

SOUTHERN  
*Rogues #1*



HERO IN  
*waiting*

SHELBY FLYNN

*Hero in Waiting*

SOUTHERN ROGUES, BOOK ONE

SHELBY FLYNN





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## CHAPTER 1



## *Jackson*

I growled to myself, took a deep pull on the whiskey I'd poured... and then started going over the list again.

It was February, still the rainy season—as demonstrated by the downpour going on outside my window—and not even spring yet. We were in the midst of the season where we couldn't do much of anything, even as a ranch that dealt in cows rather than corn or cotton. I wasn't planting or plowing or deciding which fields were going to be put to use or left fallow for the summer.

That didn't mean my job was easy. Because broken equipment and outbuildings were broken regardless of what kind of ranch I was running.. And right now, with the rain sheeting down outside, I needed my barns in working order.

It was going to get even worse if it suddenly got colder and turned to snow.

My cattle were going to have to have shelter tomorrow, unless I woke up to bright sunshine and a clear, blue sky.

And my biggest barn was currently lacking in the waterproof-roof category. It wasn't horrible—we didn't have waterfalls running down into the barn—but it also wasn't ideal.

I just hadn't thought it was going to rain this hard in the middle of the driest winter we'd seen in the last ten years. I'd been putting the repairs to that barn off until I had a bit more free cash, and now that I actually needed the structure, I was going to end up paying for the procrastination.

“Stupid,” I snarled, shoving the papers away from me and getting up to stalk toward the fireplace. “You *know* better.”

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. I did know better. I’d been running this ranch—successfully—for five years, now, and it was the best-kept ranch in the area. Best cattle. Best pricing.

Best organization.

Until right now, when the barn I needed to shelter those cattle had a busted roof because I’d been dead positive that we were going to continue having a dry winter.

I threw the whiskey glass I’d been holding into the fire, my anger suddenly getting the best of me, and then ducked back as my miniature Molotov cocktail caused a sudden flare of heat.

“Terrific, Pole,” I snorted. “Now you’re going to burn your house down, too. Busted barn, burnt house, and you’ll be set for life.”

I turned and made my way back to the desk, trying to force my brain into something that felt at least a little bit more responsible—and less like throwing alcohol into a burning fire—but stopped short when my eyes scanned across the window... and then went back.

My house overlooked most of my property, built onto a small hill as it was, but it was also at the edge of my ranch. Which meant I was right up against the county road that led out of Arberry and toward Raleigh.

A road that was constantly in need of construction, because it crossed an active stream bed and had a very bad habit of washing out on a regular basis.

Whenever we had a heavy rain. Like the rain we were experiencing right now.

Every single man, woman, and child in town knew to avoid that road when it was raining. It was practically part of our social DNA. Something we could have done without even opening our eyes.

Which meant that whoever was driving the enormous vehicle trundling down that road right now had to be an out-of-towner.

And a stupid one at that.

\* \* \*

I watched the lights of the vehicle—a bus, maybe?—for about ten seconds, using every curse word in my head for people who were dumb enough to be out cavorting around at this time of night, and then started to turn away.

Whoever they were, they were idiots to be driving along a stream bed in the middle of a storm like this. Beyond idiots. But they also weren't my problem.

Thank God.

I had enough problems to handle without having to take care of tourists who thought they'd come down south and have a jaunt around countryside that didn't want anything to do with them.

I was just reaching out to pull the curtains down over the window to block out the light when I heard it. The rain suddenly kicked up several notches in intensity, the gentle hum of the drops hitting the ground becoming more like a rattle... and then a roar.

A roar that turned into something else entirely when the hail started.

A split second after that, I heard something that was a whole lot more than just a roar. No, this was a whirlwind of sound, a steam engine-level cacophony, and I had a split second where the entire world stood still and stopped turning at the realization of what was happening.

The stream that came down out of my land—off the mountains—and underneath the tiny bridge on that road below me wasn't equipped to handle much water, but when it was raining like this, and had been since yesterday...

“No,” I muttered.

And then I was running for the door, my hand darting out to snag the raincoat that hung next to it as I raced by. I was out into the driving rain before I thought about it, and then I paused only long enough to be thankful that I hadn't taken my boots off before I started my little planning session. Three quick moves and I had the raincoat pulled on, the hood jerked up over my head, and within ten steps I was yanking open the door of my truck and leaping in, my keys already in my hand and my foot going right down onto the clutch.

It was suicidal to be out on the road in weather like this at this time of night. Even worse to be going out on my own.

But I knew the sound I'd just heard, and it was bad news. The rain was loud, yes, and the hail made it even louder.

But nothing could disguise the sound of a flood coming down the stream, breaking everything in its path... and heading right for the idiots driving on that road below me.

## CHAPTER 2

**T**his rain was going to freaking kill me.

I mean, not literally. I was on a bus that was at least mostly water tight, and the heating was cranked all the way up. So I wasn't actually in any danger of really dying.

Unless you counted being late to my first big tour because we'd gone out of our way to pick up the opening act in a little town in North Carolina that definitely hadn't been on our route, and then found ourselves in the middle of some sort of unseasonable monsoon. While on the dirty, rutted backroads of Small Town, USA.

In the middle of the night.

In which case yeah, the rain was going to kill me. If the execs from my record company didn't get to me first.

I turned to my best friend and manager, Parker, who was sitting in the seat across from me. "The execs are going to kill me for missing our first tour dates, aren't they?"

She glanced from me to the window, and then back to me, her face twisted up in an expression that I already recognized as the one she wore when she knew I wasn't going to like what she was about to say.

Not that my feelings on the matter were going to stop her from saying it. They never did.

Which was one of the things I liked the most about her. In a world where I was habitually playing Up and Coming Country Star, and where people had an obnoxious tendency to only tell me what they thought would keep me motivated, that

sort of honesty was like a long, cold drink of water on the hottest day in Nashville.

“Of course they’re not going to kill you,” she said, her expression deadpan. “They’ve put way too much money into you for that. Now punish you? *That* I can see happening.”

I groaned and slapped a hand to my forehead, trying to figure out how, exactly, things had gone so wrong. It had all started so great. My record company, Drive-In Records, had set me up on my first solo tour, and that was big news. Like, *really* big news. I was just a little—literally, as I was only 5-foot-3—girl from Shawnelle, North Carolina. No one had ever even heard of me until I won a music contest and splashed down in the biggest record company in the south. Of course, that was when the real work had started. I’d spent the last five years of my life working my little tush off, playing three shows a night for free and then carting my ass across the country on multiple tours as the opening act.

But I’d started to make a name for myself. A name big enough that the company had decided I deserved a tour of my own. They’d given me a bus and thirty dates—thirty different cities!—and then set my band and me up with security and an expense account for our road trip.

We’d left Nashville in the highest of all high spirits.

And then we’d gotten to Arberry and it had all gone wrong.

Actually, it had started outside of Arberry. We’d just crossed into North Carolina when the rain started, and in case you didn’t know, driving a double-decker tour bus through what felt like hurricane-strength winds was capital No capital Fun. We’d slowed down immediately and hit Arberry a full day behind our schedule. Olivia Johns, my warmup act—I couldn’t believe I was saying that—had come sprinting out of her house and hurled herself into the bus, soaked to the skin from her short dash, and we’d high-tailed it out of Arberry.

Right into the heart of the storm. In the middle of the night. On the unpaved—and now very flooded—road outside of Arberry.

Flash forward to me staring through the window at the rain, Parker at my side, as the rest of my band snoozed in the van, and you had our present situation.

“God, I hate the county,” I moaned. The thing was, I’d grown up in land like this. Land very *close* to this.

Shawnelle wasn’t Arberry, so this hadn’t been a homecoming. No, my hometown was just outside of Arberry... and even smaller. I’d fought tooth and nail to get the hell out of that town, and I’d never wanted to go back. I’d promised myself that I was going to be big city all the way, once I made it, and instead here I was, driving through pouring rain and acres and acres of farmland that looked like the ranch where I grew up.

I mean, at least I was driving through it with my own band. In my own tour bus. On the way to my first big tour.

I let myself smile at that... until I remembered that we were *late* for said big tour.

Dammit.

“Shane?” I called out. “How long until we hit Memphis? I’m dying for some city lights!”

“Country girl goes city,” Parker mumbled at my side, her voice tinged with sarcastic amusement.

“Shut it,” I muttered back. “You’re just as bad.”

She didn’t even try to argue with me. She knew better. Parker had been born and raised in Arberry, and we’d both sworn when we got to Nashville that we were never going back. We hadn’t known each other when we were young, but the moment the record label matched us up and sent us out on the road together, we’d realized how much we had in common.

And we’d promised each other that no matter what happened, we were going to drag each other up to the highest heights possible. Rather than into the mud outside of Arberry.

“Shane?” I called again, wondering why the driver wasn’t responding. What was he doing, sleeping at the wheel in the middle of this storm?



I got up and started making my way down the aisle of the bus, thinking maybe he hadn't heard me. I was close enough to him to see him jerk in surprise when I said his name again.

Dammit. That definitely wasn't a good sign.

"How long until we're in Raleigh, at least?" I asked, setting a hand on his shoulder. "And do you need someone else to drive?"

"An hour to Raleigh," he said, tossing a quick look back at me. "Where we're going to stop for coffee. And the last time I checked, no one else on this bus is licensed to drive this big a vehicle. So unless one of you has been taking lessons on the sly, I'm afraid we're stuck."

"Want to stop for the night?" I asked.

I didn't want him to say yes. Sure, we could have pulled over and stayed the entire night in the bus, toasty and dry. But it would have made us even later getting to Memphis for the first show, and we were already pushing our luck. At this rate, we were going to be lucky to get there and get a solid sound rehearsal in before taking the stage in front of the crowd.

I didn't exactly want to play my first big stadium show having just stepped off the bus.

But if Shane wasn't safe driving, I was going to have to put on my big girl panties and deal with it.

Shane snorted like he'd heard every single thing I'd just thought about, but shook his head. "I'd kill for some sleep, but if we miss that show it'll mean my job, and I don't have anything else to fall back on. I'm guessing ten hours from here to Memphis."

"Sounds like ten hours too many, if you're already falling asleep at the wheel," Parker said, appearing suddenly at my shoulder.

"This ain't my first rodeo, kids," Shane muttered. "Get on back there and get to sleep. You need to face cameras tomorrow. I don't."

I stared at the back of his head for several long moments, knowing Parker would back me up if I told him we had to pull over and rest for a bit.

And then I turned around and walked back to my seat. Shane had driven at least a million of these buses. He'd been on some of the biggest tours the label had ever set up.

Surely he knew what he was doing, and I was the newbie here. I needed to learn to trust the people who had more experience than I did, rather than always thinking I knew better.

My mother had been telling me so ever since I could remember, and now, I thought, was as good a time as any to start actually trying it.

I'd just sat down when the world around me started roaring, glass exploding somewhere nearby. I looked out the window, wondering what the hell was going on... and then the world turned upside down and went dark.

## CHAPTER 3

## *Every*

I gasped, my brain stuttering and floundering as it tried to come back to consciousness. What had happened? What was going on here, and why was I...

Oh God. The rain. Shane saying he wanted to go to sleep... and then refusing to pull over and do so. Me allowing him to continue on.

That rushing, horrible sound coming right at us. Glass shattering.

Darkness.

I sat straight up, the memory of what had happened coming back to me in a rush of images and feelings, along with the knowledge that something was very, very wrong.

Or at least I tried to sit up. When I activated the muscles that should have done that, though, I realized that I was... suspended in midair. Or... No, that wasn't quite right, either. I was... hanging, yes, but the ground seemed to be to my right rather than underneath me.

Oh God. We'd crashed. That had to be it. Something had happened and Shane had lost control of the van and we'd crashed and gone off the road or something. I grappled with the seatbelt, desperate now to get out of it and check on the rest of my band—and Shane himself—and managed to get it undone... only to fall several feet to what I had to be the side of the bus, given the feeling of glass under my fingers.

The side of the bus. Right. Shattering glass. That made sense. We'd gone over on our side, then, somehow, but the bus

was intact and everything seemed to be safe, structurally.

Then I felt the cracks in the glass underneath me. And the water seeping through those cracks.

Just the rain, I told myself firmly. Of course there was water seeping in through the broken spots. It was raining buckets outside and the ground where we'd landed was probably soaked. It also wasn't important right now. I was thinking the bus probably had much bigger problems than getting wet, and that was nothing compared to my friends and bandmates.

I couldn't feel any injuries on my own body. But I needed to find everyone else and make sure they were okay, too.

"Parker?" I called out into the darkness. "Shane? Lucas, Scott?" I gulped at the silence around me, trying very, very hard not to panic. "Amos? Olivia?"

My voice cracked on that last name, and I forced my heart back down into its proper place. Surely they were okay. Surely they were.

I wouldn't be able to live if they weren't.

Suddenly a body appeared on my left, coming out of the darkness so quickly that I hadn't even been able to see it until it was right on top of me, and a pair of arms folded me into a hug.

"You're okay," a low, gruff voice said into my hair, breathing heavily. "Thank God."

I almost melted in relief. "Amos. What happened? Where is everyone?"

"At the back of the bus," he said quickly. "Come on."

He took my hand and led me quickly in that direction, my feet moving along without my brain's cooperation. The back of the bus. Of course. The boys had all been sitting back there with Olivia while Parker and I were...

"Where's Parker?" I asked hoarsely. She'd been right next to me, and now she was...

“Here,” her voice called out from ahead of us.

“Thank God,” I whispered.

Wait a minute.

“Wait, you were sitting right next to me,” I said, running to her when she emerged from the darkness. “What did you do, leave me strapped in my seat to come back here and hang out with the guys?”

She snorted. “Hang out with this bunch of smelly beasts? As if. I didn’t leave you anywhere. I wasn’t buckled, though.”

Oh God. If she hadn’t been buckled, then it meant she’d been thrown across the bus when we were hit. She could have been killed.

I nearly collapsed at the thought. We were so lucky. So lucky. If things had gone just a little bit differently...

Wait. Again.

“What the hell happened?” I asked, my voice stronger now that my team was all present and accounted for. “We were driving along, no problem, and then—”

“We were hit,” Parker agreed. “But what vehicle would have been big enough to take us down?”

“Not a vehicle,” Shane said, stumbling out of the darkness from the front of the bus. “Not even close.”

I rushed to him and checked him for injuries, running my hands over his face and arms and registering several cuts, and then stopped when I realized what he’d just said. “If not a vehicle, then what?” I asked quietly. What else could it have been? The wind? Had he just been sloppy at the wheel?

Aliens?

“Water,” he said grimly. “We were crossing the bridge when a wall of water came barreling out of the darkness. Hit us flat in the side and sent us flying. As far as I can figure, we’re on the other side of the bridge, now, in the—”

There was another sudden rush of sound outside, something like I’d never heard before, and the bus jerked,

groaned... and then started sliding.

“In the creek itself,” Shane muttered.

Oh, God. We were in a creek bed in the middle of a freaking monsoon, our bus on its side and no one here to tow us out again.

I’d thought I was kidding when I said the rain was going to kill me, but if we didn’t figure out how to get out of here, that was actually going to come true.

I’d barely finished the thought when I realized that my feet were getting wet. I looked down, already knowing what I was going to see, and saw an inch of water on the floor—or the side—of the bus. A quick glance around us showed me that we were all standing in a mix of mud and water, and based on what I thought was probably going on outside, it was going to get a whole lot worse.

We were in trouble.

“Out,” I said, moving quickly for the front of the bus. “We have to get out.”

I’d never in my life given my bandmates direct orders—it just wasn’t me—so I’d expected someone to argue with me at least a little bit. Give me a reason or two that I was overreacting, or that we were safer in the bus. Argue with me about who was in charge here, etc.

No one said a word. Instead, we moved as a group toward the front of the bus, passing over the broken windows beneath us and underneath the rows of seats we’d just been sleeping in.

God, this had gone from bad to worse. We’d gone from probably missing our first show to...

I didn’t complete the sentence. I didn’t want to think about how bad this might get.

\* \* \*

By the time we got to the front of the bus, I’d moved from ignoring the idea of what might happen if we didn’t get out of

here to being confident that we were going to get out and get up onto dry land.

I mean, land that was wet from the rain. But land that was at least out of the stream bed. And out of the way of further floodwaters.

So when we stopped underneath the door to the bus, I looked up, relief and optimism washing through me.

“Right,” I said quickly. “Amos, boost me up there and let’s get the heck out of this broken tin can.”

Amos knelt immediately, presenting his broad shoulders to me, and as I climbed onto him and was lifted up into the air, I thought to myself that I could get used to this.

You know, the rest of the band doing exactly what I asked them to.

Normally they were way too busy trying to take care of me to bother with taking me that seriously.

When I was within reach of the door, I stretched a hand up toward the handle, my lip in my teeth and my breath frozen in my lungs. This was it. I could hear the sloshing of the water around the feet of my band members, the rush of the thing we were still calling a stream outside.

I could feel the chill of the water all around us.

One twist of that handle, though, and some maneuvering to get everyone up there, and we’d be out of this bus and up onto the shore, where we’d find safety.

*Twist the handle, Avery, and get us the hell out of here.* No problem. Easy peasy. Simple as peach pie.

I grabbed the handle, twisted... and realized that the door was stuck.

“No,” I whispered, twisting it again and shoving as hard as I could from my current position. But I got nowhere. The handle would turn, but something was wrong with the latch. Or maybe the door itself was just stuck. Maybe the frame of the bus had warped when we crashed, securing the door in place rather than allowing it to swing open.



It didn't matter in the end, because it all came to the same exact place.

"The door's stuck," I grunted, pushing up as hard as I could and still getting nowhere. "Amos, can you get me any higher?"

A shocked silence followed my question, and then a grunt of effort, which led to... nothing.

"You're as high up as you're going to get, kiddo," he muttered. "What do you mean the door's stuck?"

God, they couldn't see what I was doing from down below, I realized. It was pitch black in the bus and we didn't have any lights on us.

They couldn't see me struggling to get the damn thing to open.

"The door," I grunted, continuing to push and shove at it, "is stuck. Stuck. S-T-U-C-K."

And I didn't have the leverage to get it unstuck. Not with so much space between me and the handle. I needed to be closer.

I was in that split second between having figured out what I needed and figuring out how to get it done when the world exploded in sound again. Sound I recognized.

The sound I'd heard right before we crashed.

Oh God. If it had been a flood before...

"Water!" Shane shouted. "Everyone take cover!"

I'd been about to actually stand up on Amos' shoulders, intent on reaching the handle and giving myself better leverage, but found myself jerked down instead, cradled in Amos' arms, and shoved down toward the standing water at the bottom of the bus.

"Stay down," Amos muttered, his voice deep and gravely in my ear. He squirmed and then Parker was next to me, both of us caged in by Amos' arms as his body hovered over ours, protecting us from what was about to come.

I had half a second to think he deserved a raise before the water hit the bus with a groan of metal and the shattering of glass around us.

I screamed. I couldn't help it, and I didn't try to. Hey, you close yourself into a broken, battered bus in the middle of a flood and then get hit with a tidal wave and tell me how *you* react.

I felt the bus slipping further away from the bridge we'd come off, the mud and water underneath me getting deeper and colder as we went, the metal around us screaming with the effort of staying together.

God, we were going to die here. We were actually going to die.

Then I heard something else. More glass shattering, yes, but also...

Also a man's voice.

"Get the hell off the floor and get up here!" the man shouted.

I looked up, wondering if I'd actually started hallucinating. Was this my life flashing before my eyes when I was on the verge of death? If it was, it was pretty weird, since I'd never had a man say anything like that to me before. Was it possible that your life passing in front of your eyes was actually more like your brain trying to pretend you were being rescued from whatever was happening?

Because if so, it was completely pointless.

Then I saw a light coming through one of the windows above us, and a hand reaching through the opening where the window had once been. Moments later, a shadowy face appeared above the hand, and the voice got even louder.

"What are you, stupid? Get the hell up here so I can get you out of there!"

I didn't know who he was or how he'd found us, and I sure as hell didn't know why he was so pissed off at us when we were clearly in trouble.

But I'd never been so glad to hear another human voice in my life. I threw Amos off me, darted for the row of seats that would lead to the window in question, and jumped up to catch at them.

There was a man out there who was going to help us get out of this mess, and I was going to get up there and make sure every one of my friends got out of this bus while we had the chance. I'd figure out who the guy was and what he wanted after we were on dry land again.

## CHAPTER 4

The problem, of course, was that I was only 5-foot-3 and therefore way, way too short to be able to just jump up and reach the seats, which were hanging at least a foot over my head. The other problem was that even if I'd been able to do that, I would have failed completely at reaching back down, grabbing any of my friends, and pulling them up after me.

Hey, I had the best of intentions. But that didn't make me three feet taller than I actually was.

Luckily, Mystery Rescue Man took one look at me flailing around below him and seemed to understand exactly how this was going to go.

"Get back!" he shouted. "I'm coming down!"

