running everywhere, popping balloons, tripping and falling and bouncing back up. It was one of those perfect Colorado summer days, the kind of day where nothing could go wrong. Even the hot dogs and hamburgers were the best he'd ever cooked, fat and delicious off the grill.

"You should take a break," said Francis, and grabbed for his tongs. "Come on, this is your day. Go sit with your family."

"And you're going to grill for us? You got what it takes?"

"What does my apron say?" Francis spread out his arms, revealing the word GRILLMASTER printed across his chest.

"Anyone can buy an apron," said Dean, but he forked over his tongs. Truth was, he'd been itching to get out of the sun, into the shaded haven Amira had set up for the twins. She'd laid out a big blanket under a tree, and he could see her there now, holding Caitlyn's hands to help her toddle along. Caleb was anxiously waiting his turn, tugging at Amira's skirt to get her attention.

"You have a beautiful family," said Francis. "Planning to grow it some more?"

Dean nearly choked on his own tongue. "Caitlyn and Caleb just had their first birthday!"

"But you want all your kids near the same age, so they can play together."

"Or you just get three at once in their terrible twos," said Vivien, who'd come up to the grill to grab a hot dog. "You two set your own pace, when it feels right."

"When what feels right?" Mom had joined them as well, and was loading her plate with corn-on-the-cob.

"Never you mind," said Dean. "Someone get me a hot dog, and one for Amira. And one of those baked potatoes. The

kids'll love that.”

Francis piled a plate with two hot dogs and a fat baked potato. Dean squirted his dog with just ketchup, and Amira's with ketchup, mustard, and relish, and a sprinkling of diced onions, the way she liked. He grabbed a couple of sodas to wash down the food and hurried across the lawn to meet up with his family. Both kids bum-rushed him the moment they saw him, tripping over their own feet in their enthusiasm. They tumbled towards him, half-walking, half-crawling, Caleb executing an accidental somersault.

“Tato,” said Caitlyn.

“*Me*,” said Caleb.

“Both of your tato,” said Amira. “Remember, we share.”

Dean just chuckled and took his place on the blanket, letting his kids clamber up into his lap. They were getting so agile, so curious, so playful. And he'd never get tired of hearing them talk. Talking already—it hardly felt real. It had started with *dada* and progressed to *mama*, and from there they'd learned *horsey* and *thirsty* and *no*. Boy, did they love *no*, especially when it came to bedtime.

“Francis looks like he's having fun,” said Amira. “Did he say how long he's staying?”

“Just through the Strawberry Festival.” Dean tested a bite of potato, then fed it to Caleb. “The construction's nearly done now. He doesn't really need to be here, now that we're up on our feet.”

Two more kids came running over, a little older than the twins. One of them made a grab for Dean's soda. The other snuggled up next to Amira.

“We lost Mommy,” he said.

“Yeah? Where'd you last see her?” Amira craned her neck to look around.

“Over here.” Laura from the craft store came hustling over. “Sorry, sorry—are they eating your food? I turned my back for a second, and they vanished, I swear...”

“Hey, the more, the merrier.” Amira patted the blanket next to her, inviting Laura to sit down. Dean was torn between annoyance and a deep sense of satisfaction—annoyance that he couldn’t spend every second with just him and his family, here at the cowbake and every other day; satisfaction at seeing Amira so happy. The town had embraced her, and she’d embraced them right back, making friends, joining clubs, even starting a business. Her little daycare had begun with just the twins and Laura’s kids, but now, on a busy day, she had her own little army. She had Mom as well, who’d insisted on helping, and two part-time helpers she’d just hired on.

Laura’s husband came to find her after a while, and with the blanket freed up, Amira scooted closer to Dean. She laid her head on his shoulder, her hair soft on his neck.

“What were you guys yelling about, over at the grill?”

“Yelling? We weren’t—oh, you mean when Mom and Viv came?”

“Yeah. You all looked like you were bickering about something.”

“Not exactly,” said Dean, and pulled a face. “Francis just sort of...sparked off a debate.”

“What kind of debate?” Amira nudged him.

“The kind parents as great as us just can’t avoid: *hey, awesome babies. When are you having more?*” Dean watched Amira’s face to see how she’d react. Her eyebrows shot up, then she laughed out loud. She picked up Caleb and snuggled him to her, stretching out her free hand to stroke Caitlyn’s hair.

“I’ve got one for each hand right now, but you’ve got two hands as well. And so does your mom, if we need a spare pair.” Amira turned to smile at him, and Dean saw it in her eyes, that same cautious excitement he knew was sparkling in his own. He *did* want more kids, a big, happy family, and it felt good to know Amira did too.