He'd already managed to break one side of the window—enough to reach his hand through and beckon to us—but now he disappeared from view. Seconds later, I heard a pounding on the window above us, and after three repeat poundings, the guy actually fell through the window and landed on the ground next to me, crouching like he was some sort of freaking ninja.

The guy was *enormous*, and also covered in what had to be several layers of rain gear. He stood up, glanced back toward my group of friends, and then held a hand out to me like we were in a freaking movie or something.

"You first, little one," he muttered.

I didn't have time to tell him that I had a name, thank you very much, before he'd actually *scooped me up* and shoved me

toward the row of seats above us. I grabbed at the seats and managed to pull myself up far enough to get my feet against one of the arm rests, and used that leverage to boost myself toward the window.

Where I froze and turned back, looking for my friends. How were they going to get up here? I wasn't going to leave them in here while I was out there, free and clear of the killer bus.

“Get through that window!” Mystery Rescue Man roared, seeing me turn back. “I'll take care of everyone down here. Get up, get out, and jump for the shore!”

I scowled at his tone of voice, wondering who the hell he thought he was to order me around, and then the bus slid several more feet downriver, groaning as it went.

Right.

I turned my face toward the window, pushed off the armrests, and slithered through the remains of the frame, holding my breath and trying to avoid the glass shards I was sure were reaching for my tender skin.

The wind was screaming outside, the rain driving and the hail pelting at me like hundreds of tiny weapons intent on taking me down. I looked from my left to my right, searching for the shore our rescuer had promised, and realized that I didn't know which way to go. Everything out there was dark and windy and rainy and foggy, and the bridge we'd come from—or the land surrounding the creek itself—could have been anywhere. I didn't want to sprint to the right if land was actually to my left, or vice versa.

God, I didn't even know if I could sprint at all in this wind.

I pulled myself out of the window and hunkered down on the bus itself, peering through the darkness and trying to figure out which way to go. Before I could decide, Parker was climbing up out of the window, her face stiff with effort. She came to a crouched stop right beside me and looked up and down the bus.

“What’s going on up here?” she gasped. “Which way do we go?”

“If I knew, I’d already be going there,” I replied, cringing as a fresh spray of rain hit me in the face. “But we can’t stay up here. These winds are—”

“What the hell are you two doing, having a picnic up here?” a voice shouted in my ear.

I jerked and whirled to see that our mystery rescuer had somehow exploded back up out of the window and come to a crouch right next to us.

Definitely a ninja, I thought bitterly. And a cranky one at that.

“Sure, do you want to pour the tea?” I shouted back. “We don’t know where to go!”

Instead of answering, he snatched at Parker and me, tucked each of us under an arm, and sprinted forward—to the right—hustling us down the bus and toward...

He jumped when the bus came to an abrupt stop and, unable to do anything other than what he was doing, Parker and I jumped with him. And then we were flying through the rain-soaked, misty air, the world slowing around us as we floated there for several moments.

Hitting the ground was an experience I never wanted to repeat, but before I could recover the man had disappeared again, presumably to go back for the others.

Parker and I stared into the darkness after him, no doubt looking truly gobsmacked at what had just happened.

“Who the hell is that guy and where did he come from?” Parker murmured.

“No idea,” I told her. “But he’s obviously gone to ninja school. And I’m pretty sure we’d be dead if he hadn’t found us.”

\* \* \*

Moments later Mystery Guy had returned with the rest of our little group, my band mates' eyes as big and panicked as I was sure mine were. Olivia's hair was plastered to her cheeks and she looked like she was about to either throw up or kill someone. But we were all standing in the grass of the bank.

We were safe.

Then another wave of water came rushing down the stream, and this one completely engulfed the bus, no doubt flooding the entire interior.

We all ducked, turned, and started running, desperate to escape the water that had almost trapped us.

“Hold onto each other!” Mystery Man screamed, his voice reaching up over the wind. “And follow me! I'll get you out of here!”

We followed—as if we'd have done anything else—and before long a large truck came into view ahead of us. Mystery Guy ran around to the driver's door and the rest of us threw ourselves into the passenger's side, piling in without regard to seatbelts or even individual seats. We'd barely managed to close the doors before our savior hit the gas, the tires spinning underneath us until they finally found purchase and took us tearing out of the meadow that surrounded the creek that had tried to drown us.



## CHAPTER 5

## *Jackson*

I was annoyed with the lot of them when I got to the meadow and saw what had happened, and even more annoyed when they proved incapable of doing something as easy as getting out of the bus on their own.

By the time I got my duelly out of the meadow and to the road, I thought I might have to actually throttle one of them.

Sure, there were a few good ones in the group. The largest guy, Amos, seemed to have a solid head on his shoulders, and one of the others—Lucas, perhaps, based on the rapid conversation I could hear—had promptly set about getting the girls buckled into seats once we were moving.

That didn't make me feel any better about the fact that they'd been out in the middle of the night, driving through the rain in what looked like some sort of outrageous cartoon bus. I couldn't figure out whether any of them was actually in charge, and they all looked to be roughly twelve years old.

Okay, maybe twenty. But that was a stretch.

Getting anything out of them had been next to impossible. The girls were shivering and talking five hundred miles a minute, and the guys were either lecturing them or trying to comfort them—it was hard to tell—and not doing either one well. One of the guys, whose name I hadn't caught, was pouting like this was all some personal insult, and staring daggers at the other men every time they touched one of the girls.

Right. So not everyone in this merry little band got along.

Honestly I felt like I'd just managed to rescue a troupe of monkeys. Monkeys that hadn't been well-trained.

Even worse, I could see that some of them had been hurt in the crash. I glanced in the rear view mirror and ran my eyes quickly over them. The oldest guy—the one I thought might actually be an adult—had a nasty gash across his forehead, and one of the other guys was holding his shoulder like it was definitely hurt. The girls looked to be okay, but...

My eyes froze when I came to the second of those girls and found her own eyes, bright blue and far too large for her face, staring at me. She was the tiny girl, the one that didn't look like she could be over 5 feet, though her wild, curly hair gave her several additional inches. Pretty as a pixie, all sharp features and glowing, freckled skin. A gorgeous, miniature thing that you wanted to pick up and put right into your pocket.

The kind of girl you wanted to keep safe, even when you didn't even know her.

Of course, I'd figured out within thirty seconds of getting inside that bus that she was somehow important to this little band of misfits. Took herself far too seriously and was way too willing to jump right into a bad situation without thinking it through.

Just look at how quickly she'd jumped at the chance to be the first one off that bus. Sure, she'd been the first one I grabbed at, but she hadn't exactly pushed someone else to go in front of her.

So I guess it shouldn't have surprised me to see that amongst all of the people in the back seat of my truck, she was the one and only person staring back at me as I watched them.

She met my eyes, lifted one eyebrow in question—and, if I was reading her right, judgement—and then narrowed her eyes. I wondered what the hell she was thinking about, right then. Why she was narrowing her eyes and looking at me like I was somehow the one to blame for their current predicament.

I wondered, more importantly, why that one gesture sent a thrill of awareness rushing over my skin, like she'd somehow scalded me with her glare. What was the girl doing, packing laser beams in her eyes or something?

I wrenched my own eyes away from hers and back to the road, lecturing myself about safe driving—particularly in a storm—and reading too much into a simple look from a girl I'd probably never see again.

I didn't have time to figure out what the hell she was thinking or why. I needed to get them out of the truck and into better lighting so I could see how badly they'd been hurt. I needed to call Kurt, the best—well, only—mechanic in town and see what he could do about getting that busted bus out of the creek before it washed away.

I needed to make sure my cattle were inside some sort of shelter before this storm got even worse.

And none of that was going to happen if I was wasting my time staring at the tiny, beautiful girl in the back of my truck and wondering what the hell she'd been doing on a bus in the middle of the night. Where she'd been going.

And what I was going to do with her.

\* \* \*

We went skidding into the driveway of the ranch house, the mud and water rushing over the concrete and down into the front pasture, and I threw the truck into park. “Out and into the house!” I barked. “I want all of you out of those wet clothes and into something dry, and then I want you lined up in the living room so I can look at those injuries.”

“Terrific,” one of the guys snorted. “We've been rescued by someone who thinks we're in the military.”

I turned, leaned one casual arm across the seat, and stared at him, knowing that I was both larger and older than him, and therefore intimidating. “I'm the man who just went out into the middle of a rainstorm, in the middle of the night, to save you

and your little circus, kid,” I told him quietly. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, half of you are hurt. So I’d suggest having a little bit of respect.”

I didn’t wait for him to answer me. I turned around, threw open my door, and slid out of the truck, leaving the circus in question to follow me into the house.

Of course five minutes later, with them gathered and dripping in my foyer, I realized that we had a problem.

I wanted them in clean clothes. Something dry, so they wouldn’t catch a cold. But that was going to be awfully hard when they’d evidently left everything in that bus in the creek.

“Where the hell are your things?” I asked sharply, looking from one to the next and feeling like I suddenly had kids.

“Back in that bus you just saved us from,” the blonde girl said sharply. “We didn’t exactly have time to go around grabbing everything. I don’t know if you noticed or not, but we were sort of in trouble.”

My eyes swung back to her and I considered her for a split second before I answered. Big mouth for such a little girl.

Big brain, too, if the sharpness of her eyes was anything to go by.

“Our stuff wasn’t on the bus,” one of the guys said, throwing a confused glance at the girl. “Most of our luggage is in a trailer that was traveling ahead of us.”

A trailer that was driving ahead of them. Right. I put that on the list of things to take care of—I had friends in the local sheriff’s office, and they’d be able to chase any trailer down—and then started dealing with the problem at hand. They didn’t have any dry clothes to change into. Terrific.

Luckily, I did.

I directed the guys toward one guest bedroom and the girls toward another, and then made quickly for my own closet. None of the guys were as big as me, but sweats didn’t have to fit well, and as for the girls...

My cousin Delilah had a room in the house, for when she came to visit. And she had clothes. I guessed they would do just fine for the girls. Though now that I thought about it...

I paused in my closet, and then grabbed three additional flannel shirts. One for each girl. Delilah had clothes here, sure, but I didn't know if she had anything warm enough to keep those girls protected in this sort of weather.

And the last thing I needed was them complaining about being cold.

I gathered the clothes in my arms and made my way into the hallway, my mind racing across what I needed to do with my unexpected guests. Check them for injuries. Feed them. And then start making calls. Finding places for them to stay—preferably, starting tonight. I'd never been a big fan of entertaining and I didn't exactly want to start now. I wanted these people out of my house, and I didn't particularly want them coming back.

The girl, though? That tiny, fiery thing with the sharp mouth and even sharper eyes?

I felt the corners of my mouth turn up a bit... and then resolutely pushed them back down.

The girl had to go as well. No matter how entertaining I found her. No matter how much she made my skin buzz with awareness.

I didn't like company, and that was all there was to it. Besides, the girl seemed obnoxious. Argumentative. I wanted these kids out of my house, so I could go back to work.

Some part of me knew that was a lie. Some part was rumbling about not actually wanting all of them to go, and said part had specific ideas about who it wanted to stay. Because women very, very rarely interested me. They certainly didn't make me want to poke at them just to see how much I could rile them up.

I didn't have time for that sort of thing, and I'd never been interested in creating the time.

And that hadn't changed just because I'd rescued a mouthy girl and her friends in the middle of the night. The circus had to go. Hard stop.

## CHAPTER 6



The shirt he gave me smelled like him.

Or rather... Well honestly, I didn't know if it smelled like *him*, but it certainly smelled like man. Deep and musky and slightly sharp, like pine needles and the air outside. In the rain. probably doing something adventurous and slightly dangerous.

I pulled it around my body and inhaled deeply... then shook my head at myself. When I looked up, away from the deep green and blue of the flannel, I found my own gaze in the mirror in front of me.

"Girl, you're losing it," I told myself frankly. "Smelling his shirt, are you serious right now? What are you, some sort of groupie?"

I wasn't, and based on the way he'd treated us since he rescued us, the man didn't deserve that sort of adoration, anyhow. I mean sure, he'd pulled us from the bus. It wasn't exactly pulling us from a burning building, but I was big enough to admit that we'd been in trouble. We definitely hadn't wanted to *stay* in said bus, and I had serious doubts about whether we'd have gotten out of there without his help.

Then we'd gotten into his truck and he'd acted like he immediately regretted saving us at all.

Which really did beg the question: If he hadn't wanted to save us, why had he? Why play the hero if you weren't willing to accept the repercussions, when it all came down to it?

The man was a crank, no doubt about it, and though I appreciated that he'd saved us, I also wasn't keen on staying here any longer than we had to. I had a tour to get to and fans to satisfy, not to mention record execs with some very big, slightly scary expectations. So no, sitting around here in some grumpy cowboy's house wasn't on the list.

I took one last breath—because I needed to breathe, not because I was smelling his shirt—and then turned on my heel and left the guest bedroom, heading back for the stairs and whatever our would-be hero had planned for us next.

Hopefully it included food and going somewhere else. Not necessarily in that order.

\* \* \*

I got to the bottom of the stairs to find my band of friends gathered around the foyer, with Parker standing in the middle and giving orders.

“Lucas, Amos, you're evidently heading to his friend Dev's,” she was saying. “Shane and Scott, you're staying with some guy named Connor. And Olivia and I are bunking down with Dev's sister at her house.”

“Why would I do that?” Olivia asked, her voice full of tension. “I'm taking my butt right back to my parents' house, if it's all the same.”

Parker shook her head. “If it was that simple, I'd just go with you. But the roads are washed out between here and Arberry. We can't get back into town. Otherwise I'd be going with you to your parents'.”

I felt my steps stutter at this. What was she talking about? We were splitting up? And why did everyone have an assignment except for me?

“What about me?” I asked, shoving my way into the circle. “And also, why are we splitting up?”

“You're splitting up because I can't keep you all here,” a deep, rumbling voice said from behind me. “I've got work to

do and I don't need a bunch of people underfoot. I've already got someone towing your bus out of the creek, and I've got someone else going after the trailer that has your things in it. I assume you won't be in town for long. But that doesn't mean I can keep you all."

I turned, opening my mouth to argue with him about how unfair that sounded—splitting us up in the middle of the night and in a rainstorm, really?—but froze before I could say anything. My eyes were roughly level with a broad, muscular chest encased in a tight t-shirt, and a quick glance downward told me that he'd also changed out of the loose rain pants he'd been wearing when he came out into the night to rescue us. He was now wearing dark jeans that left very little to the imagination. Trim waste, narrow hips, and...

I blinked rapidly and then looked up... and up... and up. God, the man was just as enormous as I'd thought when he first dropped into the bus. He had to be at least 6-foot-3, maybe taller, and he was built like God himself had used him as the model for mankind.

Then I got to his face, and he was...

Beautiful. If you could call a man with dark, wild hair and even darker eyes, plus a jaw that looked like it could cut glass and cheekbones that a model would have paid good money to have something as simple as 'beautiful.' The man was flat-out gorgeous.

Enough that he took my breath away for several long moments.

Son of a nutcracker, the guy looked like he'd just stepped out of the pages of a calendar full of sexy cowboys. Hell, he looked like he could be on the damn cover.

He was also scowling at me, which I registered after I finally started breathing again.

"Why are you scowling at me?" I asked, giving him my best scowl in return. Sure, it probably wasn't that intimidating, considering the guy was a full foot taller than me, but even so.

If we were scowling, I wasn't going to let him get the best of me.

His face immediately cleared, like he'd just realized that he was in fact scowling, and he shook his head slightly. "I'm not scowling at you."

I snorted at the obvious lie. "So you're kicking us all out. And where am I meant to stay? Because I didn't hear my name on Parker's list."

I didn't bother to ask how Parker knew what was going on already, and why he'd told her instead of me. Because I didn't care. I didn't need to be the first one to know everything, and it was usually better if I didn't. I had a tendency to forget important details.

Parker never forgot.

So if he was going to tell anyone what the plans were, it made sense that he'd told her. There was absolutely no reason for me to feel upset about that.

No reason for me to feel jealous that he'd spent time talking to her instead of talking to me.

Hey, I didn't even like the guy, I reminded myself. He was a jerk who was now kicking us out of his house. And that was probably a good thing too, because he seemed really, really cranky.

Also, gorgeous.

But more importantly, cranky.

And he still hadn't answered my question. "Excuse me," I said pointedly. "Where exactly am I meant to stay?"

"I second that question," Scott piped up, his voice sounding rather more defensive than I would have expected. I mean yeah, I was feeling defensive because I hadn't been given a place to stay.

He had one, and he'd never seemed all that concerned about what I was doing unless we were on stage. So why did he sound like he was about to fight Jackson over where I was staying?

I glared at Scott, annoyed, and then turned my eyes back to our host, looking for an answer. *His* eyes darted to the left, right toward Parker, and I turned to her, frowning. Did she know something else I didn't?

"You're staying here," she said, her mouth twitching in what I could see was an inclination to giggle.

"What?" I gasped. Why would I stay here? Parker and Olivia were going somewhere else, so obviously there were other places to go. Why didn't I get to go with them?

"What?" two of the guys echoed at nearly the same moment.

"Rose only has room for two guests," the guy whose name I still didn't know said gruffly. "I tried to find another place for you to stay, but nothing else is available. Not within a reasonable distance. So it seems I'm stuck with you for the time being."

I turned from my best friend—who was definitely laughing at me—back toward the giant who had rescued us, my mouth hanging open in shock. "I have to stay here?" I asked weakly. This didn't make any sense. If he wanted us out, why didn't he want us all out? Why couldn't I just share a room with Olivia and Parker, or something?

What was this, some sort of punishment for being the reason we were on the road in the middle of the night in the first place? It couldn't be, I didn't think. The guy looming over me hadn't shown any indication that he knew who I was. He'd been treating me like some kid off the street, not a country star—or a country singer, at least. No, I wasn't a big deal yet, but in this part of the country, with my hometown right down the road, I'd gotten pretty good publicity.

Almost everyone around here at least knew my face.

But based on his behavior, I was willing to bet good money that this guy didn't have the first clue who I was.

So it couldn't be that he was somehow punishing me, or even that he was some secret fan who wanted to spend time with me. Why didn't I get to leave?

I turned to the guys in the band, thinking that I'd at least get some backup from them, because this was an insane idea, right?

Right?

None of them were looking at me, thought. Instead, they were all glaring at the guy who'd just told us that I was going to be staying at his house.

Alone.

"It makes sense, Avery," Parker said, slipping her hand into mine. "He doesn't want so many people here, but he's having trouble finding places for everyone. I mean, look at what time it is. We're lucky he found as many rooms as he did. Don't worry. I'm sure you'll find something to occupy your time while you're here."

I looked up to see her grinning at me, the brat, and then glanced back at the man in front of us to see the corners of his lips twitching, too. And in that moment, my feelings about him having talked to Parker about the plans for everyone went from jealousy... to anger.

They'd set this up. They'd never even met each other and they'd still managed to set up a situation where everyone else had somewhere to go except for me. This went far beyond not giving me any details, and right to...

Well, mean.

I was going to flat out kill Parker for this. Slaughter her in her sleep.

Or else figure out a way to get back at her the moment an opportunity presented itself.

## CHAPTER 7

## *Every*

I closed the door of the guest room behind me and leaned back against it, reminding myself to breathe.

Thunder boomed across the sky outside before I could do that, though, and I jumped, hitting my head on the frame of the door in the process. The immediate crack of lightning made me jump again—even though I'd known it was probably coming—and another round of thunder made me jump a third time.

I put my hand to my head, cursing myself for being such a nervous Nelly, and then glanced up and down the hallway, making sure no one was there to see me acting so stupid. You'd think this was my first time in a freaking thunderstorm in the south or something.

It wasn't. Obviously. I'd grown up in weather like this.

I'd also never gotten used to it. Thunder and lightning had scared the living daylights out of me as a kid, and it was one fear I'd never managed to outgrow. Even now, as a grown twenty-five-year-old woman, I could feel the buzz of panic rushing along my skin at the echoing booms outside.

It didn't help that I was in a complete stranger's home, and my best friend and manager was now trying to cough up her lungs in the guest bedroom.

After the storm had tried to kill me and my band.

So okay, I knew what to expect from a thunderstorm. But under the circumstances...



Under the circumstances, I thought, I needed something warm and sweet to drink. And I was going to need to add alcohol to it if I wanted to get any sleep tonight.

Another glance to my right, where the bedrooms seemed to be situated, showed me nothing but dim light and shadows, and I took that to mean the man of the house had already retired for the night. Probably right after the guys had left and Parker, while standing at the front door, had suddenly started coughing like she'd caught consumption or something. She'd collapsed right after that, her fever through the roof, and our rescuer—whose name I *still* hadn't managed to get—had said that he couldn't consider sending her to Daisy's house. He'd told me firmly that she'd have to stay here instead.

When I'd realized that Parker staying meant I could go to this Daisy's house in her place, I'd had a split second where the request sat on my tongue, just waiting to be blurted out. And then I'd realized that if Parker was sick, there was no way in hell I was leaving her.

Capital No.

The girl was my best friend and had stuck it out with me through thick and thin. I wasn't going to leave her here to be sick on her own. I didn't even know this guy, and there was no way I was leaving my best friend's health and wellness in his hands. For all I knew, he was going to wait for her to die and then sell her organs on the black market.

Or just fail to bring her the chicken soup and tea I knew she'd need.

I'd sent Olivia on to this Daisy person's house by herself, straightened my shoulders, and pushed Parker up the stairs, getting her into bed and covered with every blanket I could find.

And then I'd come out here and found the house deserted. Or at least quiet but for the pounding of the storm outside.

Which was perfect, because I wasn't really in the mood for any company.

I turned away from the wing of the house that held the bedrooms and made for the kitchen, wondering if this guy was civilized enough to have hot chocolate. And whiskey.

\* \* \*

The kitchen was enormous, and even more so when you counted the living room it was attached to. I didn't bother turning on the lights, though, because our host had left a fire burning in the fireplace and it was throwing off enough light for me to see what I needed to see.

I did wonder whether it was safe to leave that fire burning, but passed over it. The guy wasn't exactly going to put his own house in danger of burning down. Maybe he had some sort of safety device on the fireplace or something. No, I'd never heard of a safety device that allowed you to leave a fire burning all night, but I'd also never owned an enormous ranch house.

I was hardly an expert witness for such things.

I crept through the kitchen, making my way around the island and glancing at the still-stormy sky outside, and then spotted the pantry. Perfect. Any normal human being would keep cocoa mix there, and maybe even whiskey.

I tiptoed toward it, smirking at the thought that I was tiptoeing—what did I think, someone was going to overhear me?—and realized as I got closer that the pantry was actually already open. Mystery Guy must have left it open earlier when he came in here to get us food or something.

Well, that would save me the worry of a squeaky hinge when I opened it. Because if I was tiptoeing to make sure no one heard me, then I definitely didn't want a loud screech to sound out from me opening the door of the freaking pantry.

I reached for the door and made my way quickly around it, my eyes behind me on the entry into the kitchen, to make sure no one was going to suddenly appear to catch me lurking.

Which was how I turned just in time to see the huge man standing in the pantry, his hands clenched at his sides and his head hidden inside the pantry itself.

I was moving so fast by this time, trying to get out of sight, that I ran right into him.

I registered hard-as-rock muscle up against me, the warmth of him seeping through his clothes, and a scent that I'd thought earlier was like pine cones in the rain. And then I shrieked and jumped backward.

He shouted at the same moment, jumped, and hit his head on a shelf of the pantry, then whirled around, looking big and ferocious and...

Oh.

"What in sweet baby Jesus are you doing hiding in the pantry in the middle of the night?" I gasped, hand to my chest as I tried to coax my heart down out of my throat.

"What am I doing? It's *my* house!" he hissed back. "What are you doing creeping around like some sort of thief?"

I crossed my arms, immediately on the defense. "Looking for something to eat! Or... Looking for hot chocolate, if I'm being honest," I admitted, still too off-balance at his sudden appearance to even try to come up with a lie.

I looked up in time to see his lips twitching at something I'd said, though he immediately pulled them back down into a frown when he saw my eyes on him. "Hot chocolate?"

Well, I thought, in for a penny, in for a pound. Besides, maybe telling him the whole truth would get me what I'd come down here to find. "Yes," I said simply. "I don't like thunderstorms, and hot chocolate... Well, it makes me feel better."

He tipped his head, his eyes crinkling a bit at the corners. "A southern girl who doesn't like thunderstorms?"

I felt myself blush hotly at the teasing tone, and stood up as tall as I possibly could, my chin tipped up so I was looking

down my nose at him. “That’s what I said. You got a problem with that?”

He chuckled and reached behind him, grabbing something I couldn’t see off the shelf. “Not even remotely. I don’t like them, either.”

He brushed past me, heading for the oven, and I watched him go, confused down to the tips of my toes at what he was doing. He didn’t like them either? He was going to admit something like that and then just walk away from me?

“You going to help or what?”

The question was tossed over his shoulder, and I dragged my eyes up from his butt—which I totally hadn’t been checking out—to where his face was turned back toward me.

“Huh?”

He shook the box he’d taken out of the pantry. “You going to help? Or you going to leave all the hard work to me?”

My eyes flashed to the box in question, and I blushed even harder.

He’d grabbed a box of hot chocolate mix. The man who had, up to this point, acted like he didn’t want anything to do with us was on his way to the stove to make me hot chocolate, because I’d said I wanted it.

And I’d been standing here admiring the view of his rear end.

\* \* \*

I gave the pot another stir and ducked forward to inhale deeply. The warmth and sweetness of hot chocolate surrounded me, and I grinned.

“I can’t believe you make this on the stove top,” my host mumbled, appearing out of the dark with two mugs and a plate full of cookies. “You know this would have been done about ten minutes ago if we’d just made it in the microwave like I suggested.”

I snorted. “Only a heathen would think microwaving hot chocolate was better than making it on the stove. It tastes better this way.”

I could feel the long, cool look he gave me, but refused to look up from the pot where I was stirring our cocoa.

“I hate to break this to you, little one, but the mix is the same no matter how you make it,” he murmured. “Comes out of the same package and everything.”

I turned and poked at him with the spoon and he jumped back, barking out a laugh.

“Attacking me with a spoon when I’m sharing my hot chocolate with you?” he asked, pretending to be offended. “That’s a low blow.”

“Compare stove top hot chocolate to microwaved hot chocolate again and you’ll get even worse,” I threatened.

No, I wasn’t serious. Obviously. The man had a full foot on me and about 250 pounds of pure muscle. But I was enjoying this change in him so much, the sudden climb from Cranky Cowboy to Actual Human Being, that I’d let some of my walls down, too.

Was I flirting with him? Enjoying the way his laugh seemed to rumble up from his chest, like the plates of the earth moving? Appreciating the single dimple in his chin and the way his eyes warmed when he smiled?

Maybe.

Was I sorry for it?

Capital No.

He made his way back to the counter and leaned on it, smiling softly. “What makes it better when it’s cooked this way, then?”

I lifted a spoonful of liquid to my mouth and sipped, closing my eyes in pure bliss. “My mama told me it’s the way the milk heats. Heat it too fast—like in the microwave—and it doesn’t take the flavor in. Heat it slow, though...”

I lifted another spoonful of the liquid toward his face, and he leaned forward, his eyes on mine as he sipped at the liquid.

The air between us grew as thick as molasses and twice as sticky, and I felt my entire body flush with something. Awareness. Heat.

Craving.

“That is good,” he said, breaking the spell. “Your mom might be right. But I know what would make it even better.”

I jerked myself back from the edge of whatever madness I’d been about to descend into—because what was I doing, thinking this was anything other than two people making hot chocolate in the middle of the night?—and tipped my head at him. “What’s that? And if you say marshmallows, I’ll use the spoon on you again.”

Now it was his turn to snort. “I,” he said austerely, “don’t have a single marshmallow in this house. No, I was talking about whiskey. I’ve always thought a dash of whiskey in hot chocolate makes the whole thing... better.”

He glanced at me on that last word, his face carefully blank, and I shivered.

He hadn’t said anything out of the ordinary, I told myself. Hell, I’d put whiskey in my hot chocolate before. Lots of times. With lots of people.

People who didn’t mean one single thing to me, when it all came down to it.

So why did it suddenly feel like he’d suggested whiskey in hot chocolate... and meant something a whole lot more intimate than just mixing alcohol with cocoa?

## CHAPTER 8

## Jackson

I forced myself to look away from her, trying desperately to do something about the hot blood pounding its way through my body at the way she was looking at me.

What the hell was I *doing*?

I mean technically, I wasn't actually *doing* anything. I'd retrieved the hot chocolate mix out of the pantry and walked it to the stove, then grabbed the milk out of the refrigerator. I'd acted appropriately shocked and horrified when she suggested—and then demanded—that she be allowed to make the cocoa the old-fashioned way. I'd tasted it when she offered and I'd suggested adding whiskey to it.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing suggestive or even that intimate.

And yet...

And yet, it felt a whole lot like I'd just suggested we get naked and go for a swim together in the hot tub outside.

Which didn't make any sense at all, and would have been the worst idea in the entire world. I was old enough to know what I wanted, and that list had never included a wife. Or a girlfriend. Or even a girl who happened to need rescuing in the middle of the night and ended up being alone in my house with me.

I didn't need a woman in my life. Didn't *want* a woman in my life.

Even an adorable pixie of a girl who had my heart thumping in my chest like a damn drum, my interest peaked so



high I was surprised it wasn't floating above me in some obnoxious thought bubble.

Besides, this girl had been annoying right from the start. That didn't change just because she'd made some hot chocolate.

I strengthened my resolve to send her on her way in the morning and never see her again. Especially if she was having that sort of effect on me. Hell's bells, I didn't even know this girl's *name* and she was making me all jittery.

I did my best to ignore the fireworks exploding under my skin at the way she'd been looking at me, and walked quickly toward the liquor cabinet. Whiskey. Whiskey for the hot chocolate.

That was all this was.

I threw open the door and scanned the selection. Four bottles. I needed to restock.

Yes, I was a whiskey snob. Don't judge me. I lived alone in a big ranch house and was in charge of something like five hundred cattle at any point in time. I didn't have a girlfriend, and though I had friends, they ran their own ranches and were busy more often than not.

When I was alone, I liked to have a glass of whiskey. And I wasn't going to apologize for that.

"I don't suppose you have a whiskey preference," I called over my shoulder, half-amused at the idea that a girl that tiny and childlike had ever even *had* whiskey before.

"Lock, Stock, and Barrel," she said immediately, a southern drawl coming across in the words. "Or Kentucky Owl, if you have it."

I turned to her, eyebrows lifted, and looked at her in an entirely new light. "You like rye whiskey?"

She shrugged. "I like whiskey that takes up some space," she said casually. "Better than that watered-down stuff they like to serve in bars."

This startled a laugh out of me, my impression of her doing a 180-degree turn, and I grabbed the Lock off the shelf, my fingers tingling on the neck of the bottle. “Didn’t take you for a whiskey drinker.”

She gave me a very sly grin as she poured hot chocolate into the mugs. “What, you think just because I’m small, it means I can’t drink big drinks?”

I’d thought exactly that. But I was starting to suspect there was a whole lot more to her than I’d realized. Which was, of course, extremely dangerous.

\* \* \*

I took a sip of the hot chocolate and closed my eyes, savoring the heat as it ran down my throat and coated my stomach.

“Mama always said this way keeps it warmer longer, too,” a voice said softly from next to me.

I let my lips tip up in a smile. “I’m guessing the whiskey helps with that.”

I could almost hear the shrug, that casual lifting of one shoulder that she seemed to favor. “Could be. That doesn’t change the fact that making it on the stove makes it taste better than microwaving it. Plus you don’t get all that radiation.”

I turned to her, surprised. “You believe that microwaving food means you’re eating radiation?” Surely she was joking. No one actually believed that, did they? Not unless they were the sort of people who thought vegetables had feelings and the sun was talking to them.

This tiny, mouthy girl couldn’t think that. She seemed far too practical to subscribe to such things.

Though now that I thought about it, I realized that I couldn’t know that for sure. I mean, I didn’t know a single thing about this girl, except that she liked hot chocolate. And whiskey.

And she didn’t like thunderstorms.

“Of course I don’t think that,” she said with a snort. “But my mama does, so I heard plenty about it when I was growing up.”

I searched her face, looking for any sign that she was joking, but there was none. As far as I could see, she was being completely serious. “She sounds like quite a character.”

A corner of her mouth twitched. “That’s one way to put it.” She took a long sip of her cocoa, then pulled her eyes from the fire and met mine. “So tell me why you’re afraid of thunder.”

“Wait, I never said I was *afraid* of it,” I said, trying to remember whether I’d said that or not. No. I was sure I’d just said that I didn’t like storms. Not liking them and being afraid of them were two very different things.

She lifted one blond eyebrow as if she was reading my thoughts and arguing with them in her head.

“I’m not afraid of them,” I insisted, instinctively reaching for the shelter I generally built around myself. The hard shell I’d constructed when I was young, and had never fully let go of.

The armor that had protected me—and the one I reached for whenever I felt like I might be on the wrong side of an attack.

But something about the girl made it difficult to find it. I’d let go of it at some point in the kitchen and now I couldn’t find the edges anymore. Couldn’t quite pull it back around the soft inner parts of me.

It was the whiskey’s fault, I told myself firmly. I’d obviously poured too much of it into my cocoa.

I sighed, paused, and then realized that there was actually nothing wrong with admitting that storms scared me. Nothing wrong with telling her why. It wasn’t like she was actually going to be able to use it against me. What was she going to do, conjure up a storm and attack me with it? No.

Besides, she’d be gone in the morning. And something about telling her this one secret felt... right.

“I didn’t have the greatest childhood,” I admitted. “Grew up in a trailer outside of town that hardly counted as shelter. The roof of my room leaked, and the window rattled every time thunder rolled across the sky. When I was little, I thought...” I swallowed the words down, realizing that I’d already gone a whole lot deeper into my thoughts than I’d planned to.

She wouldn’t care. And even if she did, I couldn’t afford to care whether she cared. What was I doing, giving her pieces of myself that no one else had access to?

To my surprise, she reached toward me and touched my arm gently with the tips of her fingers.

Electricity lit me up like I was a god-damned filament in one of those old-fashioned light bulbs, and I spasmed so hard I bit my tongue... and then held as still as I could.

Because the truth was, I didn’t want her to stop touching me.

“I get it,” she said softly, her letters starting to slur a little bit with the hour and the whiskey. “I got caught out in the field once in a storm. Lightning struck the ground right next to me, and I thought I was dead. The whole world lit up and then there was this terrific boom. I was positive I’d died and gone to hell. Turned out it was just a thunderstorm. But I never got over the fear.”

She admitted it like it was the easiest thing in the world, like telling people about her darkest fears was something she did every day, and having watched her, having seen how the guys in her group treated her, I could believe it. Those guys were willing to sell their souls for her, and at least two of them had looked like they wanted to fight me when I said she’d be staying here rather than going to someone else’s house.

They treated her like she was their little sister, or a pet they’d picked up by the side of the road. Hell, they treated her like she was their most treasured possession.

This wasn’t the sort of girl who kept anything to herself or ever considered that she might not get away with something

she did. She said whatever she thought and counted on everyone around her to take her at her word.

She didn't have secrets like mine. No, she was completely herself.

And I was both enthralled by it... and incredibly, overwhelmingly jealous.

I reached the bottle of whiskey toward her, lifting my brows in question, and she held her mug out with a grin. "Yes please, sir. Actually... Wait, what's your name, anyhow?"

"Jackson," I said, smiling a bit as I poured a generous amount of whiskey into what was left of her cocoa. "What's yours?"

She tipped her head like she was surprised I was asking, and then frowned. The frown was gone almost as quickly as I saw it, though, and when she answered, she was laughing. "Avery. Nice to meet you, Jackson."

To my shock, she shifted, turned, and snuggled up against me, then lifted her mug to her lips. "How about we just stay here for a while, until the storm passes. I'll keep you safe from the thunder."

I chuckled, but wrapped my free arm around her, doing my best not to notice how perfectly she fit up against my body. How right it felt to be holding this girl I'd never even laid eyes on before.

How right it felt to have someone else in my space.

That right there was a first for me, if I was being honest. And as long as it was being offered, I wasn't in a hurry to stop it.

"Deal. Tell me more about where you grew up. Keep me distracted from the storm."

I hadn't actually heard the storm since we started making cocoa in the kitchen, and I certainly wasn't worried about the weather outside. But this was the first time in years that I'd felt the tension melting out of my shoulders, the stress in my head

calming itself. So I wasn't going to stop her from 'protecting' me from the thunder.

## CHAPTER 9

## *Every*

I woke up to the sound of thunder and opened my eyes to a view of watery gray sky outside, still overcast and threatening.

And then I realized that I wasn't in a bed. No, I was reclined on some sort of firm surface. Something that felt like...

I exploded up off the couch, my memory crashing back into my head like a flood, and glanced quickly around the room, hoping to God almighty I was wrong.

I wasn't wrong. There was the fireplace, the fire still smoldering in the grate. There were the shadows of the kitchen, the lights off and the place filled with darkness in the cold gray of the morning. And there was the couch. Deep chocolate leather, and big enough to fit several people, situated just close enough to the fire that you could enjoy the warmth without worrying that your socks were going to catch on fire from stray sparks.

The couch where I'd fallen asleep last night, warm and cozy on whiskey and the bulk of my host.

"Jackson," I whispered, my eyes darting around the room once again.

To my extreme relief, he was nowhere in sight. I couldn't remember now if he'd spent the entire night on the couch with me or not, but he'd disappeared before I woke up, and God, was I grateful for that.



Because what exactly did you say when you woke up next to someone on their couch after having known them for just a few hours? I couldn't imagine one polite way to address such a situation, and after years of my mother teaching me to be polite in any situation, that was really saying something.

Not that I'd ever even imagined a situation where I woke up on someone else's couch after having fallen asleep next to them while drinking whiskey and hot chocolate. Because I just didn't do this sort of thing. Sure, I'd been with other men, even had a boyfriend or two.

Guys that I'd taken months getting to know before I agreed to date them. Guys who had been gentlemen, first and foremost.

*Not* men who had saved me and then lectured me and my friends about how reckless we'd been to get ourselves in trouble in the first place. I wasn't the kind of girl who generally put up with cranks, if I was being honest.

Still... My mind flashed back to what Jackson had said about his childhood and the crooked turn of his lips when I'd talked about my own, and the way he'd pulled me into him when I said I'd keep him safe from the storm.

Cranks didn't smile like that. And they didn't generally cook hot chocolate for the girl they claimed they didn't like and couldn't wait to be rid of. And that thought made *me* smile a bit. I hadn't wanted to stay here—in this town or this house, honestly. But if this Jackson guy had a soft spot, and I knew how to access it...

It might make the stay a whole lot more pleasant.

\* \* \*

When I got back up to the room I was supposed to be sharing with Parker, I paused. She'd been alone all night, sick, and that made me feel guilty as hell, but at least it meant she'd been in a quiet room. Which should have been better for sleeping.

In theory.

Honestly, even now—7 in the morning, according to my phone—I thought about leaving her to continue sleeping. I didn't want to wake her up if she'd just gotten to sleep, and I'd rather have her resting than anything else. Parker was both my personal manager and the tour manager, and I needed her at full power if we were going to pull this off.

Unfortunately, I also needed a shower. And our bathroom was connected to the bedroom.

I opened the door slowly, sneaking my head through the space as quietly as I could and running my gaze across the darkened room...

To find Parker sitting up, rings still under her eyes and a phone pressed to her ear.

"I understand that, Sid, but the fact is, we're lucky to be alive. I would think you'd be focusing on that rather than the first show. Just think of what a good byline that'll be. 'Avery Dawson, nearly killed in a bus crash, refuses to cancel her tour. "I can't do it to the fans," she says, tears in her eyes.'"

Parker's own eyes darted up to mine and she winked, bringing a grin out on my face. We may only have been in this business for four years, but Parker had fallen right into it. She'd learned the ropes more quickly than I had, and had figured out within the first year that the way to wrap the execs around your finger was to give them exactly what they didn't even know they wanted.

God, she was good. And I was damned lucky to have her.

She was nodding, now, wearing the expression she always wore when she'd talked her way around one of them, and by the time she hung up, she was looking both successful and extremely proud of herself. "Well, we're forgiven," she said, her face becoming immediately serious again. "But we've only got a day to get the bus running again and our butts into Memphis for that show."

"That's not going to happen," a gruff voice said from right above my head.

I jumped, only now registering the heat coming off the body behind me, and scuttled into the bedroom, turning and glaring up at him. “What do you mean, that’s not going to happen?”

He smirked at having caught me by surprise, the jerk, and strolled casually into the room after me, carrying a tray with what looked like enough food for an entire army on it.

“The bus thing. Just talked to the guy who got it out of the creek. It’s in pretty bad shape.” He slid the tray onto the bedside table and gestured toward it. “Figured that wasn’t going to be the news you wanted to hear, so I cooked you breakfast. To soften the blow.”

I looked from him down to the food, and then back up. There was definitely enough food there to feed an army. And I was ravenous.

But I needed to hear the news he had before I could even think about eating.

“What did your friend say about the bus?”

“That it would probably be better and less expensive to buy a new one,” he said sharply. He reached down, grabbed a sausage off the tray, and popped it into his mouth. “Guess you’d better call whoever that was back and tell them plans have changed. Sounds to me like you’re going to be here for a couple of days, at least. This storm isn’t due to finish up until mid-week, and no one is going to be able to get any work done—or a new buss for you—until the roads are safe again.”

I felt my eyes narrow at this. “That’s not nearly enough food to make up for news like that.”

He just shrugged, cast me a mocking grin, and strode back out of the room.