“When were you thinking?” he asked.

“Well, after the...” Amira broke off, biting her lip.

“After what?”

“Don’t make me say it.”

Dean pretended not to know what she was talking about, casting a puzzled look at Caitlyn and Caleb. “What’s your mom talking about? After...dinner?”

“I’d smack you right now if my arms weren’t full of babies.” But Amira was smiling, and Dean grinned right back. He’d been planning on waiting till tonight at home, till the kids were in bed and Amira was all his, but the thing with big families was, plans tended to fall through, or at least get rejiggered to fit with their needs. A gentleman didn’t make a lady propose, so Dean set his plate aside and rose to one knee. Amira’s eyes widened, and she let out a gasp.

“Oh, Dean, I didn’t mean—you don’t have to, right now—”

“When better than now, when we’re all together?” He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. “Amira, this last year has been the best of my life. You’ve made me happier than I’d ever thought I could be, and I want to ask you—”

“Oh, my God, is he—” Vivien came running. “Mom! Dean’s proposing! Get the camera *now!*”

*And you’re ruining it*, he thought, but Amira was laughing, giggling helplessly with joyful tears in her eyes. Caitlyn and Caleb were chattering loudly, confused by the proceedings but determined to join in.

“Amira,” he finished, through laughter of his own, “will you marry me and make me the happiest man alive? The ring’s still in my sock drawer, but—”

“Yes! Yes, I will! Of course I’ll marry you, Dean, I can’t wait. And we’ll fill up that house with the best family ever. Oh, Dean, I love you...”

The cowbake broke out in a chorus of *awwws*. Dean ignored them and went in for a kiss. Caitlyn and Caleb both squirmed between them, but their soft little hugs only sweetened the moment. Here, in this messy, ketchup-stained embrace, Dean had found everything a man could need: family and love and

dreams for the future, and all the time in the world to make them come true.

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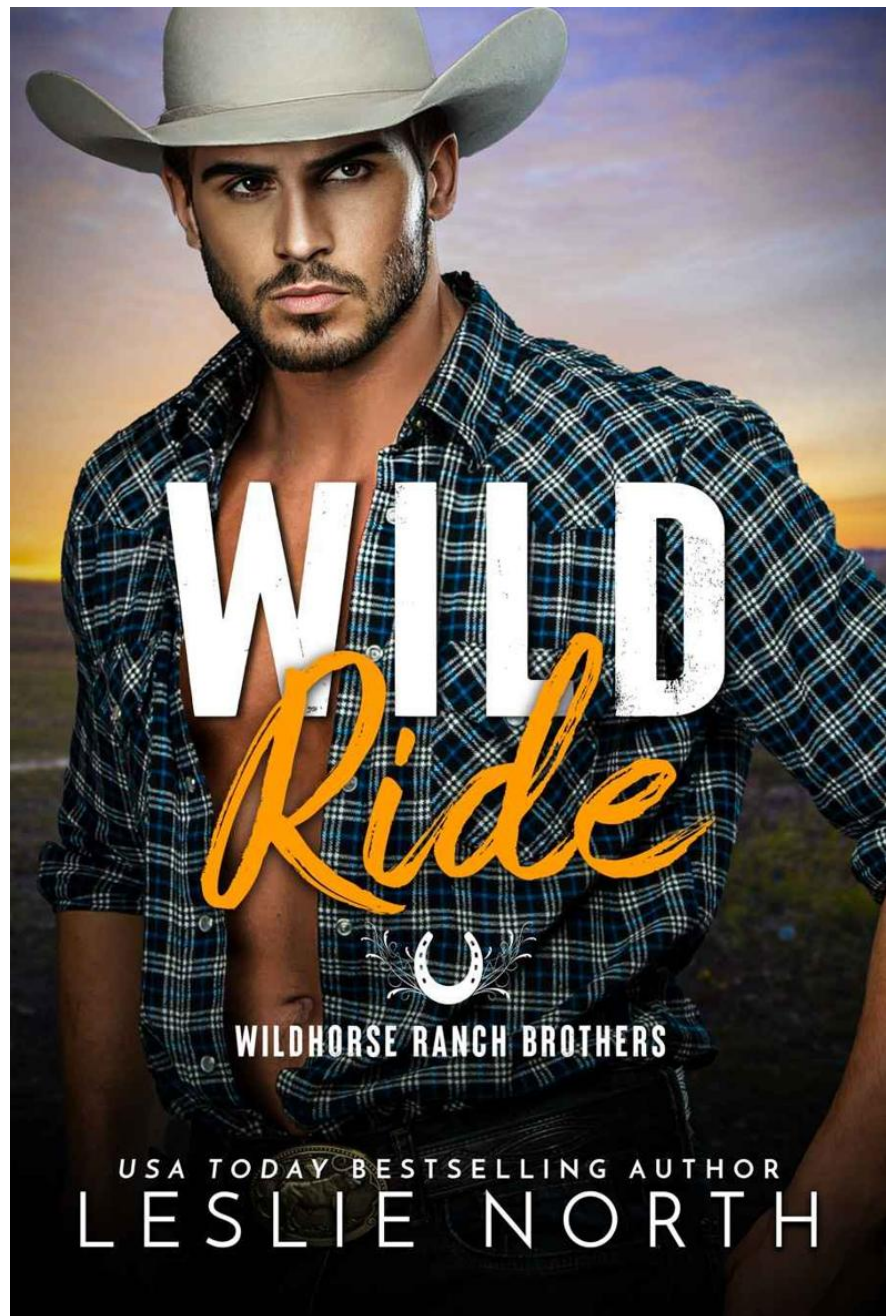
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## BLURB