I watched him go, huffing softly to myself, and quickly revised the opinions I’d come to last night and this morning. The guy might look like the meltiest chocolate dream ever, and he might have let his guard down last night when we were sitting in front of the fireplace, but evidently that didn’t mean anything in the cold light of day.

In the light of day, he was just as cranky and hateful as he had been when he rescued us.

And if he was right, I was going to be stuck with him for at least three more days. While missing the first shows of my tour and disappointing the record label.

I hadn't thought we could get into any more trouble than we were already in. Evidently I'd been wrong.

## CHAPTER 10

## *Jackson*

I got back down to the kitchen, poured myself another cup of coffee—black, with brown sugar only, thank you very much— and leaned a hip against the counter, looking through the window at the land spread out before me. The house was at the highest point of the ranch, which meant I could see just about everything, from the small forested area on one side of the valley to the creek that cut down the other edge of my land from the mountains, and everything in between. The wide open fields that made up the grazing land for my cattle, the fences I'd spent my blood, sweat, and tears on to keep the cows at least somewhat contained.

All of it drenched in water now, those fields nothing more than lakes with sucking, treacherous mud underneath them, just waiting to grab at any cow that walked through. If the cow was small enough, it would suck them down into the water and drown them.

Which was exactly why I needed to get out there, get the cows rounded up, and get them up into the barns directly below the house. Or, at the very least, the pastures next to those barns.

Pastures that would be out of the way if the valley decided to flood.

Those cows were the pieces that made this ranch tick. They were my investments, my charges. I needed them secure between four walls.

And I can hear what you're saying. 'Cows are used to being outside, Jackson. Surely they'd be okay.' What you

don't know is that cows left up to their own devices were trouble. Worse than trouble. They were a disaster waiting to happen. I'd never met any other creature so capable of finding a bad situation and inserting itself right into the middle of it. Even now, I could see several cattle on the hillocks below me, slipping and sliding as they made their way down toward the valley rather than up toward the barns.

Stupid beasts.

I thrust myself up away from the counter and set down my coffee mug. I didn't have time to be standing in the kitchen watching them. Hell, I hadn't had time to go out into the countryside last night and rescue a bunch of kids in a bus rather than seeing to the animals I was actually responsible for.

Not that I'd change what I did. I was glad to have saved the people from that bus.

I felt something brush against my consciousness as I followed that thought through to those people ending up in my house... and then one in particular ending up in my kitchen. On my sofa.

I shook myself away from the thought and focused once more on reality. Cattle. I needed to get out into the rain and see about my cattle. Not stand around daydreaming about a girl who may or may not remember the night we'd shared together in front of the fireplace.

Cows.

I directed my steps toward the door of the kitchen, my mind sorting through the things I'd need before I went out. Rain gear, check. I had that sitting right by the door, courtesy of last night's little field trip. Horse, check. My favorite, Gunner, had looked fresh and ready to go this morning when I went into the stable to feed breakfast. He'd been locked up for days with the rain, and would probably be just as happy to get out as I would be.

I paused at that, wondering, and then pressed forward. Yes, I had guests. Yes, it might perhaps be more polite to stay and make sure they had everything they needed. But I couldn't

afford to put everything on hold just because I had people staying at my house. Hell, I'd warned them ahead of time that I wasn't going to play host, and that I didn't have time for them to be underfoot. They'd just have to find a way to entertain themselves until they figured out what to do about that bus of theirs.

And as for the girl, Avery...

Something deep inside me warmed at the memory of last night. The whiskey running through my veins and the feel of her in my arms, her head growing heavy with sleep and contentment. Her promise to keep me safe from the thunder. And for just a moment, my steps faltered.

It had felt like something was starting between us last night, and there was a part of me that wanted to seek her out again. Figure out whether that something was still here this morning.

Then I remembered my promise to myself that I was going to get rid of her as quickly as possible, and my earlier promise—years old, now—that I didn't want to take on the responsibility of having a woman in my life. Too much trouble.

Too much risk.

I'd seen exactly what a woman could do to a man if she wanted to hurt him, and I'd told myself long ago that I was never going to put myself in that position. Not even for a girl who looked like she could light up an entire room with the strength of her own glow.

No, Avery would have to entertain herself—her and her friend Parker—until it was time for them to go. I had a ranch to run and a life to lead, and those two had no place in it.

\* \* \*

Of course convincing myself of that was all well and good, easy enough to do. It all sounded very mature and responsible. And it lasted until I got into the foyer and ran right into the girl



in question, her face pressed to the glass of the window next to the door and her hands slipped into the back pockets of her jeans.

I came skidding to a halt at the sight of her. I'd assumed she'd still be upstairs, and was therefore unprepared to deal with her in person now, when I had other things that needed doing.

"What are you doing down here?" I asked, my voice gruffer than I meant for it to be.

She turned and cocked her head at me. "Last time I checked, I was staying here for the time being, courtesy of you not bothering to find me another place to stay. So I'm just guessing you can probably expect to see me in your house for the next day, at least."

I heaved a sigh, trying to be patient. "I mean what are you doing down here instead of upstairs?"

At this, she cocked one eyebrow. "Am I not allowed down here?"

"No, I..." I stopped, wondering why the hell I was so flustered at such a simple question. Of course she was allowed downstairs. I just hadn't expected her, that was all.

Not that I was going to tell her that. Something told me that admitting I hadn't expected her, and that seeing her so suddenly had made something inside me start expanding like a balloon that was about to pop, would just lead to her laughing at me.

If I got it out at all.

"I would have thought you'd be upstairs eating breakfast with your friend," I told her, forcing my voice into something stern and foreboding.

She scoffed. "Parker's already asleep again, and I didn't want to bother her. Besides, I'm not really a breakfast person. Not in the morning, anyhow. At night, on the other hand..."

"You like to eat breakfast at night?"

“Night time is the best time to eat breakfast,” she told me coldly, like this was some sort of introductory Course to Being Human. “Everything is better at night.”

I cracked an unwilling grin at that. This girl took herself so damn seriously it was hard to do anything *but* laugh. “You sure have some serious opinions. Cocoa has to be cooked on the stove. The microwave is cheating. Breakfast should only be eaten at night. Any other rules I should know about? After all, if we’re going to be living in the same house for the next couple of days...”

Her eyes narrowed, her cheeks going pink. “Are you making fun of me, sir?”

Yes. But I wasn’t going to tell her that, either.

Still, I didn’t think it would be the last time it happened. I was enjoying making her blush way more than I should be.

“Of course not,” I said formally. “Merely noting that you have some very big opinions for such a small person.” I cast a glance at the window behind her, and cringed. The light was grayer than I liked, and though it was still early, I could see it was going to be one of those days where night arrived when it should only be afternoon.

I needed to have the cattle in long before that happened. I couldn’t have them spending another night out there in the cold. Too many chances for them to get hurt—or worse, sick with something that would infect the entire herd.

I started walking toward the door, reaching out to snag my rain gear on my way by. “Now if you’ll excuse me, little one, I have some work to do.”

To my utter shock, she stepped right in front of me, her chin tipped up in a way that told me she was going to say something stubborn. “Where are you going?” she demanded.

I stifled a sigh. I didn’t have time for this. But I also wouldn’t put it past her to stand there asking questions for hours, if I gave her an opening. “Out,” I told her quickly. “I have five hundred cattle out there, and though some of them will be fine in the rain, there are a whole lot that won’t. Those

ones need to get into a barn, and they're not going to go on their own."

I expected her to argue. I expected her to ask more questions or tell me all the reasons why I shouldn't be bothering.

I was not expecting her to frown, then nod and say, "In that case, I'll help."

The speed at which she volunteered took my breath away.

And I would have been lying if I said I didn't like the idea of spending more time with her. Asking her more about her big opinions, and hearing what she thought about this, that, and the other thing.

I would also have been lying if I said I couldn't use the help. Did I think she knew the first thing about rounding up cows? No. I knew who and what she was, and I doubted she was anything more at this point than a spoiled city girl, horrified at the idea of mud or rain.

But even if she just stood in the way of the cows to keep them from going in a direction I didn't want, it would be helpful. Yes, there was a good chance she'd get in the way or be completely useless.

But not as useless as I'd be if I stood in here arguing with her about it.

"Fine," I said. "But keep in mind that I don't think a woman's place is on a ranch, and I've never wanted one here. I don't have room for that sort of thing. That being said, if I let you help, there are rules. I call the shots out there and you do exactly what I say, got it?"

She gave me one of her half-shrugs. "Obviously."

Then she turned and walked out the door, her cowboy boots clicking on the porch and her wild, curly hair getting frizzier with every step, courtesy of the rain.

## CHAPTER 11

## Every

I got three steps past the door and cringed, knowing exactly what Jackson had to be seeing from behind me.

Uncontrollable curls that were getting more and more out of control the further I got into this moisture-packed air. I could practically *feel* them rioting all over my head.

I reached back through the door, my fingers grasping around on the table there until they found the cowboy hat I'd noticed last night. Grabbing it, I jerked it toward me and jammed it down on my head. Yes, it was too big and probably looked ridiculous.

But it was the only thing I had available for controlling my curls, and as far as I was concerned, that was the only excuse I needed. It would also, I thought practically, protect me from the rain. At least a little bit.

I glanced down at my clothes, realizing that everything else was going to be drenched, and was just wondering whether Jackson might have something that could pass for a rain coat when an enormous expanse of plastic suddenly swirled around my shoulders. I glanced down, surprised to see myself now engulfed in rubber-ducky yellow, and then glanced up at my host.

"Rain gear," he said gruffly, striding past me and refusing to meet my eyes. "You won't do me any good if I have to immediately bring you back because you're wet or cold. Let's go."

He didn't say anything else, and I hustled after him, marveling at the man who could both make sure I wasn't

going to get wet out there, and then treat me like I was the worst kind of imposter in the entire world.

If nothing else, this was going to be interesting. But I was keenly aware that he'd done us a favor last night, and the last thing I wanted was to feel like we somehow still owed him.

He'd saved our lives. I was helping him save his cows. That was a fair trade, right?

\* \* \*

I swung up onto the mare he'd offered me and settled into the saddle, then shifted a bit to make sure it was the right fit for me. I didn't know why he had a saddle small enough for me—he looked like he needed one roughly twice as big as I did—but I wasn't going to complain. I adjusted myself once more... and then realized that he was standing next to my horse, staring up at me.

With his mouth hanging open.

“What?” I snapped. “Are we going? I thought you were in some sort of hurry.”

He shook his head like he was trying to clear it of the cobwebs that had obviously taken up residence inside his skull, gave me one more narrow-eyed look, and then strode quickly toward his own horse.

I allowed myself a quick smile of victory—I suspected it was rather hard to take him by surprise, and I'd done it twice in the space of twelve hours—and then put my heels to my horse's sides and sent her after him, through the barn doors and out into the rain.

As we sloshed down the path that would lead us into the valley, and toward (I assumed) the cattle in question, I went through what he'd told me, his voice hurried and clipped and his strides so long I'd been struggling to keep up with him. He had roughly five hundred head of cattle on the ranch and the majority were heifers, some of them with calves—which he hadn't counted in his total number. He had five large barns on

the level below the house, along with several fields. He'd settle for the heifers with calves in the barn and the rest of the cattle in the field attached to the main barn, but he'd rather have all the cows inside.

"This storm is supposed to go on all week," he muttered. "And I don't want those cows getting into trouble in the mud."

It made sense. My parents were ranchers, too, and I'd seen how much trouble cows could get into when left up to their own devices.

I didn't really see how two people were going to wrangle five hundred cattle anywhere on their own. But I was assuming Jackson would have some genius answer for that. Just like I was sure he had genius answers for everything else.

All you had to do was look at the man to know he took himself way too seriously, and thought the world of his own ability to handle situations.

As our horses hit a steep part of the road, though, and our gallop became more sliding than actual running, I wondered if he'd ever met any situation that was beyond him... or if I was going to see it happen for the first time today.

\* \* \*

To my relief, Jackson's ranch ran a whole lot like the one my parents owned. Instead of having all the cows in one large enclosure—or worse, in an open area without any fences at all—he'd already divided them into separate fields. Each field looked to be about fifteen acres, and from what I could see, he'd put around one hundred cows in each one.

Enough to make the whole thing efficient but not crowded. Kind to the cattle but not doting.

This was a man who cared enough for his cattle to make sure they lived a good life here, and something inside me warmed at the thought. I'd never been able to resist a man who was kind to animals.

The thought disappeared almost as quickly as it came up, though, as Jackson whirled his horse toward me and started shouting through the rain.

“We handle the furthest field first, and make our way back!” he said. “The closer we get to the house, the easier it will be to get them up the hill and into a barn, and this means we start with the hardest ones first. You got a problem with that?”

I stared at him, caught between laughing and shouting back. Did I have a problem with that? Why was he already acting like I was arguing with him about how he wanted to do things?

Unless... Ah, I realized. It wasn't that he thought I was going to argue with him. No, he thought I was going to start whining. God, he was one of those men who didn't think a girl could do anything at all. No wonder he'd been so obvious about the whole I-don't-believe-women-belong-on-ranches thing.

So I did the only practical thing. I pointed at the furthest field I could see, tipped my head, and shouted, “That one first?”

At his nod, I sent my horse forward into the driving rain again, laughing as I heard him splutter and then shout at his horse to follow me.

When I got to the field in question, having galloped up the center aisle, which I noticed was both wide enough and contained enough to be the ideal avenue for herding cattle, I pulled to a stop and waited, my brain already working on the problem at hand.

I knew Jackson thought I was going to be more of a distraction than anything else.

Well, we'd just see about that, wouldn't we? This wasn't my first rodeo, and I was getting pretty tired of people assuming I couldn't do anything just because I was short.

This didn't look like it was going to be that difficult, if I was being honest. The cattle were already bunched together,



miserable in the pouring rain, and it didn't look like Jackson had been down here to throw them any hay this morning. So they'd be hungry, and less inclined to want to get sticky in a place that didn't appear to have any food for them.

Honestly, we probably could have brought the hay truck down here and just led them back to the barn. It might have been easier. It wasn't the sort of solution a man would think of, though. Especially not a man like Jackson, who looked like he always chose brawn over brains, if he had a choice.

When he pulled up next to me, I already had my thoughts in order and started pointing. "One of us in the front, one of us in the back of the group?" I asked. "I don't think they're going to give us much trouble if they think we're working with them to get them to food."

Another surprised look from him, and I raised my eyebrows, indicating that I was waiting for his response. His feedback.

Men, I'd found, reacted better when they thought you were asking for their help on something. And the truth was, this was his ranch and his cattle, and he probably knew them better than I did.

My idea might be good, but he might have a better one. And if he did, then that was what we were going to do.

His eyes shot toward the cattle, considering, and he nodded quickly. "You're right. They're hungry and they're cold. We give them a route toward warmth and they're not going to argue with us."

A surge of pride went through me at his words, warming me from the tips of my fingers so somewhere down deep in my belly, and I grinned.

Yeah, I'd thought it was a good idea. But I couldn't lie; him approving of it made it feel even better.

He dipped down, his fingers going to the slide on the gate, and we broke into action. I took the front of the herd, the two of us somehow silently agreeing that he'd be better at the back than I would, and after several moments of milling around,

keeping the cattle from bolting out the gate, I saw him give me a hand signal that meant he was in place and ready.

Well, I thought, here we went.

I'd never wanted to be a cowgirl, but I sang enough songs about the men who did this. Maybe this was the universe's way of making sure I actually understood the men I sang about.

Or something.

I turned and urged my horse into a gentle canter, heading for the gate and then through it, and then up the alley between the fences. I kept my canter slow and steady, thinking it would be better for keeping the cows more relaxed. But when I tossed a look over my shoulder, wanting to make sure that things were going the way they were supposed to, I realized that wasn't going to work.

No, the cows were moving a whole lot faster than my horse was. And if we didn't get out of the way quickly—

“Yah!” I shouted, bringing my heels down on my horse's flanks and willing her forward.

The mare, who seemed to somehow be linked into my own brain, shot forward, ready and willing, and we galloped up the lane and then up the hill, the horse fighting for footing as she went, the cows thundering along behind us.

\* \* \*

It took us two hours to get through all the cattle in the fields, and by the third field Jackson and I were working so well together that anyone might have thought we knew each other a whole lot better than we actually did. One glance, a word or two here or there, and we knew what the other wanted. Where we needed to go or what we needed to do. We began to move in sync as if we were in some sort of dance, our horses matching strides and moving in tandem. And it started to feel...

It started to feel as if we'd been doing this all our lives. As if we were more than just strangers, having known each other less than twenty-four hours.

It started to feel as if he knew my mind nearly as well as I did.

Which was ludicrous, of course. All we were doing was herding cattle. It wasn't like we were talking about the meaning of life or our grandest dreams or anything like that. But I found myself looking for him whenever I felt like something wasn't going right. Searching for his eyes when I needed help.

Shivering with pride when he nodded at me in approval or sent me a bright, shining grin once we cleared the last field.

We worked together to get this final group into the last barn and then shoved the doors shut behind us, both of us breathing hard but riding high on the idea that this had been the last group.

Then Jackson frowned and tipped his head.

"What?" I asked, recognizing this as the thing he did when his brain had registered something amiss.

He looked from the fields below us back to the barn we'd just closed and bit his lip, frowning more heavily. His eyes darted to the right and the left, and then he wedged the door open a crack and looked intensely through it, his gaze darting like he was actually counting the cows inside.

When he turned toward me, his face was bleak. "We're missing some," he said quietly.

"What?" I spun and looked down into the valley, my eyes going from one field to the next and looking for a group of stragglers. But there weren't any. We'd been systematic about working through the fields, and they weren't big enough for us to have randomly missed any cows. "But we've cleared all the fields."

Then I saw it.

In one of the fields closest to the base of the hill—a field we'd collected cows from half an hour ago—the fence on the far side of the stretch, opposite the gate itself, was down.

Struck by lightning or just taken down by the wind, all three rails were lost, leaving a gaping hole in the structure.

A hole quite big enough for cows to have gone through. And on the other side of that hole, a large creek of rushing water, heading right for the spot where our bus had been pushed off the bridge last night.

If that water was strong enough to push a tour bus off a bridge, I couldn't even imagine what it might do to a group of cattle. And when I looked up at Jackson, the expression on his face told me that he was thinking the same thing.

We were running for the horses before either of us said a word, and swinging ourselves up into our saddles. Then we were pounding our way down the muddy hill once again.

And this time, we were moving a whole lot faster than we had been before.

## CHAPTER 12

## *Jackson*

**W**e slid-slash-galoped down the hill, my focus half on making sure my horse didn't go down and half on the question of what the hell we were going to do. It was clear what had happened. Part of the fence had collapsed, courtesy of lightning or wind or rot in the fence itself.

The how didn't matter. What mattered was that some of the cattle had discovered the hole and taken advantage of it. There was no good reason for it. The only thing over there was the creek—now river—and a bunch of dirt. Now mud. I never let the cows graze over there because for whatever reason, grass had never grown in that soil. So it wasn't as though they were familiar with the land and had a specific goal.

No, they'd gone just because there wasn't any fence to stop them.

Like I said. If there was trouble to be had, cows would find it. No matter how illogical and unlikely it might seem.

So now they were in mud. Sucking, sticky mud with a high clay content. And heading for a rushing river that had taken Avery's bus right off a bridge and into the creek bed.

Avery.

That brought up the other thing currently occupying a slice of my mind.

I got to the bottom of the hill and veered right, heading for the field with the hole in the fence and the section of land beyond, where I was hoping the cows were still alive and unharmed. Hopefully stuck in the mud, honestly, since it

would mean they wouldn't be able to get into any further mischief.

And as we galloped, I thought about the girl whose horse was hard on my heels.

She wasn't at all what I'd expected. I'd thought she was spoiled and opinionated. Pretty, yes, but also a spoiled city girl—or one who was now accustomed to the city—who wouldn't know her way from the house to the stable.

Instead, she'd mounted a horse like she'd been born to it, settled into the saddle with the ease of someone who'd grown up there, and then followed me gamely into the rain. She'd taken one look at that first field and come up with the same plan I would have proposed. And she'd worked hard throughout the day, helping me get my cattle to safety.

I'd been surprised at her willingness, and how hard she'd worked. And I'd been even more surprised at how well we meshed. At how my heart sang every time she turned her bright grin toward me after having done something clever.

Today was an absolute disaster, and though I could think of several people I'd want with me at a time like this, 5-foot-nothing Avery Dawson wouldn't have made the list. I mean, not that I would have even considered her an option. Up until last night, she was nothing more than a name and a face. A fuzzy idea of a local girl who'd made it to the big city and become at least relatively famous.

Honestly, she was a girl I'd never thought twice about.

And now here I was, galloping toward a creek that had jumped its banks and may well have washed away twenty or so of my cattle, with no one but Avery by my side.

We went splashing through the field and through the opening in the fence, into the deeper, stickier muck on the other side. The horses slowed a bit, struggling with the footing and the lack of a path, and I thought for the millionth time that I really needed to drag this area and do something to make it more solid.

Preferably before it rained again.

Then the creek was rising up in front of me, the surface of the raging water even with the clay we were struggling through, and I put the soil—and Avery—out of my mind and started looking for cows. Any sign of them. Figures struggling in the mud. Heads bobbing in the current.

Bodies lying washed up on the banks of the creek.

But there was nothing. I cast my gaze to the right and the left, desperate to find them and horrified that I might already be too late, and drew to a stop so I could look more closely.

Avery stopped her horse right next to mine and immediately put her hand up, her finger pointing to our right. “There!” she shouted.

I swiveled in my saddle and followed her gesture, and there they were. Twenty or twenty-two of them, most of them young ones. Not this year’s calves but calves who’d been born last year and were now yearlings.

Terrific. A band of teenagers. Exactly what I needed.

They weren’t stuck in the mud, which meant we wouldn’t have to get them back out again. But they were close to the creek and definitely thinking about going right into the water. I was sure they thought they had a very good reason, but whatever that reason was, it wasn’t good enough.

Those weren’t babies, but they weren’t yet solid, either. Get into that water and they’d be broken in seconds.

Avery must have been thinking along the exact same lines as I was, because she let out a sharp laugh. “God, cows are stupid. They’re not actually going to get into that creek, are they?”

“All signs point to yes,” I said, wondering how she knew so much about cows. Had she said she grew up on a cattle ranch? I couldn’t remember, now.

And it was pretty unimportant at the moment. The only important thing was getting to those cows and getting them back into a fenced enclosure, and from there, up to the barn.



“So how do we do this?” Avery asked, once again following my thoughts. “If we come on too strong, we’re just going to scare them right into the water.”

She was right about that, and my mind raced through the other options. The cows all knew me, knew that I was the man with the food, but I definitely couldn’t get the hay truck down here, not with all the mud. And I wasn’t sure they’d realize what it was if they saw it out of context. I also didn’t want to go all the way back up to the barns to collect hay.

We were going to have to count on the cattle to understand that we weren’t there to hurt them. And pray that they cooperated when we tried to drive them back toward the fields.

“We have to use the horses,” I told her quickly. “There’s no other choice. We’re lucky they’re young. As a group they’re stupid, but they don’t have a leader yet so they’re not following anyone’s instructions. If we can get in there and give them firm directives, they’ll follow us.”

“You’re putting an awful lot of faith in their brains,” she noted.

I shook my head. “They’re waiting for someone to tell them what to do. See how they’re just sort of milling around? They don’t want to be out here. It’s cold and wet and definitely scary. They want to be with the rest of the herd. They just don’t know how to do it.”

I was right. I could feel it in my bones. If we could give them a leader, they’d follow that leader to the ends of the earth. But we had to do it fast—before they got the stupid idea to get into the water.

And yet we had to do it slowly.

“So what’s the move?” Avery asked, signing on to my idea with a whole lot less argument than I’d expected.

I thought for a total of three seconds before I started talking. “We walk up to them. I’ll go around to the other side, you stick on this side. If we go slowly enough, they won’t run. Once I’m on the other side, we play it like we did with all the

others. You turn around and lead them back and I'll pick up any stragglers. Easy."

"Easy," she said, her voice sarcastic enough that I glanced at her, wondering if she was suddenly going to back out on me. But her face was firm and expressionless, all focus.

She was ready. And she wasn't backing down from what seemed like an impossible mission.

I added that to the mental list of characteristics I'd been building for her, and then pointed my horse toward the other side of the herd and started walking, my eyes on the cows and my lip caught in my teeth. Avery waited to start her horse forward until I was nearly even with the cows, and by the time I got to the other side of them, their bovine eyes on me and their young bodies tense and ready to run, Avery had started toward them as well, her horse moving at a slow walk and her face completely casual.

"Just coming over here, not a big deal, cows," she said. And then, much to my surprise, she started singing. "Cows, cows, cows," she sang, putting it to the tune of an old Beatles song. "Cows, cows, cows."

Every single cow turned its head, their ears up and their eyes intent on her, and in that moment, I was able to slide up behind them and brush the one that was closest to me, using my horse to gently encourage them to start moving.

"Get along, kids," I breathed. "Let's go. Hup, hup!"

This was the moment of truth. The moment when they'd either agree to move the way I wanted them to... or realize how close I was and spook, to head right into the water.

I held my breath and clucked at them once more, praying that they'd just do what I wanted. Make this easy on all of us.

And then, as a group, they started moving toward Avery. Her face shot up, her eyes meeting mine, and I saw the quick flash of her teeth. Then she turned around and started walking back, leading our wayward calves home to safety like she'd been born to do this job.

Like she'd arrived just to help me with a situation I couldn't have handled by myself.

I didn't pursue that thought any further. But I was incredibly aware of that balloon growing in my chest. The one I'd never felt before.

I'd known her for fifteen hours or so, and she was already making me rethink my standing arrangement with myself about not wanting a partner. I scowled and turned my focus to the job at hand. Get the cows into a field. Get them up to the barn. Close them in.

Anything else—any second-guessing about my life choices, with both cows and house guests—was going to have to wait until after I'd had a shower, a change of clothes, and at least one glass of whiskey.

Maybe some hot chocolate, too.

## CHAPTER 13

**B**y the time we got that last group of yearlings up to the barn, I was cold and shivering and questioning every decision I'd made in the last twenty-four hours.

But I was also flushed with the excitement of having been part of a successful rescue mission.

Look, I'd never set out to be a rancher, and I certainly didn't have any grand goals of working on a cattle ranch or hustling cows or any of that Hollywood Golden Cowboy-type stuff. I was a country-western singer and a guitar player, a touring and recording musician, and *that* was what I'd always wanted. I couldn't have been happier with my lot in life, as it were.

I'd found my way right into the career I wanted, and though it left me single and mostly homeless, as I had to spend so much time traveling, I wouldn't have changed it for the world. I didn't need a house or a ranch. I didn't need to be settled, and I certainly didn't need all the responsibilities that came with owning a place.

You could have asked me five hundred times if I'd be interested in settling down on a ranch and doing things like rustling cattle, and I would have given you a capital No every. Single. Time. Partially because the package would have come with a husband, which I didn't have time for.

But I loved animals. I always had. And when it came right down to it, rescuing a bunch of cows from certain drowning (or dying a muddy death) felt pretty dang good.

Doing it with a guy who looked like he could definitely be part of Hollywood's Golden Cowboy stereotype? Yeah, that didn't hurt.

Still, see what I said above about cold and shivering. No matter how successful the rescue mission had been, I was ready to get off this horse and into something that felt more like a house than a barn. I wanted something warm to drink and a steaming hot shower, and I didn't care what order I had them in.

I pulled to a stop in front of the closest barn, hoping these cows would fit into it—did these have a maximum occupancy limit posted somewhere?—and turned and waited for the cows and the cowboy in question to catch up to me.

They were right behind me—all of them—and Jackson made quick work of swinging down off his horse and opening the door to the barn. I figured that meant I was the one doing the herding, so I got behind the cows and used my horse to push, shove, and generally encourage them to move forward while Jackson tried to keep them all going through the door rather than down the sides of the barn. The moment the last one passed through the doors, I vaulted off my horse, threw the reins down, and rushed to help him close them in.

Which was when it all went sideways. The weather up to that point had been at least relatively calm. Cold and raining, but not necessarily stormy.

Evidently getting the last cows into the barn was some secret sign for the wind to pick up, though, because I'd barely grabbed the edge of the door when a gust came flying along the wall of the barn and right into me. I held the door tightly, trying to pull it closed before the wind got any stronger, and dug my feet into the mud, grinding my teeth in frustration.

I knew I was fighting a losing battle. That didn't mean I was willing to just give up.

I tugged again, furious at the combination of slippery mud under my feet and a body that had always been a little bit too short, and, just when I was about to give it up as a bad job, I felt the wind suddenly shift. It went from pushing the door one

way to shoving it in the opposite direction so quickly that I didn't have time to adjust my own stance, and before I knew it the door was flying closed and dragging me with it, my feet slipping through the mud like I was water skiing or something.

A single breath and the wind changed direction once more, sending me flying in the opposite direction. I was jerked backward, the door flying open again, and was about to let go out of sheer desperation when I felt an enormous body slam into me from behind.

“Push!” Jackson muttered, his hands planted on the door above my head and his bulk pressing against me.

I didn't ask questions. I didn't argue, and I definitely didn't pause to consider the position he was putting me in. I pushed like my life depended on it, my feet somehow finding purchase in the mud now that Jackson was here, like the only thing that had been missing was his presence in my personal bubble. The wind died down, the rain stopped, and we worked together to shove the door closed, his arms caging me in as we walked forward.

He reached down and slid the lock home, securing it in its latch, and then let out a slow, deep breath.

And then we both grew very, very still. The world around me became quiet, the sounds melting away like they'd never been there, and time itself seemed to slow down.

I was standing pinned up against a barn door with Jackson at my back, his arms surrounding me and his heat sinking quickly through my clothes to make its way into my own body. And I could feel every inch of him.

Every. Single. Inch.

I took a shuddering breath, hardly daring to move, and found that the air had grown thicker, too. I'd always thought breathing was just one of those things you did without any thought, but now... Now it felt like I was trying to breathe underwater. Trying to pull something into my lungs that didn't belong there.

I wasn't going to acknowledge the man standing behind me, his bulk a rock wall around me. I wasn't going to think about how good it felt to have him there, his body protecting mine from the rain, his mass providing strength and safety.

I wasn't.

Because I couldn't afford to. This man was nothing to me. Just a guy who'd happened to rescue me and my friends from a bad situation, and whose house I happened to be staying at.

A guy I'd slept on the couch with last night, and who I'd just helped round up cows with. In the rain and wind.

He was nothing to me. Nothing. And he could never be anything more than that. I had a career to think of. A band and a tour and my next album. I couldn't do any of that if I was distracted by some rancher in North Carolina.

And why would I be distracted, anyhow? The man was nothing to me.

Seriously.

Unfortunately, my body didn't seem to agree, if the chills running through my bones were anything to go by.

At that moment, a rush of wind picked up again, swirling around us like we were somehow in the middle of a miniature tornado, and the spell was broken. We both gasped and jumped apart like we'd been caught doing something we shouldn't have been—cuddling against the side of the barn in the middle of a rainstorm?—and dashed back to our horses, looking everywhere but at each other.

Neither of us said anything about what had just happened. We swung up onto our horses and galloped for the smallest barn, and I assumed we were going to leave that moment, when the storm had grown quiet and pressed us together, at the mouth of the barn where it had happened.

\* \* \*



We stumbled into the house half an hour later, the horses mostly dry and in their stalls and the tack spread across the aisle of the barn where we'd dropped it, both of us too tired and cold to bother with putting it away.

Jackson cast a look out of the corner of his eye and gave me half a smile as we got into the foyer. "I don't know about you, but I need something warm."

My teeth were chattering so hard by this time that I could barely answer him. "F-F-Fire?" I managed.

His nod sent pride shooting through me, as if I'd been waiting my entire life for approval from this man. "I'll take care of the fire. You get the hot chocolate."

He said it like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like we did this every day, the going out and rescuing a bunch of cows and then coming back to the house to warm up and drink hot chocolate together.

And I headed for the kitchen like I'd been expecting him to say it. Like it *was* the most natural thing in the entire world. Not because I wanted to sit in front of the fire and drink hot chocolate with him for the second night in a row.

Not because the thought of heading to the bathroom instead, for the promised shower and change of clothes, made me feel somehow hollow after having spent the entire day with him.

Certainly not because I wanted to sit in front of the fire with him and hear more about how he'd come by the ranch, and why he ran it alone.

No, I went to the kitchen to make the hot chocolate he'd suggested because it sounded good. It sounded warm. And I'd said I wanted something warm, right?

Right?

So hot chocolate fulfilled that need.

And that was the only reason I grabbed the whiskey on the way back out of the kitchen, too.

Warmth. Period.

## CHAPTER 14

## *Jackson*

I watched Avery hustle toward the kitchen, her eyes narrowed and her mouth moving like she was having a conversation with herself, and hid my smile.

The girl thought she was something else, that was for sure. She had more confidence than anyone I'd ever met—except my best friend Dev, who thought he was God's gift to the world—and I was betting she'd never met a challenge she didn't think she could accomplish. Hell, I bet she'd never even considered the possibility of not accomplishing something.

If I could bottle that confidence, I'd be able to sell it for \$100 per bottle. More than that, probably.

I wondered how the hell she'd come by it. Was it something she'd been born with? Something her parents had taught her? What sort of parents did she have? What sort of childhood had she had?

How'd she ended up on the road that ran along the edge of my property in the middle of the night, driving through the worst storm this area had seen in years?

I shook my head, stopping the flow of questions, and snorted. What the hell did I care how she'd ended up there, or what had led up to it? That was none of my business, and I'd never been the kind of guy who wanted to know other people's stories. I certainly never asked for them.

Asking other people to tell their stories made them far too likely to ask for mine. And my story wasn't one I gave away easily. Even to the few people I called friend.

As I watched Avery hustle into the kitchen, though, stopping to grab ingredients as she made her way toward the stove, I couldn't lie to myself. That girl had blown into my life like a damned tornado, all light and color and rushing wind, and then she'd woken up this morning and promptly announced that she was going to help me run the ranch for the day.

People never offered to help me. Probably because most people knew that I didn't need help, and that I'd refuse it if they offered it.

So why hadn't I refused Avery?

And why did I have a sudden, driving urge to ask her story... and then tell her mine?

\* \* \*

By the time she got back into the living room, carrying an entire teapot full of what I was assuming was cocoa and two mugs—along with a bottle of whiskey—I'd had a very firm talk with myself about her and reminded myself that I didn't invite strangers into my life.

Particularly strangers who were only passing through, and who probably didn't give one single fig about some rancher in North Carolina.

I didn't know why I felt myself opening up to her, but I was convinced that it had to be some sort of fluke. I'd spent my entire life looking out for myself, and I'd vowed long ago not to let anyone else into the small bubble I maintained. Letting other people in was too much work.

It was too risky.

When she set the teapot on the table and then looked up at me and grinned, I did some quick work on my defenses, adding another layer of brick and stone to my walls. This was nothing, I reminded myself. Just some country artist staying in my house for a couple of nights. Sure, she was pretty and

charming and so cheerful that it was almost impossible to frown when you were around her.

That didn't mean I wasn't going to keep right on frowning, just like I'd always done.

"Hot chocolate," she said, stating the obvious. "And some whiskey. Just in case."

I eyed the offering suspiciously. "Hot chocolate in a..."

"A teapot," she said proudly. "I made more than we needed and it wouldn't all fit in the mugs, so I found something else."

"What did you do, go get it out of your luggage or something? I don't keep things like that in my kitchen."

Seriously, it was several shades of green and yellow and had flowers on it. Not exactly the kind of thing I bought and stored for a rainy day.

She gave me a jaded look, like I'd just said the stupidest thing anyone in the history of mankind had ever said. "Funny, then, that I found it in one of your cupboards. You obviously don't know what's actually in your kitchen. Probably because you don't cook all that often."

"I cook," I said defensively.

She snorted. "Throwing breakfast together once doesn't count, cowboy. Cocoa?" She'd already been pouring some into one mug and glanced up at me, one eyebrow lifted in question. "Or are you just going to stand there and watch me drink all of it?"

I slid onto the couch, the corner of my mouth twisting at the thought of this tiny girl drinking an entire pot of hot chocolate on her own. "You couldn't finish all of that if your life depended on it."

Another snort, and she slid the already full mug toward me, followed by the bottle of whiskey. "You say that because you've never seen me eat."

The twitch at the corner of my mouth turned to a reluctant grin at that. "Is that so? Favorite meal?"

She tipped her head, took a sip of her own cocoa, and then grabbed the whiskey bottle and added a generous slug to her cup. “Depends. Where am I when I’m eating?”

I frowned. “At a table?”

She reached over and poked me in the ribs, and it was so unexpected that I jumped and yelped, then rubbed the spot where she’d touched me.

It was burning like I’d just gotten too close to the sun. And it wasn’t because she’d poked me hard enough to do any damage.

“What?” I asked.

She made a face at me. “Obviously I’m at a table. But am I in the city or...?”

“Sure. Nashville,” I replied.

“Pizza,” she said immediately. “There’s this little place by my apartment where they use way too much cheese, and it’s like dying and going to heaven.”

“Possibly from the heart attack you’re getting from having too much cheese,” I noted.

This time, I managed to dodge out of the way when she tried to poke me, and I settled back into the couch, chuckling. “Okay, what if you’re at home?”

She tipped her head again—her thinking position, I realized—and then grinned. “Pulled pork. Rice. Plenty of sauce. Corn on the cob. And pie for dessert.”

“That’s quite an impressive list.”

She just shrugged. “I told you. I like to eat.”

I considered her for a moment, wondering how that was possible given how little she was. She looked like she didn’t weigh more than 100 pounds, as tiny as she was. How did someone that small eat that much?

My eyes dropped from her face down over her body, taking in the rounded curves, tiny waist, and flare of her hips,

and when I looked back up, she was watching me look at her, her own gaze narrowed.

I turned back to the fire, feeling like I'd just been caught staring by a girl I secretly liked, and reached for another question. "What sort of pie?"

Before I knew it, she was giving me a list of reasons for peach pie being the best pie out there, and how you made sure the peaches stayed firm when you were cooking it, and then going on to tell me how to cook a range of other dishes.

Like I'd ever need those sorts of instructions.

When she finished with that, though, she launched into how she'd grown up cooking because her mom had been so bad at it, and then I was hearing all about her childhood. The ranch house where she'd grown up, the cattle her father had bred, and the fact that she only had one sibling. An older brother who'd never given her the time of day, and who still told her every time he saw her that he couldn't believe anyone had ever allowed her out of their small town.

She was telling me about her best friends growing up and how she'd been both valedictorian and the spring queen at their town dance—not surprising, I thought, considering she looked like a pixie—and how guilty she felt about not getting to see her parents enough these days.

And I found myself laughing and asking questions, dying for one more story, for one more piece of history from this tiny, brilliant spitfire of a girl.

When we put our mugs to the side, the cocoa long gone, and she leaned up against me, yawning, I found myself moving around to make room for her against my side. Laying my arm over the couch behind her.

Letting my fingertips curl around to touch her shoulder.

And when she cuddled into my side, curling up like a kitten and sighing like she'd finally gotten warm—despite the mud we were both still wearing—I let out a small sigh of my own and leaned my cheek against the top of her head.

Reveling, for just a moment, in the idea of having someone else in my home. The warmth of having a partner. And the idea that someone was actually enjoying being around *me*.

I knew I was out of my mind to allow myself to relax into it. There were good reasons for keeping women like her out of my life.

But right then, in the warmth of the fire and the haze of good whiskey, I didn't look at those reasons. I put them out of my head, breathed in the scent of her, and did my best to turn my brain off.



## CHAPTER 15

## *Every*

I woke up shivering with cold, and it was several long moments before I figured out where I even was. The world around me was pitch black, which terrified me—I was secretly afraid of the dark—and it smelled like...

Hot chocolate. Whiskey. Smoke.

Oh God, something had happened and we were on fire. I sat up so quickly that my head tried to fall right off and looked around, terrified. Then logic came crashing back in and I realized that if we were on fire—whoever ‘we’ were—there would have been a whole lot more light.

And heat.

And I’d woken up cold and stiff. Stiff enough that I looked down at my body, wondering, to find that I was still dressed in daytime clothes, despite the fact that it was obviously night time, and...

Covered with mud.

Oh God.

Everything came rushing back quickly enough to make my head spin once again. The day of being out on the ranch, saving cows. The rain and mud and freezing wind and...

The moment by the barn. The wind shoving the door open and then pulling it closed again, and an enormous body covering me as it pushed the door closed for me, heat seeping from that body to dance along my skin like the touch of a flame.

A night spent staring at the flames of a fire and drinking cocoa, talking about my childhood and laughing at the memories with a man who hadn't even been there to see it happening.

A man.

Jackson.

There was a stirring behind me, and a murmured grunting, and I let my eyes slide in the direction of that sound. And though I'd thought it was dead black around us, I realized now that it wasn't. The fire had gone out but there was enough light coming in from the stormy sky outside that I could see shifting shapes in the room.

The shape of Jackson laying behind me on the couch, his face touched by the watery, gray light of the night.

God, he was beautiful. I knew I'd thought it before, the first time I saw him out of his rain gear, but now, staring at him as he slept, I was struck by how absolutely stunning he was. Sure, he was gorgeous when he was awake, all storms and ice, but when he was asleep, the normal frown relaxed. His lips were fuller, almost pouting in his sleep, and the lines that generally marked his forehead had eased, making him look almost childlike. Those cheekbones were still sharp, drawing his skin tight, and the dimple in his chin stood out, a dark shadow, but the stubborn strength, the shadow of defensiveness that usually held his face in its grip was gone, and he was...

Breathtaking. There was no other word for it.

When he was awake, his face was still, cold strength, his eyes sparking with the need to defend himself. When he was asleep, all of that fell away and left him vulnerable as a child.