*Wild horses couldn't tear these hearts apart...*

Trevor Wild will do anything to save his beloved Wildhorse Ranch... Including starting up a trendy glamping side business —something as alien to him as a day out of the saddle.

Luckily, smart and sassy Sabrina Hearthstone is an expert. Trevor's hired her to live on the ranch while she sets up a glamping experience on his land. But it doesn't take long for Sabrina to disrupt his life, in more ways than one. Trevor's got a

ranch to save, and the last thing he needs is to fall for a beautiful woman. But his heart seems to have other plans...

Sabrina might be an expert at revamping, but she has no intention of making over gorgeous cowboy Trevor Wild, even if she is wildly attracted to him. He's stuck in his ways, stubborn as a mule... But sexier than any man she's ever known. When they aren't butting heads, they're trading kisses that set her heart racing, and leave her weak in the knees.

But Trevor still doesn't trust her, and Sabrina can't keep waiting for him to realize she's more than just some city girl. When disaster strikes, she'll have to make a choice...

But can she be happy without her Wild man?

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## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Trevor**

“That her?” Trevor Wild asked his brother. The question rose from his lips like vapor, his warm breath chilled by contact with the early morning air.

He already knew the answer to his question, but he wanted to make sure he wasn't hallucinating the pretty blonde woman standing in front of the old bunkhouse with her arms crossed. She appeared to be in deep contemplation of the woodpile he had been gathering there all season, and the intensity of her concentration made her blind to everything else—including the two men watching her from behind the fence across the property.

“That's her,” his brother confirmed. Trent hitched the front of his Wranglers up and blew casually on the steaming mug of coffee he had snagged from the ranch kitchen. Trevor, sleep-deprived from his long drive home from the conference, felt a surge of

jealousy at his twin's morning alertness. "Sabrina Hearthstone, Wildhorse Ranch's very own Glamping Coordinator. I'd say it has a certain ring to it, but I'm not sure half of those words were meant to exist in the English language."

Trevor cringed in private agreement, the shadow of his hat brim concealing his reaction to the distasteful word. Glamping, a portmanteau of *glamorous camping*, was not a concept he had ever imagined, let alone expected, to put into place at Wildhorse. At thirty-two, he was sure life had more unpleasant revelations in store for him, but whether Sabrina Hearthstone might be the blonde-headed instigator of an impending string of glamping-related disasters remained to be seen.

"Looks like you're going to have your hands full with this one," Trent remarked, as Sabrina pulled her hair back into a ponytail and dropped to a squat. He said it in the tone of a horseman surveying a particularly unruly filly. Trevor wondered what his brother had gone through already with this woman; still, there was no mistaking the slight note of admiration in Trent's tone.

"Looks like she's got her hands plenty full already," Trevor said. He squinted across the lawn at Sabrina, who appeared to be dismantling the woodpile and hauling it up onto the porch. "What the hell is she doing?"

That scrap was probably lousy with splinters—not to mention pill bugs and spiders—yet she didn't shrink from grappling with it barehanded. She might as well have been holding the front door wide open and inviting the pests to brunch in the goddamn bunkhouse living room.

"No idea," Trent replied, before amending, "I thought she said something about wanting the scraps for planters or a coffee table or something. You know, like a craft project."

Trevor sighed and cuffed his brother on the shoulder. "Thanks for keeping an eye on the place while I was away." He tipped his hat to keep the sun off his eyes. "You want to stick around for a bit? Give me the rundown on what's been going on?"

"Sure. Not like I have a job or anything."

"Whatcha got, Sheriff, one in the drunk tank?" Trevor tried not to smirk.

“Two, actually,” said Trent. “But they’ll sleep late.” He elbowed Trevor, and the two shared a chuckle.

“You heard from Charlie?” asked Trevor, when Trent’s laughter died down.

“Can’t say I have. Guess he’s busy with training.”

Trevor stifled a snort. He had a few things he could say about that, most of them sarcastic, and not entirely kind. Like, how hard could their brother Charlie be training when every week the tabloids caught him out on the town with some cheerleader on his arm, a blonde one week, a brunette the next? But that wasn’t fair. Charlie had busted ass to get where he was, star quarterback of the Texas Teamsters. If he chose to enjoy the perks, that was his business. And everyone else’s, if you asked TMZ.

“It’s too quiet without him,” he said instead. “Remember when he used to get up at 5AM, and rush that tackling dummy out in the yard?”

“Baaaah,” hollered Trevor, miming a tackle. “You can just say you miss him.”

“Who says I do?”

“That look on your face, those sad-puppy eyes—”

“Sad puppy—I’ll show you sad puppy.” The grim line of Trevor’s mouth quirked up a little. “Okay, Sheriff. You go get your drunks. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“I’ll be around. And get yourself some coffee!” Trent hollered the suggestion at Trevor’s retreating back. “Something tells me you’re going to need it!”

*Something tells me you’re right.* What he wouldn’t do for a cup as black as Sabrina Hearthstone was fair. Despite feeling dead on his feet, Trevor loped the length of the yard to reach the freelance glamping coordinator he’d hired. She glanced up when she heard his boots, and started talking almost before he was within earshot.

“Oh! I’m so glad you’re here, Trent. Do you mind helping me with this monster?” Sabrina wiped her forehead and indicated the log giving her trouble. “It’s kind of funny-shaped, see, with a bump on the end. I can’t get a grip on it...”

Trevor doubted Sabrina's freckled, toothpick-thin arms would be much help wrangling the awkward-shaped log, but he had never turned down a woman in distress. "Sure." He pulled on his work gloves and stooped to wrestle the other end of the log into his arms. "But I'm not Trent."

"Huh?" Sabrina glanced up to take him in again, and dropped the side of the log she was holding. Trevor grimaced and set his end down, too. The way his mouth naturally settled in a frown, the lines only deepening when he was annoyed or working, distinguished him from his more approachable twin brother.

"No...I mean, *wow*. You really aren't, are you?" Now that Sabrina had halted operations, Trevor straightened to regard her in turn. The way she looked him over, with eyes as wide and summer-blue as the Texas sky, made him acutely aware of just how close she was standing.

"No. I really am not," he agreed. He wondered how much Trent had let her get away with while he was gone. Sabrina Hearthstone had a face as pretty as an angel's—pair that with her ridiculously tight, stone-washed designer jeans, and he doubted his brother had been willing to deny her much. She was the living, breathing embodiment of a country song sweetheart—the worshipped, vaunted *city girl*—and for the first time, Trevor contemplated how much trouble he might be in, having her on his property.

"So, you must be Trevor," Sabrina deduced. "The owner." She extended a slender hand, and Trevor removed one of his gloves before taking it in his own. He wondered what his callouses must feel like rubbing against her soft skin. She didn't draw back immediately, so maybe they weren't too bad. They held the handshake a few seconds longer than strictly necessary before Sabrina withdrew and flushed a little.

"Sorry I mistook you for your brother," she apologized. "I guess I didn't realize you'd be back today."

"I keep to a schedule," Trevor stated. "Which is something you're throwing off already, Miss Hearthstone." He nodded toward the scraps she had accumulated on the porch. "I'm tossing that wood out in the quarterly clear-out." She stared at

him blankly. “That’s tomorrow. You want to keep any of it for arts and crafts, I expect you to go through it all today.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Wild, but this isn’t for *arts and crafts*,” Sabrina protested. She gestured toward her woodpile selections. “This is upcycling! I’m going to make good use of this stuff. If we want to attract customers and garner favorable reviews, then we’re going to need to liven up the living spaces with a few rustic decorations. Planters for the doorways. Window boxes. Nightstands.”