I reached out without thinking and ran a soft fingertip along his bottom lip. What the hell had happened to him to make him think he had to present such a hard, cold face to the world? What was he protecting in there?

He shivered at my touch and I jerked back, horrified at the thought of him knowing that I'd been touching him while he

slept. It wasn't that I thought he'd do anything to me if he knew. I didn't know him well enough but I would have bet my entire next album on him never laying a finger on me.

But I was only here for a few days.

I couldn't afford any entanglements. I didn't *want* any entanglements.

Without waking, he reached out to me and pulled me back against him, and, surprised at the action and worried that fighting him might wake him up, I went. He was big and warm and right now, in the darkness, with the storm still raging outside and the thunder shaking the world around us, I welcomed the safety of his body.

Welcomed the security of knowing that he was right there behind me, ready to encircle me in his arms and keep me safe.

It took me almost no time to realize that he wasn't only safe. He was also rocking his hips against me, his hands pressed against my hips to keep me in place. That heat I'd just been talking about...

It wasn't only coming from his arms being around me.

I shifted slightly, my body responding without any conscious decision on my part, and he groaned and pressed against me harder.

Not so asleep after all, I realized, shivering at the realization.

My shiver must have brought him all the way awake, because he moved just enough to bring his lips up against my neck. "Cold?" he whispered, his breath brushing against my ear and sending goosebumps racing across my skin.

I gasped at the feeling... and then tried to remember how to breathe so I could answer him.

He moved again before I could manage, lifting his head up and then practically vaulting from behind me. "God, of course you're cold. The damn fire's gone out and I didn't turn the heat on last night. Fell asleep before I could think of it."

There was a smile caught in that last sentence, and I felt an answering grin growing on my own face. “You fell asleep before you thought to turn the heat on? What, tuckered out from actually spending a day working in the rain?”

It was a ridiculous accusation and I knew it. I’d taken one look at Jackson and known he was the kind of man who worked his fingers to the bone every day. The kind of man who ran an entire ranch with hundreds of cattle by himself, and probably did a perfect job of it.

Before I could think of a way to tell him so, though, draw the flirtatious statement back and give it some truth, he’d managed to get the fire going again and was standing next to the couch. He smiled softly down at me, his hair mussed with sleep and his clothes covered with mud.

“Guess I must have had other things on my mind,” he murmured.

And then he slid over me and back onto the couch behind me, turning me around to face him and drawing me closer. And before I could think of an answer to that statement, he’d slid his rough, calloused hands up my jaw and into my hair, grasped the back of my head, and lowered his face to mine.

His lips were soft as petals and just as full as they’d looked when he was asleep, and he used them like he’d been born for this moment. Born for this kiss, his lips moving over mine like they already knew every curve of my mouth.

And though a part of my brain was screaming at me that this was a very bad no good idea, I shut that part down and gave in to the warmth and strength and safety of him. We’d been together all day and now, with the darkness outside and the fire crackling behind me, his hands in my hair and whiskey and a sleepy haze flowing through my veins...

Right now, I wasn’t sure I’d ever wanted anything more than this gorgeous cowboy with the heart he didn’t show anyone and the soft, wonderful lips that were already moving down the column of my throat toward the neck of my shirt.

## CHAPTER 16

## *Jackson*

I exploded up off the couch and came to a crouch on the floor, the entire thing happening before I managed to put more than three thoughts together.

Of course those three thoughts were... well, kind of important ones.

One: It was morning.

Two: I was naked.

Three: Avery Dawson was laying half on top of me, also naked, and we were still on the couch in the living room.

Okay, so that last thought was actually more like three thoughts in and of itself, but they'd occurred to me in such shotgun fashion that I'd counted them as one, and the moment they were finished filing through my mind, I'd done my ninja move and gotten off the couch as quickly as I could.

Because my God in heaven, what in the ever-loving hell had I done?

I cast my eyes back to the sleeping form on the couch and took her in, my mind frozen as I stared at her. God, she was beautiful, all pale, freckled skin and enormous, frizzy hair, the curls rioting over the couch like they were trying to take it over. She was still dead asleep, her long lashes laid out over those round cheeks and the freckles standing out clearly on her nose. The corners of her mouth were turned up in a slight smile and I wondered whether she always slept with a smile on her face...

Or if it was something she was wearing because of what we'd done last night.

Oh my God.

I remembered feeling her shiver and realizing the fire was out, and then getting up to get it going again. I remembered moving back to the couch and sliding over her and just...

Just losing my damn mind, obviously.

Though it would have been a lot easier to keep it in place if she hadn't felt so damn good when I stupidly decided to kiss her.

"Hello?" a hoarse voice called out from the hall that led from the stairs to the kitchen. "Is anyone here?"

Oh God. Oh Goddy God.

Parker. I'd forgotten all about her, but that damn girl had been sleeping upstairs the entire time. She'd still been sick last night when we remembered to check on her, and we'd thought it better to leave some soup with her and then leave her to sleep, and I hadn't thought of her again.

Now she was evidently finished being sick and up walking around. Looking for her friend.

Her friend, who was currently laying naked on the couch right in front me, while I towered over her, as naked as the day I was born.

I jerked the blanket off the back of the couch—why the hell hadn't I thought to just toss that over us last night when Avery was cold?—and tucked it quickly around Avery to cover her up. Then I grabbed my jeans from the ground—still covered in mud and slightly damp—and yanked them on.

They were cold and stiff and horrible. But I'd worn worse things, and right now I just needed to make sure Parker didn't come in here and find us both naked in the same space.

I already knew I'd made a mistake sleeping with the girl who was only here for a couple of days. I didn't want that mistake getting any worse, and it would definitely get worse if anyone else ever knew about it.



\* \* \*

I managed to head Parker off in the hallway and send her back up to her room to have a shower with the promise that I'd make breakfast when she was clean. I also told her that Avery had fallen asleep on the couch and I didn't want to wake her after the day we'd had yesterday.

They were good stories. Parker had taken one long look at my naked chest while I'd cursed myself for not putting on a shirt as well, and then given me a sort of blurry, I'm-still-too-sick-to-argue shrug and turned and headed for the shower.

Which left me to my own devices, for the moment. I'd started a pot of coffee, which I figured we were all going to need pretty desperately, and then headed for my own shower.

I was now letting the water run over my head, hot and steaming, as I tried to figure out what I was going to do.

Yeah, I'd been having a good time with Avery. She'd been beyond helpful yesterday and I got a kick out of her smart-alec little mouth. I thought I'd probably get lost in her baby blues if I stared into them too long, and I could spend an eternity with her body pressed up against me, her hair tickling my cheeks and her scent coloring my world.

I paused and gave that thought several moments to just exist in my brain, bright and sunny and beautiful.

And then I shoved it into a closet, locked the door, and forbade myself from ever looking at it again. Because those things might all be completely true, and Avery herself might be the most perfect thing I'd ever set eyes on, but that didn't mean I'd ever intended to do anything with her. I'd had a deal with myself about this. She was only here for a few days and then she'd be going off somewhere else to court fame, or whatever it was she did in her real life.

This whole thing? This place where she was helping me round up cows and sitting with me in front of the fireplace while we drank cocoa and whiskey?

This wasn't real. This wasn't my actual life. This was some sort of in-between place that only existed until she got on her bus and left again. And I was too damn smart to have fallen into it. I knew better than to let myself believe the lies that happened in the in between.

The lies that made you think it was going to get better.

I shut the water off, holding onto that thought, holding onto the memory of the pain that was no doubt coming for me, and grabbed for a towel. I had a busy day ahead of me. I might not have grown up in this town, proper, but since I got away from my past and bought the ranch, I'd jumped right into town life.

These days, I was one of the guys the townsfolk depended on when things went wrong. And if the storm had hit anyone else as hard as it hit me, there would be people out there without power, without water, and without roads.

I had a big truck, and I had muscles. So did my friends. And somewhere along the way, we'd become a sort of informal rescue group. Dev texted me last night and let me know we were heading out to do some good this morning, and I was ready for it. I felt like I was coming apart at the seams, myself, with Avery's sudden presence in my life. So getting out there and helping other people put things back together? Yeah, it sounded like the best possible medication right now.

I just hoped I could get out of the house before Avery was up to try to talk to me about what happened last night.

\* \* \*

I should have known better than to think I'd get that lucky. I was just sneaking out of the kitchen, a travel mug full of coffee and a bagel in my hand, when Parker showed up in front of me, her skin looking freshly scrubbed and her eyes a whole lot brighter than they had been.

"So?" she asked. "Breakfast?"

I opened and closed my mouth, having completely forgotten that I'd told her I'd cook breakfast if she went up and had a shower.

God dammit.

"Turns out I'm not going to be able to do breakfast," I told her, my mind kicking into gear and handing me the answer to her question. "Friend called. Gotta go help some people out of the mud."

"Helping people out of the mud?" a tiny voice piped up from behind Parker. "Count me in."

And, as if seeing Parker wasn't bad enough, Avery herself dodged around her taller friend, looking just as freshly scrubbed, and grinned up at me. "I take it the cows all managed to stay in their barns last night, then? No more hustling this morning?"

I kept my mouth shut, knowing that I didn't have an answer prepared for her. Yes, the cows had managed to stay in their barns last night. And yes, I was going to help people out of the mud. I mean theoretically, that was one of the things I'd been doing.

But I hadn't for one golden moment wanted to take Avery Dawson with me to do it.

Having her help yesterday had already led me right into a world of trouble. Who knew what would happen if I had her around for another day.

Nothing good.

And the last thing I needed was for her to think we had something building between us. I didn't have space in my life for anyone to think she had anything with me.

Even worse if she tried to hold me to something when I had exactly nothing to give.

## CHAPTER 17

“Can I ask what, exactly, you think you’re doing?” Parker asked quietly, watching me.

I was in the bedroom we were supposed to be sharing—which I still hadn’t even slept in—and she was watching me as I put on my boots and got ready to leave with Jackson.

Again.

Not that she’d been watching me yesterday when I was telling him I’d be helping him with his rounding-up-the-cows project. She’d been too sick to know about anything.

Honestly, that had been a lot easier than this. Right now all I could think about was the judgement coming off of her in waves. The judgement and the worry.

I looked up at her, doing my best to look like I did in fact know what I was doing. “One: We’re staying at this guy’s house for free. Two: He’s gone out of his way to not only save us but also help us get all of our stuff back. Three: He also figured out how to get our bus out of that creek and get it to a place where it could get fixed. The least I can do is help him with some stuff while we’re here.”

She shook her head slowly, like I was speaking absolute gibberish. “One: We’re only staying here because he refused to send you anywhere else. Two: Yes, he saved us and helped us get our stuff back. Three: He didn’t actually get our bus fixed. In case you forgot, that bus is now laying in a heap of metal behind the mechanic’s shop. It wasn’t fixable.”

“But he’s the one who got it there,” I pointed out quickly, crossing my arms and tipping my chin up. “And we’re getting a new bus. Which wouldn’t have happened unless he got our bus out of the creek and to the mechanic in the first place. The label wouldn’t be sending us a new bus if they didn’t know about the old bus, and—”

“Avery, do you hear yourself?” she asked, interrupting me. “You’re sitting there defending a guy you don’t even know, who is, given everything I’ve seen, an irredeemable crank. This is just some guy in a small town who happened to help us out. Sure, he helped us out of a tough situation. That doesn’t mean you can risk your reputation for him. The label has put a whole lot of time and money into you. How do you think they’re going to react when they hear you’re down here getting too attached to some no-name rancher while they’re waiting for you to get to your tour?”

I was so shocked by what she said that I actually jerked back like she’d just slapped me in the face.

Then I started cataloging all the things she had dead wrong.

“I’m defending a guy that’s been nothing but nice to us,” I pointed out. “Okay, he’s been cranky, but there’s something else there, Parker, I can feel it. And I’m not risking my reputation. Why would you even say that?”

She looked at me like I was the stupidest girl she’d ever met in her life, and shook her head. “Because, darling Avery, he was willing to send all of us away. Everyone but you, who he magically didn’t have a place for. And none of us missed that part. Now here you are, playing right into that with this need to suddenly help him with everything. Don’t look at me like I’m trying to hurt you. I’m your manager. It’s my job to notice things like this and make sure you don’t do anything... Averyish.”

I was hurt and angry at what she was saying, but my lips twitched at that last word.

Because at the end of the day, ‘Averyish’ was exactly why my label had agreed to let Parker become my personal

manager. I had a bad habit of giving people the benefit of the doubt when they didn't deserve it. Letting them in to make trouble for both me and my career. It was a longstanding problem, and had started when I was still in school and found myself gathering strays and taking them home to my family.

Unfortunately, they hadn't always had the purest of intentions.

Part of Parker's job was making sure I didn't keep doing it.

But that wasn't what was going on here. I liked Jackson, and I was most certainly giving him the benefit of the doubt. But I didn't think I was wrong about that. I didn't know him yet, no, but something told me he had a heart of gold hidden under all that crankiness. And as long as I was going to be here—for three more days, until the new bus arrived—I didn't see anything wrong with searching for the shine under all the mud.

I shrugged and gave her a flashy grin. "Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud, Parker," I said quietly. "He's not that bad, and I'm bored. I'm not going to do anything stupid. I promise."

I turned and left my best friend and keeper standing behind me, no doubt lifting one eyebrow in that way she did when I talked back to her. I knew that she might be right... but I also felt in my gut that she was dead wrong about Jackson.

I'd closed the door between us and started for the stairs before I had a chance to really think about what she'd said about him keeping me here when he should have sent me away. My mind snagged on that, wondering what the hell Parker meant by bringing it up, and my steps paused for a moment.

*He was willing to send all of us away. Everyone but you, who he magically didn't have a place for.*

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

And why did it have my heart hammering against my ribs like it was trying to escape its prison and go flitting down the hallway toward the cowboy in question?

\* \* \*

We were in Jackson's truck and driving toward town when I started thinking Parker might have been right. Because the thing I'd forgotten when I was defending Jackson and my need to help him was what we'd done on the couch last night. Twice.

Now that I was sitting in the passenger side of his truck, the still-soggy scenery flying past us and a thick, tense silence building up between us, I was starting to wonder the hell I'd gotten myself into. The truth was, I'd never had a one-night stand in my entire life, and I'd definitely never slept with a guy who wasn't supposed to be anything more than a short-term contact.

I had no idea how to navigate these particular waters. And given the current silence packing the truck, I didn't think Jackson knew what to do about it, either.

God, why had he let me come with him if it was going to be this awkward?

"So we got a call this morning that our stuff is on the way," I finally said, hoping that talking about something that had nothing to do with Jackson might get us through the drive.

He grunted like he couldn't care less about our things showing up.

Right.

"Means I can stop wearing the same pair of jeans," I went on, forcing myself to sound more cheerful than I was actually feeling. "Also means I can stop wearing your shirts."

Another grunt, and I started to wonder how long it would take me to walk back to his house from here. If I asked, would he pull over and drop me off? Let me out of this situation?

Or would he insist on knowing why I wanted to go back to the house?



Oh my God, I was horrible at this. What had I been thinking last night to sleep with him? Why on God's green earth had I thought it was a good idea to kiss him back when he kissed me? Let his hands explore my body when he leaned in closer, his breath intoxicating and his warmth nearly burning me?

What had I been *thinking*?

I hadn't been, I remembered. I'd taken one breath of his heady scent, pine cones and rain and wood smoke, and I'd turned my brain off and fallen right into the darkness with him.

God, I was stupid.

"Guess the bus gets here soon too, huh?" he asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I grabbed at the statement like a lifesaver and dragged myself out of my head and toward the light. "Yep, three days. Guess your friend didn't think the old one was salvageable, so he and the label managed to find another one for us. Hope it's better than the first one, because I have to say, the chairs in that one felt like the springs might come through the padding and stab you at any moment."

I knew I was babbling, and that he probably didn't give two white magnolias about the state of the seats in the old bus. I cast a quick glance in his direction and saw his eyes on the road, his jaw set like he was trying to keep himself from answering.

So I kept talking.

And I talked about that dumb bus until we got to Arberry, unable to stop myself and only vaguely aware that every word was some sort of shield against the shadow growing in my heart.

Because something about the idea of leaving, of getting on that new bus and driving away from the man sitting to my left and glowering at the road...

Something about it made me deeply, achingly sad.

Not that I was looking at the emotion very closely. Parker had told me not to do anything Averyish, and looking at that thought right there?

It was way too Averyish to be a good idea.

## CHAPTER 18

## *Jackson*

I'd never thought it possible, but it turned out Avery Dawson could talk nearly as much as my cousin Delilah. And once she got started, it was evidently impossible to shut her up again.

The girl talked the entire way to Arberry, going on and on about that stupid bus and her hopes for it, and by the time we hit the outskirts of town, bumping over the ruined road and hitting every pothole in the place, I knew more than I'd ever wanted to know about buses.

Funny, because she'd been quiet and rather intense yesterday when we were working with the cows. And she hadn't seemed flighty or nervous last night—or the night before—when we were sitting by the fire, talking. Now, however...

The girl acted like being quiet was something so dangerous she couldn't even contemplate it.

And if I was being honest with myself, there was really only one explanation for that.

It had taken me three seconds of sitting in the truck with her to start regretting having let her come along. The tension had become so thick you'd have to have a freaking sword to cut through it, and when I glanced at her halfway down my driveway, I'd seen her face turned to the window, her neck and the tips of her ears a bright pink that told me she was flushed and nervous.

Didn't take a genius to realize she was embarrassed about what had happened between us last night. Embarrassed and

probably horrified. Probably angry, too, that I'd put her in that situation. Because there was no doubt that it had been my idea.

My body that had been calling out for her. My brain that had been too foggy with sleep to remind me that it was a horrible idea.

And now she no doubt hated me for it. She was a girl on her way up to stardom, and I was...

Nothing but a rancher from North Carolina. A good rancher, yeah, and a successful one, but I didn't think either of those things were going to make her label too keen on her starting anything with me.

Not that I wanted to start anything with her in the first place. I was a lone wolf, I reminded myself, and I liked it that way. Last night... The night before...

Those had just been blips on the radar. Momentary lapses of judgement.

Things we should absolutely pretend didn't happen.

I nodded firmly at that idea, clutched the wheel harder at the thought of her leaving in three days, and listened to her go on and on about it until we finally got to town and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Here, at least, I knew exactly what was expected of me and how to do it.

Here, there weren't any tiny, glowing girls with big ideas waiting like grenades in the road, ready to explode under my feet and send my life shooting sideways.

\* \* \*

"So what are we doing?" Avery asked immediately, sitting up and looking around like she expected lists of tasks to be sitting by the side of the road.

I nearly laughed at the idea. "We're here to help the people who need help," I told her. "We're meeting Dev and Connor at

the church, where people will be gathered if they need something. And then, we get to work.”

I felt her look, though I didn't meet it. I didn't want to see those blue eyes, so keen and ready to go.

Meeting them now would make it too easy to remember the way they'd glowed in the firelight last night as I leaned down to kiss her.

“Get to work doing what? Are my friends going to be here?”

I made a left at the first turn, and then a right, and headed straight for the church at the end of the street. It was an ancient thing, at least one hundred years old, but had always been the designated meeting place during any sort of emergency. Right now, people would be gathering in the parking lot, waiting for those of us who could help them with whatever they needed. Connor, Dev, and I would do whatever needed doing, along with the small fire department in town, and then we'd head out into the countryside to check on the people who weren't able to get into town.

Just like we did every time a storm blew through our small section of the country.

“Food, supplies,” I told her, slowing down and pulling into the driveway. “Getting the energy back on. Getting people unstuck. Helping them get their livestock into the barns. Maybe I'll just let you handle that part, seeing as how you were so good at it yesterday.” I delivered the last sentence with a grin and a glance at her, and saw her smile in return.

“Yeah, right. I can't do it by myself, though. One gust of wind and I'll be finished. I need a partner who can... watch my back.”

Her last statement didn't come with a smile. It came with a softening of the voice, a stomach-dropping crack on the last word.

Yep, she was thinking exactly what I was thinking.

Good thing we were here. We'd have plenty of work to do today, and that would keep either of us from thinking too

much. Or even interacting with each other any more than we had to.

Because I was guessing that neither of us could afford to think too much about what had happened. Just like we couldn't afford to be around each other any more than we had to be.

Being around each other caused us both to do things we'd almost inevitably end up regretting, later. At least she would. She had a career and a future to think of. She couldn't get caught up with someone in the south while she was touring the world, singing to her adoring fans.

Besides, I'd decided against having a woman around years ago, for my own protection.

And I wasn't going back on that decision. Not even for Avery Dawson.

"Work," I said, stepping too hard on the brakes and bringing the truck to a skidding stop. "We're here. Let's go."