*Upcycling*. Great. Another made-up word. Trevor hooked his thumbs in his belt and didn’t budge an inch, predicting his silence would be enough to settle the matter. Generally speaking, it was. Today, however, his natural powers of intimidation appeared to be diminished after the long drive. Sabrina had her hands on her hips, her dark pink lips pursed in challenge. For the life of him he couldn’t decide if her expression was meant to convey a fight or invite a kiss.

“And it’s going to take me longer than a day to figure out what I can and can’t use here,” she clarified.

“You signed a contract,” he said. “And that contract clearly states you agree to adhere to Wildhorse Ranch’s rules and schedule.”

“And how about coffee?” Sabrina started up the porch steps, pausing halfway to smile back at Trevor. “I assume there’s room in your schedule for that?”

“There might be,” said Trevor. “If you think you’ve earned it.”

“I’d say I have. I’m covered in sweat.” She glanced back again. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sweating.”

Sabrina laughed. “Come *on*.”

Trevor’s frown deepened. Sabrina’s offer struck him as a tactical maneuver—her way of trapping him in a longer discussion—but he followed her up the steps to the bunkhouse kitchen despite his suspicion. He couldn’t help noticing the sequins studded around the back pockets of her jeans. The detail—*and only that detail*—drew his attention to Sabrina’s pert rear. She sure could fill a pair of impractical pants. The denim might as well have been painted



onto those shapely, athletic legs of hers. He doubted she could fully bend over in them, but he wouldn't have minded seeing her try.

“You were at a conference, right? How did it go?” Sabrina asked perkily as she took the bunkhouse pot off the burner and poured them each a mug of coffee. Trevor hovered in the doorway, studying her change in expression and wondering if he was being taken for a ride. She certainly had the cheerful demeanor to be successful in her chosen profession...*if* that profession actually existed. *Adventure coordinator*—who came up with that crap?

“It went fine,” he said. The equine breeding conference had given him a lot to chew on, and he felt cautiously optimistic about the future of Wildhorse's breeding program for the first time since he had taken a chance and hired Sabrina.

“Yeah? Only *fine*?” Sabrina pretended to pout.

“Pretty good, actually.” Trevor's response was grudging. His struggles with the ranch were none of her business, none of anyone's but his. He hadn't even liked calling on Trent to help Sabrina move in. Wildhorse Ranch was all Trevor's, and he'd rather have seen to the matter himself—but the conference couldn't wait.

“Milk? Sugar? Hazelnut creamer?”

“None of the above.” Trevor took his coffee, walked outside, and settled back against the porch railing. Sabrina leaned on the doorframe, pursing her kissable lips to blow steam off her own mug. She took her coffee black, same as him. Trevor pulled a sour face to hide his surprise. He'd expected she'd bogart the ranch hands' whole sugar stash, not to mention their month's supply of creamer.

Sabrina sipped her coffee, and her smile turned wicked. “So, I was thinking—”

And here came her pitch. Trevor cut her off before she could get rolling.

“I got in touch with you because Wildhorse Ranch needs another source of income,” he began.

“Obviously.” If she was annoyed by his interruption, she didn’t let it show.

“But my quarter horse breeding program is still my main focus. It’s what we’ve done here for three generations, and it’s the whole reason I went to that conference. It’s the heart and soul of this ranch, and that isn’t changing.” Trevor scowled, hoping to drive his next point home. “So, I don’t want our programs intersecting, Miss Hearthstone. You’ll coordinate your campers and keep them out of my hair, and I’ll go about my business as usual. Are we clear on that?”

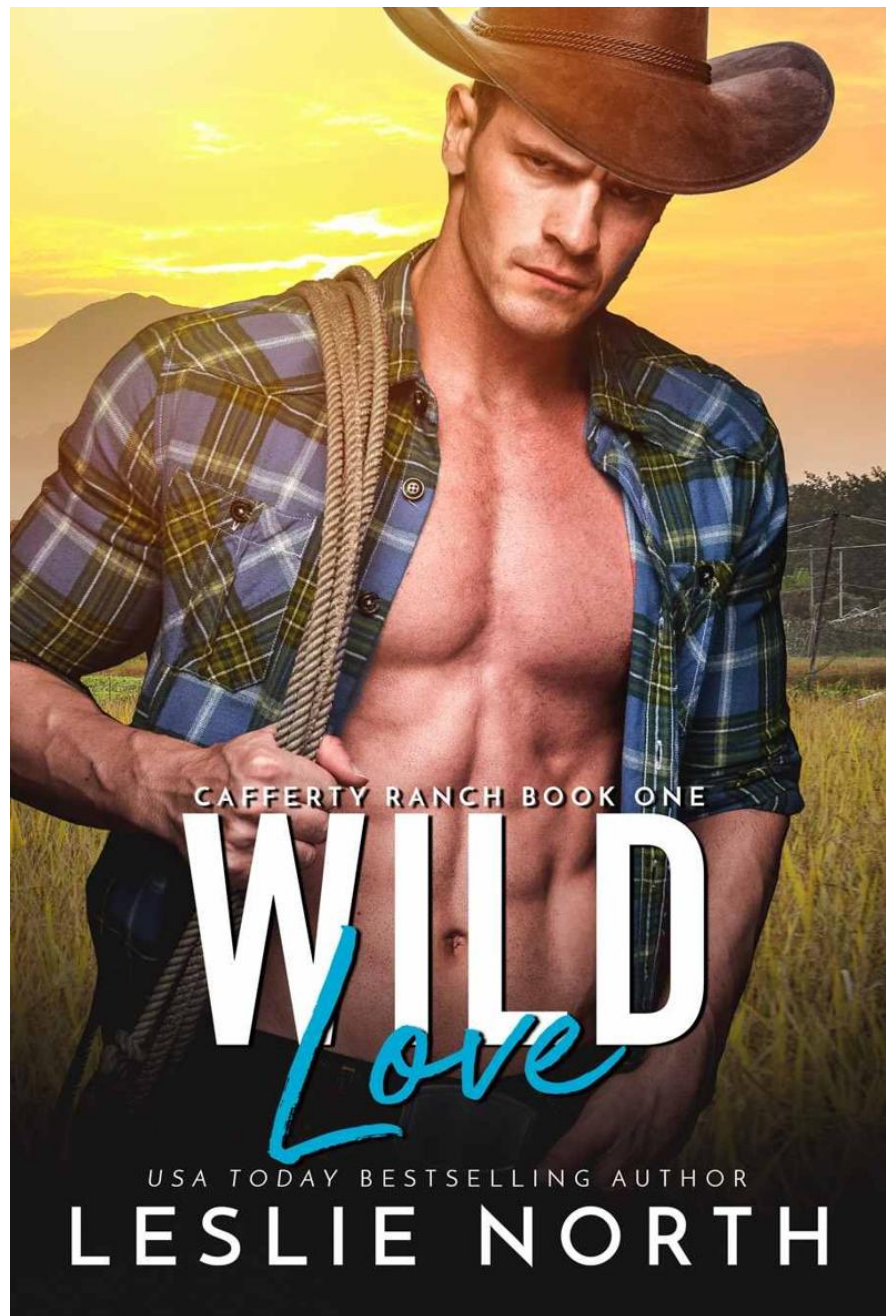
“That won’t work,” said Sabrina, calm but firm, like a teacher. Trevor bristled at her air of assurance, but she kept on talking like nothing was wrong. “They’re not *my* campers. They’re *glampers*. And they’re *ours*. And what they’re paying for is an authentic ranch experience—or at least, a taste of one. How will they get that if our paths never cross?”

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## BLURB

*The heart wants what the heart wants...*

Web designer Zoe Wilson has two good reasons to avoid Cafferty ranch. First, she's scared of horses. And second, she absolutely does not want to bump into her first love, Jake Cafferty. Too bad her best friend just happens to be Jake's sister.

When she asks Zoe to update the ranch's outdated website, Zoe agrees—happy to lose herself in the digital world. But the more time she spends near Jake, the more all those feelings from years ago rear up in her heart, kicking like a wild bronco...

Jake never told anyone, but Zoe broke his heart when they were kids. Now she's back, and the gruff cowboy vows there's no way he'll let that happen again. But there's something about Zoe that he just can't resist, and he soon finds himself falling for her all over again... Hard.

When Zoe gets accepted into a prestigious program, she doesn't want to give up on their love. But Jake can't bring himself to leave the ranch.

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## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter 1**

“Well, we gotta make do, simple as that,” Jake Cafferty said to Dustin Whitlock, his foreman. “No way we can replace it with all of the upgrades we need, so repair is the name of the game.”

They were headed back from their ride out to the far pasture to check on the stranded and broken-down tractor, the latest in a series of unexpected expenses that were giving him nonstop headaches.

“I’ll do my best,” Dustin responded with a nod.