I got out of the truck without waiting for her and strode toward Dev and Connor, using every ounce of my self-discipline to forget that Avery even existed.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day was taken up—thank God—with exactly what I'd told Avery we'd be doing. Running bottles of water to houses that had lost access to their supply, or whose wells had stopped working due to lack of electricity. Getting into the electrical boxes of anyone who'd lost power and seeing whether we could fix what was wrong. When we couldn't—which was far more often than I liked—we'd run firewood and supplies out to the house, making sure the family had candles, blankets, flashlights, and whatever else they might need to keep them warm until the power company could make their way out. Most houses had generators for exactly this sort of situation, but there were far too many people who hadn't been able to afford them, or who had gone out this winter and found theirs broken.

Our jobs, Connor and Dev and me, was to make sure those people didn't freeze to death in the middle of the night just because some equipment had stopped working.

We paid visits to the restaurants and houses in town that were cooking food and took meals to those who needed them. We helped dig trenches to drain the water that had been flooding buildings in low spots.

We even rounded up cattle and horses and goats and pigs and whatever else and ushered them into their waiting barns.

And though I never would have expected it, Avery was there every step of the way, hauling as much wood as she could carry and herding pigs like she'd been born to do just that. She handed out water bottles and meals tied up in foil, and helped start fires in fireplaces and get blankets delivered.

She also, much to my surprise, turned out to be very, very good with electricity. Hell, she fixed one entire breaker box that had been defeating Dev for nearly an hour, and then refused to tell any of us how she'd done it.

By the end of the day, she had shadows under her eyes and her hair was three times as big as it had been when we started out. She was covered in mud from head to toe, and looked as though she'd actually been rolling in the stuff.

But she hadn't complained, not even once. And though I'd spend the majority of my day trying very hard not to think about her, I'd given that up about an hour in. It was impossible to ignore her when she seemed to be everywhere at once, helping Connor tie a cow to the rail and then darting over to deliver water to the family that owned the cow, or singing softly to a litter of kittens as she moved them from a flooded barn into a house. Struggling with her hair and cursing at the curls—and the weather, and the rain, and the fact that she didn't have her hair dryer—and then sloshing through a creek to help rescue a group of sheep on the other side.

The girl was tiny and fiery and absolutely brilliant. And she wasn't at all what I'd thought she would be on that night when I first rescued her. She might be a girl who was used to getting her own way, and she might very well be a girl who'd



grown too used to the city to want to live in the country anymore.

But she was also a girl you could count on when the chips were down. A girl who'd help you rescue cows and then sing about it in the middle of the mission.

A girl who was both a bright, shining star on her way up to the galaxy... and someone who wanted to sit on a couch, grounded and settled, and drink whiskey while she told you about her childhood.

And the more I watched her during the day, rescuing kittens and taming electrical boxes and wading into the mud without complaining, the harder it became to ignore the feelings growing in my chest.

The harder it became to remember that pact I'd made with myself when I was twelve years old, about never letting another woman into my life.

## CHAPTER 19

**W**e were halfway through our second day of what I'd come to think of as 'search and rescue' when I finally ran out of gas. It was really too bad, too, because I felt like I'd holding my own up to that point. I was surprised they'd let me help, to be honest. I'd been with Jackson and his friends—and various townspeople—for nearing two days, now, and not a one of them had said anything about who or what I was. They hadn't treated me any differently than they treated the other people around us, and when it came to hard work, they hadn't hesitated to hand me my fair share.

It was... strange and wonderful at the same time, I decided. I was used to being recognized and treated differently. Hell, my own band wouldn't let me lift a finger if they could help it.

I hated it. It was the worst part of fame, everyone's need to treat you differently. Coddle you and act like you couldn't get your hands dirty.

Being here, among people who either didn't know me or didn't care, was...

Wonderful.

I was herding a bunch of sheep toward their barn—on foot—when it happened. There were no horses available, so I was running back and forth myself, prodding at their fuzzy behinds and shouting at them to keep moving, and I'd been mostly successful. We were almost to barn when the world suddenly seemed to tip sideways on me.

I had a moment of pure surprise at the feeling of something cold and wet seeping right into my ear, and had a further moment of frustration about what the cold, wet something was doing to my hair. And then the world around me turned dark and I stopped thinking about any of that.

\* \* \*

When the world went bright again—or as bright as it could be, given the grayness of the sky—I was in a truck. A quick scan told me that I was in *Jackson's* truck, in the passenger seat, and honestly I would have recognized it even if I hadn't opened my eyes, because at this point I'd spent so much time in here that I knew the scent of it. I knew the way the seat felt against my legs and the distance it took for my feet to reach the floor.

I knew how far he sat from me and what I'd have to do to reach him.

He wasn't there now, though, and I knew that as well, though I couldn't remember why I knew it. Instead, he was...

Someone outside the truck shouted, their voice incredibly angry, and I sat up quickly and looked through the windshield.

Right, Jackson was out *there*. Facing off with four other guys who all looked roughly as big as he was, and just as angry. I sat up further, trying to kick my brain out of whatever fog it had been in and into thinking shape, and looked quickly over the situation. Jackson had his back to the truck but he was walking menacingly toward the guys in question, his shoulders hunched and his hands clenched into fists at his side. His hat, which he'd been wearing all morning, was off and he'd shed the jacket he'd been wearing.

If I had to guess, I would have said that his entire stance screamed "I'm about to kick. Your. Butt."

Terrific.

My eyes flew to the other parties and I tried to figure out who they were and what they'd been doing to piss him off so

much. A quick glance from right to left showed me four of them, which I already knew, and that they were all relatively big guys. Though now that I was looking, I saw that they weren't as big as him, and were definitely younger. I couldn't explain exactly how I knew, but they had that still-stringy look of teenagers. Guys who hadn't quite grown into their bodies yet.

My eyes went to what lay behind them, and I saw a farmhouse that sat close enough to the street to be clearly visible... and a stack of firewood right in front of it.

Firewood that these kids had evidently been in the process of trying to steal, given the scattered logs on the ground.

Jackson must have seen them doing it and pulled over to stop them. Hell, for all I knew, we'd delivered that firewood ourselves because this family didn't have power or a generator to keep warm.

Which meant these kids could have been responsible for a family going cold all night, just because they wanted to cause trouble.

A thrill of anger went through me at that thought, because I'd seen enough scared and desperate people over the last day and a half to last me a lifetime, and I knew exactly what that wood meant to the family inside the farmhouse. Without giving it a second thought, I threw open the door and jumped out of the truck.

"What the hell is going on, here?" I snapped walking up to stand right next to Jackson.

One of the kids in front of us snorted, his eyes roving up and down my body and coming to land on my face, accompanied but a truly annoying smirk. "What, you've got to call on that tiny thing for backup, Jackson? Don't know what she's going to do. That girl can't even sing. I'm guessing she's no good at fighting, either. Too tiny. Too fragile."

I had enough time to think that I was absolutely going to kill him—if not for the smirk, then for the insult about me being fragile—before Jackson went flying forward, all fists

and swinging arms and cussing, and though I wouldn't have thought it possible—there were four of them and only one of him, after all—he hit one right in the nose before any of them could move, and then turned to take the second down in a ball of flailing fists and feet. A couple of quick punches to that one's face and he was out as well, and by the time Jackson came back up, his back heaving with slow, steady breaths and his fisted hands up in front of him, the other two had evidently decided that the whole thing wasn't actually as important as they'd thought it was.

They ran back to their truck, jumped in, and went skidding out of the driveway, throwing mud up in their hurry... and leaving their friends behind, laying on the ground and bleeding.

Jackson watched them go, his eyes narrowed and his mouth in a grim line, and then looked down at the boys on the ground.

“Punks,” he snarled.

He turned and walked toward me without bothering to help them, and I scurried back to the truck, both overwhelmed at what I'd just seen—as shocking as it might sound, I didn't generally find myself in fist fights—and also...

Excited.

Not in an it's-Christmas-morning way, but in a way that had my breath growing still in my lungs and my cheeks flushing. My heart racing and something aching down deep in my belly, like I'd just been hit by something I never saw coming.

Something I'd never so much as *considered*.

\* \* \*

“Get into the house and get whatever you have that passes as a first aid kit,” I said firmly. “I'm changing and then I'm doctoring you, and I won't have any arguing, you hear me?”

Jackson smirked, but shrugged and nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” he said, pretending to be meek.

It didn’t fool me, of course. I’d just seen the man go into a fight with four other men and come out victorious, and I doubted this cowboy had ever come up against a situation that scared him. I highly doubted my stern voice did anything more than make him want to laugh. But he was bleeding from several cuts and I’d seen the scrapes on his hands from one of his victim’s teeth. I wasn’t just going to let that pass by.

My mama had raised me to take care of the people around me, if I could. Even if they were angsty, cranky, and moody as all get-out.

I slid out of the truck and made my way quickly into the house and up the stairs, to the room Jackson had given me this morning when Parker woke up sick again. It wasn’t the biggest of the guest bedrooms, he said, but it didn’t have a sick girl laying around in it, and that had been good enough for me.

More importantly, it now had a bag full of my clothes, courtesy of the trailer Jackson’s friends had managed to find and send back toward us. And that right there had been music to my ears when it arrived yesterday.

I slid out of the mud-covered overalls I’d been wearing and glanced at them with distaste, wondering if it was even worth it to wash them, and put on yoga pants and a comfortable sweatshirt. I knew it was only mid-day, but I wasn’t planning on setting foot outside again today, and as long as I was going to be inside, I wanted to be comfortable.

When I reached the kitchen, I found Jackson at the stove, stirring a pot. I rushed toward him and grabbed the spoon, snatching at his hand to see whether he’d done any further damage to it. “What the hell are you doing? You’re hurt!”

He smirked, but let me take the spoon without argument. “Ain’t the first time I’ve had bruised knuckles, little one. No need to act like I’m dying.”

I glared at him, then shoved him toward the counter. “Sit. What were you making, anyhow?” Turning toward the stove, I

saw milk bubbling in the pot, and when I glanced over at the counter, I saw the mix for hot chocolate.

I nearly melted. I couldn't help it. The man was like a little boy with his cocoa. It was a good thing I was leaving soon, or I'd end up gaining 50 pounds drinking the stuff with him.

When I looked at him, one eyebrow lifted in both question and laughter, he just shrugged.

“I wanted something warm. Figured you might want something warm, too. After all, I'm not the one who fainted.”

I'd always heard of anger evaporating, but I'd never really believed it could actually happen. So I was shocked when I suddenly felt shaky-kneed and breathless at his words. The man was sporting bruises and scrapes galore, and though I knew he'd probably seen worse—these were hardly life-threatening injuries—the first thing he'd thought to do when he came into the house was to make me something warm to drink.

Hell, he hadn't even changed out of his dirty clothes. He was still wearing the mud-stained jeans and flannel shirt he'd gone out in this morning, both of them sticky and wet from the work we'd been doing. He'd put his hat down somewhere and his hair was messy and wild. He had a smear of dirt down his nose.

He was beautiful and wild and untamed, and I didn't think I'd ever known anyone quite like him.

I reached up and rubbed the dirt away before I could think better of it, his skin warm and alive under my finger.

“You could have at least taken a shower first,” I said, my voice coming out so soft it was nearly a whisper. “You're filthy.”

He caught his lip between his teeth and reached up to take my hand away from his face. “You have no idea,” he murmured. He swallowed heavily, his eyes going from my gaze down to my lips and then coming back up, dark and hungry and wanting.



The look shot straight through me, leaving a scorched path in its wake, and I nearly gasped at the shock of it.

The man was fire, I thought. Fire and ice and everything in between. And I didn't have the first clue what made him go from one to the other.

But I knew he wanted to kiss me. And I didn't think I'd ever wanted anything more in my entire life.

Then he shook his head, dragged his eyes away from mine, and looked at something behind me. The ghost of a smile colored his lips and he glanced back at me. "If I make the cocoa the way you like it, will you play for me?"

I jerked and tried to orient myself to this sudden change of direction. He'd gone from scorching heat to... asking me to play for him? I turned and looked at what had caught his attention, and saw my guitar leaning up against the wall, fresh out of the trailer that had been carrying our stuff. It had been here since yesterday, but I hadn't had a chance to unpack it until this morning, and I'd nearly forgotten it was even here.

I turned back to him, wondering if he'd finally figured out who I was. When I looked up at him, though, I saw only raw honesty on his face, and a vulnerability I'd never caught there before. No awe at my fame. No sly smile at having Avery Dawson and her guitar in his house for a private concert. No sign that he had any idea I was anything more than some girl who played guitar.

Sure, he must know we were a band on the road. He would have had to be blind not to realize it.

But all signs pointed to him not knowing which band we were.

And that right there made me feel all sorts of warm and fuzzy inside.

Because he'd been taking care of me and including me in his life for the past three days. And it wasn't because of who I was. For the first time in what felt like a very, very long time, someone was including me just because they liked me, rather than what they thought they might be able to get out of it.

“Sure,” I murmured. “Dinner first. Then guitar. I’m starved.”

His mouth quirked. “Hot chocolate. Showers. Dinner. Guitar.”

I reached out and poked him firmly in the chest. “Deal.”

## CHAPTER 20

## *Every*

I sat on the couch and settled my guitar on my lap, already knowing exactly which song I was going to play. It wasn't one of my more popular songs. Wasn't even on any album.

This was a song I wrote just for myself, and had never planned to share with anyone else. Partially because it wasn't catchy enough to stand up on an album... and partially because it was so personal, so true, that I'd written it knowing that I was going to keep it for myself. This particular part of my soul wasn't for anyone else to touch.

I'm sure you're wondering why, then, I decided I was going to play it for Jackson, and it's a valid question. But it just seemed right. This moment, these few days with him, had been time spent outside of reality. We were somehow on a different timeline than the one where I was a rising country star who never got a moment to herself. Here, on this timeline, I was just a girl in a small town. A girl who helped a guy catch his cattle and save the townsfolk. A girl who showed other guys how to rewire electrical boxes to get around burnt-out wires—something my dad had taught me when I was young—and helped them wrangle animals into barns.

Here, I wasn't someone too famous to touch or be friends with. I'd spent my entire childhood fighting to get out of the small town where I'd grown up and now here I was, feeling like the people in this small town were the first ones in a long time to see me as anything other than their meal ticket.

And it had started with Jackson himself.

So yeah, it felt right to give this man who saw me for exactly what I was the song I'd written about that girl who'd been dreaming so hard about escaping her small town.

I smiled at him, knowing that it was a soft, gentle smile, full of those dreams, and then I started to strum my guitar, letting the strings warm under my skin while my fingers remembered what it felt like to play. It had been several days, now, and if I'd been a responsible musician I would have been finding a way to practice every day, keep my fingers nimble.

But living this life had pushed that practicality to the side, and now it took a moment for my fingers to remember what they were supposed to be doing. Once they warmed up and settled down to their job, I began to hum, warming my vocal chords as well.

And when they were ready, when the hoarseness had fallen away from my voice, I started to sing.

## CHAPTER 21

## *Jackson*

**M**y God, the girl was an angel.

I watched her warming up, watched her getting ready to launch into song, her hair curling in riots and snarls around her head and her eyes reflecting the firelight, and wondered which song she was going to sing. I went through the songs I knew—not many, but I hadn't been able to avoid them completely—and had one in particular picked out as my guess when she opened her mouth.

I'd been wrong. I'd expected her most popular song. The one with the driving beat and the catchy chorus. The one that sounded like it had been written for summertime parties that included plenty of watermelon and water balloons.

Instead, she gave me a slow, sweet melody, her voice deeper and softer than I'd ever heard it, the lyrics telling me about a summer when she was young, when she'd sat down and started dreaming about making it big one day. She sang about the dreams she'd had and the way her heart had yearned for something more, something bigger than what her parents showed her. The way she'd felt when she first realized that she could be something other than what her parents were.

It was a roller coaster, she sang, and she was flying toward the top, nearing that point where there would be no going back, nearly at the spot where the whole world would spread before her, so she could see exactly where she was headed.

She didn't look at me while she sang. She closed her eyes and swayed to the music, her face lifted up to the ceiling and a slight smile on her lips. She looked like she was falling into a

dream right there in front of me, the world around us melting away until only the two of us were left, connected by some string that I didn't understand...

But was having more and more trouble questioning.

I wanted to reach out and brush my fingers through her hair. Grab her and pull her to me. Recreate that heat, that spark I'd felt in the kitchen when she set her fingertips on my face and told me I was filthy.

Hell, I wanted to do a whole lot more than that.

And the wanting terrified me.

When she finished the song and opened her eyes, smiling at what was no doubt an awed look on my face, I shook my head. "Avery Dawson, that might have been the most beautiful thing I've ever heard."

And I watched her face go from dreamy and soft to horrified in the space of half a second.



## CHAPTER 22

**T**he words had barely passed his lips before I was on my feet and heading toward the door, though I couldn't have told you what had spooked me or why I was running.

I guess it had surprised me so much to hear my full name, to hear that I'd been wrong to think he didn't know who I was, that I was running from the truth. Running from the idea that he might be just like everyone else. Just waiting for his chance to worm his way into my life and tag along with whatever I had going on at any given moment. I'd been enjoying being myself with him so much, enjoying the feeling that I was just another person, and to find out that he knew who I was—had probably known it all along...

It stung for reasons I couldn't even explain to myself.

Though I suspected that the feeling that he'd been lying about what he knew had an awful lot to do with it. No, I hadn't thought we were being completely honest with each other, but I also hadn't thought we were lying.

Not that I'd thought about it at all.

Before I could go any further through the room—or in my argument with myself—he caught my arm and whirled me back toward him, catching me in his arms and bringing me up against his body.

I stared up at him, forgetting how to breathe at the look on his face.

He looked... vulnerable. Again, with that vulnerability. It wasn't what I expected to see from him after everything he'd

done over the last couple of days, and it certainly wasn't who I'd originally thought he was. That first night, I'd thought he was nothing more than a crank. An unwilling hero who had regretted saving us from the creek and was already looking for ways to get rid of us.

Now he looked like a man who was on the verge of admitting that he'd been more affected by our meeting than he wanted to admit.

"Where are you going?" he asked softly. "Why are you running?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I—"

He ducked down and kissed me before I could finish, his lips sealing to mine as his fingers slipped over my jaw and tangled in my hair, holding me there. And God help me, I kissed him back, holding onto him like he was some sort of life raft in the storm, the only hope I had left to keep me alive.

The truth was, though, I was drowning in him. Drowning in his kiss, drowning in the way he made me feel.

Which made it that much harder when he yanked back, looked at me like a man who'd just agreed to let someone cut his heart out, and then turned and rushed from the room.

## CHAPTER 23

## *Every*

I went down into the kitchen the next morning assuming that whatever Jackson and I had built between us was over.

I'd sat on the couch in front of the fireplace for an hour after he left, waiting for him to come back and sit with me. He hadn't.

He hadn't knocked on my door, either, anxious to tell me what he'd been thinking or why he'd fled the room like I'd burned him.

And I'd woken up this morning feeling torn neatly in two. The new bus was going to be delivered tomorrow and we'd be back on the road again, leaving Arberry and its people behind us.

I couldn't figure out whether that was a relief... or a source of heartbreak.

And the scene behind us last night hadn't helped. I'd seen the raw emotion on his face, felt the heat in his kiss. The absolute need. I wasn't looking for a man, and I knew it didn't fit into my public persona. It was awfully hard to play America's Sweetheart if you had a man on your arm all the time, and my label would have hated the idea that the time they'd put into building that particular image was going to go to waste.

Particularly for a cranky cowboy from Arberry.

But I'd seen his conflict, his need... and I'd felt the echo of it in my own soul.

Which made him running away from me rather inconvenient.

By the time I got into the kitchen, though, I'd decided I couldn't afford to care. I didn't have room in my life for a man, and he'd made it very clear that he didn't want anyone on his life, either. Whatever had happened between us was just a fluke. A momentary, passing fancy. That was all.

We both just had to get the hell over it. Because as of tomorrow, we'd both be getting on with our lives.

Separately.

I lifted my chin, put on my most unemotional mask, and strode into the kitchen, ready for just about anything.

Anything except Jackson standing at the counter in jeans that hugged his hips and a white t-shirt that looked a size too small, his muscles stretching the fabric in the arms and across the chest, his face light with laughter at something Parker had said. Something in my chest squeezed and my mask nearly failed at the need rushing through my body. I wanted to make him laugh like that. I wanted him to lean toward me, dropping his voice and chuckling at something I'd said. Maybe an inside joke. Something only we understood.

God, I wanted a whole lot more than that.

And I couldn't have any of it.

I shoved my mask back into place just before he turned toward me, the skin around his eyes still crinkled with his smile.

"What's so funny?" I asked, forcing my voice to be light and uncaring, like I walked into a kitchen and saw men who made my stomach do flips every single day.

"Your friend was making fun of my plans for the day," Jackson said, grinning.

I turned my eyes to Parker, who'd turned as well. Evidently she was feeling better, which was a relief. I couldn't imagine anything more miserable than hitting the road tomorrow if she was still down with whatever she'd had. We'd

already missed two shows and we were going to be hauling butt to try to make the shows in Kentucky. Once we got there, we'd be in a hurry to get up to speed, and that'd be nearly impossible if Parker was still under the weather.