They both turned to the sound of tires crunching up the long dirt driveway that led to Lost Valley Ranch’s main house.

“Expecting someone, boss?” Dustin asked.

“Nope.”

Jake frowned and rubbed his hand down the coppery scruff along his jawline. They weren't due any visitors that he knew of, and he wasn't in the mood to entertain whoever was zipping closer, a little too fast for his liking. Jake spotted someone in sunglasses singing along to the radio. A very pretty, very

*familiar* someone, unmistakable even in the two point five seconds he had to take her in as she sped by.

“*Dang it.*”

Dustin glanced at him. “Something wrong?”

“No. Yeah. Maybe,” he muttered. “C’mon, we need to put these horses up.”

They urged them into gallops and followed behind the cloud of kicked up dust to the driveway in front of the house.

“You mind taking care of Indigo for me?” he asked Dustin as he slid off his horse. “I need to deal with...that.”

They both glanced over at the Jeep.

“Well, huh,” Dustin said as he leaned over and took the reins from Jake. “I guess you do.”

The appreciation in Dustin’s voice was obvious, and Jake couldn’t blame him. The petite, dark-haired woman grabbing bags from the back of the Jeep was immediately appealing even at a distance. Her jeans fit her just right, and every time she leaned forward, they were granted a view of her ample assets down the front of her white T-shirt.

Jake walked over and took advantage of the fact that she was completely oblivious to his presence to check her out from head to toe. Yup, she was as gorgeous as he remembered. Her dark brown hair was shorter now, but she still kept it tucked behind her ears the way she used to—he recalled how she used to say she didn’t like the way it got in her eyes when she was trying to work. And for someone who spent most of her time glued to a computer, she sure had a phenomenal body.

The question was, *why* was Zoe Wilson there now?

“Hey, Zo,” Jake called to her, reverting to his old nickname for her instinctively.

She jumped. Something else that hadn’t changed about his old girlfriend; she got so in her head that she tuned out the world around her.

“Jake! You scared me.” She placed a hand on her chest. “Hi.”

When she met his gaze, he was once again knocked sideways by how striking she was. Her skin was still porcelain pale, probably because she was a half-vampire night owl. Even though Jake usually preferred longer hair on women, Zoe's shorter cut suited her, and made her sharp cheekbones even more prominent. He refrained from letting his gaze drift downward because he wanted to be a gentleman, but he'd already clocked the curves.

It had been ages since they'd seen each other, and he shouldn't have felt the little bubble of excitement when she said his name, but Zoe had always had that effect on him.

"I wasn't expecting you until next month," he said, trying not to sound irritated even though he was, a little. He leaned up against the side of her black Jeep.

"No, that's when I'm leaving," she said in a matter-of-fact tone, turning back to continue unloading her bags. "Shannon said it was fine for me to set up camp here for the next month to clear my head and help you guys update the ranch's website. You don't mind, do you?"

It was a loaded question and they both knew it. On the face of it, she was simply there because she was his sister's best friend, and she apparently needed a place to stay. But he could have sworn Shannon had told him she was coming in a month and only staying for a weekend. Had he gotten it backwards, with her coming that weekend and *staying* for a month? He should have known better than to say yes to anything Shannon asked him when he was distracted—she *knew* he was only half listening and used it to her advantage.

So apparently, he would be housing his former girlfriend for an entire month. And sure, she was his sister's best friend and had come at Shannon's invite—but still. Peel back the layers and they both knew there was some unresolved...*stuff* between them. Not only was he now fuming at his sister for inviting her, he wasn't happy about the idea of having to see Zoe every day. She was part of his past and that's where she needed to stay.

Jake chose to ignore the subtext as well as the fact that her showing up unexpectedly on what was shaping up to be a crappy day was the last thing he wanted. He didn't like surprises, especially ones that put his still-adorable ex under the same roof

as him. Jake had enough on his plate to worry about, like the entire future of the damn ranch, and he simmered at Shannon for putting him in this situation.

“Yeah, it’s...it’s fine,” he finally managed to say.

But it wasn’t.

He was so up in his head that he didn’t notice petite Zoe struggling with a duffel bag that looked as big as she was. She tugged it from the back of her Jeep, and it fell to the ground with a thud that finally caught his attention.

“Here, let me get that for you,” Jake said, hustling over to her.

Zoe gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you. Shannon texted me that she’s doing something horse-y and would help me get set up in my room in a few minutes, but I figured I might as well get started.”

“Did she tell you which room she’s putting you in?”

“Yeah, she said something about the yellow room?” Zoe pulled on an overflowing backpack on with a grunt.

He nodded as he hefted the duffel bag onto his shoulder. The room was at the opposite end of the house from him. Good. He didn’t have time for distractions, and that way he could pretend that she wasn’t even there. Lord knew he had plenty to keep him busy and keep his mind off of her.

“Well, come on let’s go,” he said, throwing an arm out towards the house. “I’d lead the way, but I’m sure you know where you’re headed.”

Zoe grinned at him as she walked by, that adorable, crinkly nose thing she used to do back in the day, and he ignored the flicker of warmth in his chest.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Jake fumed at Shannon, sounding more like a parent than a big brother. “Where have you been?”

She froze in the doorway of the kitchen, hackles up and bracing for a fight. “Um, the barn? Doing my *job*?”

Shannon scowled as her hands flew up to pull her long auburn hair into a bun, her unconscious stress move when she was gearing up to go at it with Jake. All three of the Cafferty kids

had their mom's rich brownish-red hair, one of the many traits they shared. Shannon's hair twisting happened more and more since Jake had stepped in to assume the role of patriarch after they'd lost their parents three years before.

Their second shared trait was a spitfire temper that matched their hair color. When Jake and his two sisters got to bickering, it was always a contest to see who could scream the loudest. Of course, they loved one another intensely, and those familial bonds had only tightened after their parents died in that car crash, but strong feelings and short tempers meant that they were just as likely to snap at each other as to hug it out.

"Why didn't you tell me Zoe was coming today? I had no clue," he huffed.

"Jake, I *did* tell you, you just pick and choose when you listen," Shannon said, glaring at him with her arms crossed.

"You told me when you *knew* I wasn't paying attention—and then didn't bother to mention it again or give me a single reminder that she was showing up today. The timing is crap. The last thing I need is an outsider hanging around here for the next month."

Shannon scowled at him. "Outsider? Zoe's spent, like, half her life here. Have you forgotten all the sleepovers we had when we were little? When she got into a jam with her housing situation, of course I offered for her to stay here. Why wouldn't I? We've got more than enough room with just the two of us rattling around this big house. And besides, she's here to help us. She didn't like the thought of imposing on us for a month, so I told her she could pay us back in trade. Our website is a disaster, and she's an amazing coder and graphic designer."

Jake paced on the far end of the kitchen, the raspy sound of his boots on the tile filling the silence. They always gravitated to the sunny space with windows that looked out to their vast property. It was the heart of the house, and their de facto meeting spot.

As he paced, he tried to think of how to frame what was bothering him about Zoe staying for the next month. Having enough space wasn't an issue—Shannon was right about that. But the idea of having her so close set his nerves on edge. In his home, in his life, in his *business*, if she was going to be working



on the website—getting an up-close-and-personal look at how the ranch was faltering under his stewardship. The idea was enough to make him shudder. Bad enough that he was letting down his family in his struggles to keep the ranch afloat. Was it really necessary to invite his ex to come and watch him fail? Was there any way he could talk Shannon out of that part of it? Let Zoe stay at the ranch, if need be, but keep her out of the ranch's business?

“A new website isn't going to fix what's broken around here, Shannon. We both know how much Poplar Springs has changed in the past ten years. Back when we were kids, there was a waiting list for riding and roping lessons. Now we can barely fill a class. Not to mention the rising costs of the breeding side of the business. There's more competition than ever, and you're running to keep up.”

“Come on, give me some credit, Jake!” Shannon shot back. “My breeding program is way better than what's out there.”

It was true. Shannon had an eye and a gut instinct that no one could touch, plus the technical skills to ensure successful matches. The problem was the Lost Valley Ranch breeding program struggled to stand out in a crowded market. Without more visibility and recognition to drive up demand, they couldn't secure the prices her horses deserved, which meant the program often ended up running at a loss.

He huffed out a sigh. “I know it is, I'm sorry. All I'm saying is we've gotta make some changes around here if...” he trailed off, realizing that he'd already said too much.

“If what?” Shannon frowned. “What are you saying?”

“Nothing,” he backpedaled quickly. There was no use in worrying his sister. Worrying was *his* job. “It's just that we've got some expenses I wasn't anticipating, plus those upgrades I've been wanting to tackle since forever. It's a lot.”

He rubbed his eyes. He couldn't bring himself to tell his sisters that they were closer than ever to losing the ranch. Losing everything his family had built. The weight of the responsibility was crushing, especially when he saw all the ways he was falling short.

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