Also, she was my best friend. I didn't want to see her sick any longer than I had to.

"Well you're out of bed. That's progress," I said, moving toward her and feeling her forehead. "Are you better?"

She shrugged. "Not all the way, but getting closer, I reckon."

I gave her a grin. "You're feeling good enough to make fun of Jackson. That's got to mean something."

This brought a snort from her. "Wait until you hear what he's got planned for the day. You'll change your mind immediately. He's making himself an easy target."

I turned to find Jackson dead serious, now. "God, what is it?" I asked, mystified. "Or do I even want to know?"

He turned his serious expression on me, looking like he was daring me to laugh at what he was about to tell me. "Of course you want to know. We're doing the same thing we always do after there's a big storm. The mud run."

The mud run. Right. Of course.

What the hell did *that* mean?

\* \* \*

The three of us went splashing into a parking lot at the base of a hill and came to a skidding stop, Jackson grinning like some kid who'd just been told he got to go to Disneyland.

I still didn't know what the hell we were doing or why I'd been invited—or why we'd brought Parker, who was still looking a little green—and no matter how many times I asked, Jackson had refused to tell me.

So now I tried again.

“Let me get this straight. You’ve brought us out into the wilderness in your truck, when Parker’s still sick enough that she can barely sit up straight, and now we’re... what? Here to look at a mountain?”

He turned to me with a grin that was entirely unlike the man I’d thought I knew. “We’re here,” he said, “for the mud run. And we brought Parker because she hasn’t experienced it yet.”

“Riiiiiiight,” I said, stretching the word out. “And it’s important that Parker experience it because...?”

This earned me a shocked look. “She’s from Arberry.”

I turned to look at Parker, who looked just as mystified as I did at this vague statement. “Do you have any idea why you being from Arberry means you have to go on this mud thing?”

She shook her head, her eyes wide, and then coughed into her fist. I turned back to Jackson, at that and pointed at her. “The girl’s about to cough her lungs up, so this better not require any physical effort on her part. If she gets hurt doing this, I’m going to kill you with my own two hands.”

He barked a laugh at that, either because there was no physical effort involved in the mud run or because he thought it was hilarious that I might try to kill him, and then pointed toward a number of other trucks filing into the parking lot. “Don’t worry. She’s riding in a truck that’s even more secure than this one.”

I followed his pointing finger and saw that the truck he was pointing at had a familiar face behind the wheel. The dark hair and flashing blue eyes of his friend Dev, who’s been helping us with the rescue missions over the past couple of days. Dev pulled up next to us, rolled down his window, and tipped his hat at me.

“Hey, pixie,” he said, grinning. “Jackson talked you into coming?”

I snorted. “He hasn’t told me a single thing about it, so I don’t think you could call it talking me into it.”



Dev's eyes shot past me to Jackson, questioning, and then he laughed and looked back at me. "Then I won't ruin the surprise. You got a passenger for me?"

"Sure do." Jackson jumped out of the truck, pulled open the door to the backseat, and pulled a screeching Parker from the truck. He led her over to the passenger side of Dev's truck and deposited her there, then came trotting back, laughing.

I watched all of this, caught between horrified at losing Parker and amused at the look on her face as Jackson turned her over to the keeping of someone she'd never met. I had no idea what was going on, but I rather thought it served her right, being forced into someone else's truck.

After all, she was the one who'd helped Jackson decide that I was staying at his house rather than going anywhere else, on our first night here. And then she'd laughed at me when I found out. As far as I was concerned, she deserved the tables being turned on her.

Besides, I knew Dev. Sort of. And he was a good man. He'd take care of her.

If there was any 'taking care of' included in this mud run situation.

"Why does she have to ride with him?" I asked when Jackson reappeared.

"Rules of the run," he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Every driver has to have a passenger."

I frowned and looked out at the other trucks, seeing a range of vehicles that looked much like Jackson's, with a number of men driving, and some women. And in each truck, a passenger. There, right across from us, Connor sat revving the engine of his bright red pickup, and had...

Olivia was sitting in his passenger seat. What was this, some sort of redneck double-date situation? In the mud? How the hell did he even know Olivia? I'd thought she was at Daisy's house, whatever that meant.

"What do you mean, rules of the—"

My voice broke as Jackson hit the gas and sent us shooting forward, mud splashing up from our tires and every other truck jumping forward at the same time, all of us racing for...

I turned my eyes to the front, shocked and somewhat terrified, and saw that we were all racing for a narrow opening in the trees.

An opening that led to the road running up the hill in front of us.

## CHAPTER 24

## *Jackson*

A very was laughing so hard she could hardly sit up, though she was doing her level best to at least keep her forehead away from the dashboard. She'd already hit her head on it once, when we went over a particular large bump, and since then she'd been working to stay upright in the seat no matter what sort of maneuvering we were doing.

She was also going to have a black eye that would probably have Parker screaming bloody murder when she saw it.

I didn't give one single damn about that, though. I was having way too much fun up here on the mountain. Up here with this tiny firecracker of a girl in my truck, shouting instructions and encouragement as we slid and spun through the mud, trying to get to the finish line first.

"Remind me what we get if we win?" Avery shouted over the country music she had playing as our soundtrack.

And yes, the music had been her idea. The moment she figured out what the run was about, she'd said we needed music to drive by. I'd done the run five times, now—we did it every time we had a storm—and I'd never thought of putting music on to drive by.

Of course I'd never driven it with Avery before. But with her by my side, screeching in excitement every time we slid sideways, it felt right.

Everything about this felt right.

And for right now, for the time we were in the truck and away from the rest of the world, and with tomorrow held at bay by the distance between the mountain and my driveway, where the bus would pick her up tomorrow, I was letting myself pretend that tomorrow wasn't going to come.

“We don't win anything!” I shouted, steering carefully around a tree stump that emerged from out of nowhere. “But we get to say we won!”

“That doesn't even make sense!” she shouted back. “Why try so hard if you're not going to get anything in the end?”

I snorted and sent a grin her way, finding her turned toward me, her hair flying around her head like it was possessed and her eyes flashing with excitement. “Because what the hell else are we going to do with all this mud?”

\* \* \*

“I can't believe Connor won,” Avery moaned, slumping in her seat. “He's never going to stop bragging about that, you know.”

I shook my head. “Oh, I know. But never fear. There'll be another run the next time there's a storm. And I already know how I'm going to win it.”

She laughed, her laughter like silver bells tinkling in the sunlight, and I turned to stare at her. She'd managed to get mud in her hair somewhere, even though we'd had the windows closed the entire time, and she looked like some sort of woodland creature. Something that had been out in the woods, communing with nature, and then had somehow found her way into my truck to play tricks on me.

She was either an angel or a fairy. I still hadn't figured out which it was.

But I didn't want her smile to leave, and I wasn't ready to take her home yet.

I turned the truck back on, waved quickly at Dev, and then started out of the parking lot and toward the mountain again.

“Wait, where are we going?” Avery asked, her voice tinged with surprise and suspicion. “Is there a second run or something?”

“No, ma’am,” I replied. “But as long as we’re out here, I want to show you something.”

\* \* \*

It only took us ten minutes to get to the spot I had in mind, and though Avery peppered me with questions for the entire drive, I didn’t give in. I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.

So when we finally got to the lookout point, the one I’d discovered years ago, when I first learned that driving could mean escape, she had no idea what to expect.

I pulled through the trees, out into the clearing, and got right up to the edge of the cliff, then rolled to a stop and turned to watch Avery’s reaction.

It was worth every penny. She tucked her feet under her and pushed herself up and forward, her hands on the dashboard and her eyes wide and staring as she dragged her gaze across the view in front of us. She moved from left to right and then back again, taking it all in, and then turned to look at me.

“This is... This is...”

“My favorite spot in the world,” I said simply. I turned to look at the view, and it took my breath away. Just like it always had.

This wasn’t the biggest hill in the area and the others would probably provide better views, but this was the one I’d discovered first, and I’d never been able to imagine anything more impressive than this. Down below us, we could see the small town of Arberry, laid out like a doll’s city, and beyond that the scattering of buildings that made up the town where Avery herself had grown up. We could see for miles, the flat plains and the hills and valleys. The ranches that made up the

cattle industry in this part of the state, the farms that specialized in cotton and vegetables.

We could even see the creek that had tried to drown Avery and her friends.

“It’s better in the spring, when everything is green,” I murmured.

“And the fall, I’m betting,” she added. “When the trees are turning.”

“And the summer, when everything is growing and thriving and the cows are in the fields and the birds are overhead.”

I felt her turn to me, though I didn’t take my eyes off the view. “So basically you brought me here during the only season when you *don’t* love the view.”

I gave her a shrug. “If I didn’t love the view in all seasons, I wouldn’t have brought you up here to show you. This is my favorite place in the world. And you’re...”

*Something special, I didn’t say. Someone I wanted to share this with. The first person I thought would understand why I needed to get up here and get away from the world.*

They were words coming straight from my heart, but I didn’t let them out of my mouth. Because once they were out there in the world, I wouldn’t be able to take them back. And I knew from experience that making yourself vulnerable like that, allowing someone too deep into your soul, only gave them more ways to hurt you.

When I turned to her, though, she was looking me like I *had* said all of those things. Her eyes were a deeper blue than I’d ever seen them, her mouth open in a small O that made her look as though she was just about to say something.

“I’m what?” she asked quietly.

Everything. She was everything. And I didn’t know how it had happened or when. If it had been when we were getting the cows into the barn on that first day or drinking hot chocolate in front of the fire. Or if it had happened while she

was talking about her childhood. Or while we were taking supplies to the townspeople and she'd jumped right in, like this had been her town and her people.

Or when she played a song for me on her guitar.

The kiss we had right afterward.

Her laughter as we swerved and slid through the mud on the mud run.

The images flashed through my mind, one after the other, and with each image, her face was burned more sharply into my brain, her laughter echoing through my mind in a way that I thought would never actually end.

“You’re something special,” I whispered, knowing full well that I was opening myself up to her... and not caring.

For the first time since I was twelve and my mother started hitting me every time she'd had too much to drink, I actually stopped caring that I was making myself vulnerable to someone else.

And then Avery was in my lap, straddling me and somehow fitting between me and the steering wheel and I was fumbling with the lever to push the seat back while she brought her lips down on mine, the kiss sweet and wonderful and everything Avery, and I was putting my brain into a closet and promising myself that for the rest of our time together, I'd act on instinct, and instinct alone.

Because I didn't know how much longer we had together. Maybe just until tomorrow. But I did know that I wanted to enjoy every single second of it. And I didn't want my brain or all the baggage I'd been carrying for years to get in the way of that.

\* \* \*

“Who hurt you?” she asked quietly.

She was sitting on my lap still, sideways this time, with my shirt covering her to keep her warm. And she was so tiny that



even sitting on my lap, I could still rest my chin on the top of her head. The smallest slip of a girl I'd ever met, and I remembered thinking that she was the kind of girl you wanted to pick up and protect. Put into your pocket for safekeeping.

Only when it came right down to it, she had such a big personality that I wasn't sure she'd fit into anyone's pocket. I was damn sure it would be wrong to try to keep her there.

"What makes you think anyone hurt me?" I asked hesitantly.

She chuckled. "One, you talk nonstop about not wanting to have a woman in your life, and that doesn't happen naturally. But more than that, I can see that you're hiding something. I see a flash of you every once in a while, and then I see you put it away. The parts you don't want anyone touching. I figure those are the parts that someone hurt, once."

I bit my lip, and tried to figure out whether she actually knew anything. Could Dev or Connor have told her anything? Parker, more likely, though I was older than her, and I didn't think she would have heard the stories when we were young. And neither Dev or Connor would have said anything.

Sure, they knew how I'd grown up. An outsider. A poor kid who barely got to come to school. I hadn't known much about them then, but they'd known about me. the kid from the junkyard, whose parents barely had enough money to feed their family.

A kid who had never belonged to anyone.

Particularly not my mother, who had spent her money on alcohol and become so mean with it that I'd taken to sleeping in an abandoned car in the yard rather than in the trailer she called home.

No, Dev and Connor knew some of how I'd grown up, but they wouldn't have told Avery. It wasn't their place.

Which meant she'd seen it for herself.

I tightened my arms around her waist and held this beautiful jewel of a girl tightly, marveling at a heart so pure that she'd been able to see through the walls I put up and right

into the darkness inside. And that she'd stayed, even when she saw that darkness.

Well. Stayed until tomorrow.

"I didn't think I talked nonstop about not wanting a woman in my life," I observed, putting off the admission for a moment.

She tipped her head back and forth. "Okay, maybe you only said it once, but it stuck. Still... Who hurt you?"

Right. Truth it was, then.

Because as much as I didn't want to deal with the truth, something inside me actually wanted to tell this tiny girl in my lap. Something that had been wanting to tell the story for a long time.

Something that was, I thought, quite possibly ready to share the load with someone I trusted.

"It was my mother," I told her softly, staring into the distance. "She... drank. And she was mean when she was drinking."

She sat up quickly and put her hand to my cheek, her eyes deep blue and very, very sad. "She hit you," she breathed.

I nodded once, unwilling to actually say the words out loud. "Starting when I was twelve. Any time she drank."

Her eyes closed on that, as if she could barely stand to think about it. "And how old were you when you ran away?"

"Sixteen. Old enough to be able to work. That was when I met Connor. He'd known who I was—everyone in town did—and when he saw me busing tables at the diner, and then heading for the hotel across the street, he stopped me. Asked if I needed a place to stay. His parents took me in. Let me stay in the house in exchange for doing chores around the place."

Her hand twitched on my cheek and she opened her eyes and put her other hand on my face, cupping it like she could hold me together. Protect me.

Then her face changed from sad to something feral. Something angry and protective.

“I would have protected you,” she said firmly. “I would have given you the best home anyone ever had, and I would have torn your mother apart.”

This surprised a laugh out of me, and I pulled her to me and cradled the back of her head in my hand, trying to memorize the feeling of her here in my lap.

“That’s the second time you’ve promised to protect me,” I said. “From the thunder, and now from my mother? Do I look like I’m in need of protection?”

“Everyone needs protection from something,” she said simply. “You’ve just never had anyone to do that for you.”

She was more right than she knew.

And yet she couldn’t be the one to protect me. Because this girl, this tiny thing who saw me for exactly what I was and didn’t let it frighten her, was leaving tomorrow.

And I’d probably never see her again.

## CHAPTER 25

We came to a slow, reluctant stop in front of the door to my room.

“Guess this is my stop,” I said, looking up at Jackson and doing my best to look inviting. Sexy, even.

Because God, I wanted this man to ask to come into my room. I wanted him to cup my face the way he did, his back hands running from my chin to the back of my head. I wanted him to look down at me with those dark eyes and tell me...

What?

*What, exactly, do you want him to tell you?* a voice in the back of my head asked sharply. *Because you know that no matter what it is, it'll make everything complicated.*

I sent a mental snarl in the voice's direction and shoved it into a deep, dark corner where I hoped it would stay for at least a little while. Yes, this was complicated.

But complicated didn't necessarily mean bad.

“I guess it is,” Jackson replied with the hint of a smile. He slid a finger under my chin and tipped my head up, leaning down to give me a whisper of a kiss. Just enough to send goosebumps racing across my skin, and make the butterflies in my belly dance with joy.

And then he drew back, winked at me, and walked away.

Toward his own room.

Without so much as a backward glance.

I watched him, confused as all get out, and fought the urge to call out after him. I didn't want him to walk to his own bedroom. I wanted him in *mine*! After everything that had happened today, the view and the conversation and the afternoon in the truck... After everything he'd told me, all those stories that I thought he didn't share with just anyone...

He was just going to leave me at my door and walk away?

I didn't understand. I didn't understand at all.

But I did know that he'd been hurt before. Not by anyone he was in a relationship with, but by his own mother. The woman who should have been taking care of him, through thick and thin. The woman who should have been holding him as he shook, scared of the storms of life, and had instead been beating him whenever he made a sound. I hadn't asked for details. I didn't want them in my head. I knew they'd just get in there and haunt me.

And at the end of the day, they wouldn't make me understand him any better than I already did. I'd had a happy childhood, full of sunshine and rainbows and music lessons. An older brother who constantly tried to leave me behind, but would have fought anyone who tried to lay a hand on me. And parents who loved me more than life itself.

I couldn't understand a mother who wouldn't do that for her son, and I thought I could feel heart-wrenchingly sad about what had happened to him, I couldn't actually *understand* it. My brain didn't have the experience or the capacity to make sense of it.

Which meant I also didn't have the capacity to understand how he needed to move when it came to caring for someone.

Hell, for all I knew, this was the first time he'd allowed himself to even try it, and he was so intent on not screwing it up that he wanted to move at a turtle's pace.

The one thing I did know was that he definitely cared about me. I'd seen it in the tilt of his smile, the shine of his eyes in the truck up there on the mountain. I'd heard it in his

voice. And I'd most definitely felt it in the way his fingertips skimmed over my skin.

Yeah, the man cared about me, all right.

And much to my surprise, I cared about him. In a bone-deep, earth-shattering sort of way that I'd sung about but had never actually experienced. Go figured. Of all the people in all the world, I'd fall for some cranky rancher in the town that overshadowed my own. I'd been fighting to get out of a small town my entire life, and had finally done so...

Only to find love in the next town over.

I snorted at that, but there was a smile on my lips and a glow in my heart.

Jackson cared about me, and I cared about him, and yes, it was going to be complicated. There was no doubt about that. I was going to have a world of explaining to do to the label and another world of planning to do for how I was going to make this all work.

But if Jackson was the prize at the end of that journey... well, I guessed I'd manage.

Even if he wanted to move at a pace that would have embarrassed the oldest old lady in this town.

My smile grew wider, and I opened my door and slipped through it. I needed to get some packing done tonight if we were going to be leaving tomorrow... though I hoped that the first thing Jackson asked me in the morning was if I would stay a bit longer.

I hoped he was dreading the coming separation as much as I was.

And I hoped he was planning to do something about it.

## CHAPTER 26



# *Jackson*

I was up before the sun rose.

The first reason was that I wanted to cook breakfast for Avery. I wanted to show her that I could cook—and that I did it very well, thank you—and that...

Well, that this was the sort of domestic person I could be. The sort of roommate, or partner, or...

I cut that thought off before it could go any further and moved over to stir the eggs before they burned. I'd always thought that cooking eggs was something you could only do if you were willing to give it all of your attention. Look away for one moment and they burned. Leave them alone to go grab the milk and they cooked too long and turned dry. And God forbid you decide to butter toast while you should be stirring eggs instead.

The truth was, eggs were better slightly undercooked. They kept cooking even after you turned the heat off, and you had to take that into account when you were actually cooking them.

These weren't things I'd just known by instinct, either. It had taken years of living on my own, and screwing up many, many eggs, before I learned the secrets to cooking them.

Cooking for this many people, though... I turned the heat under the pan down, hoping I could leave the eggs for a moment without doing any damage, and turned to the bacon. I hadn't gone to bed last night expecting company, but Avery had texted me in the middle of the night to let me know that

her friends were all going to be here this morning to meet the new bus.

The new bus. Her friends. Her *band*. Her band that was leaving today, to go on tour through who knew how many cities and play for who knew how many people.

I glossed over that and thought instead of the fact that Avery had been up in the middle of the night. Texting me.

I wondered if she'd been thinking about me before sending that text. I wondered if she'd been finding it as hard to sleep as I had, her head filled with the memories of the day, and the days before it, and the way our gazes had tangled every time we were in the same space, the sparks jumping between us as if we were connected by a live wire.

Or maybe that was just me.

I shook my head, trying to clear it and think rationally, and took a sip of coffee. The strong drink had always had a way of settling me down, bringing me back to earth, and that was exactly what I needed right now. Because ever since yesterday in the truck, I'd been feeling like my head was full of air, my brain no longer functioning on any type of realistic plane.

I was having crazy thoughts. Had been having them since yesterday, and they'd gotten even worse last night when I couldn't close my eyes without seeing pictures of Avery.

For example, it had come to me in the middle of the night, when I was busy not sleeping, that I could solve the ache in my heart by simply asking Avery to stay longer.

I'd immediately started listing all the reasons that wouldn't work, of course. Because I was a realist. First, she was meant to go on tour. She'd already missed several dates, and I didn't think she'd want to miss any more. Second, there was nothing here for her. Just a cattle ranch with too much work to do and not enough time to do it. She was a girl who'd fought tooth and nail to leave her small town and make it in the music industry, and I was... what?

Going to ask her to stay in a small town with me for longer than she'd already had to?

Ridiculous.

The biggest reason against it, of course, was me. I was having enough trouble admitting to myself that I might like Avery more than I liked the average person. Dealing with the emotions trying to rise up inside of me was proving to be a whole new form of torture, and I hadn't even talked to her about any of that.

There was quite literally no guarantee that I could pull this off. No guarantee that I had any clue about how to love another human being.

But if all of that was true... why did the idea of asking her to stay make me feel like I was flying through a sky shot through with stars and rainbows and other highly unlikely additions? Why was I standing here grinning to myself over my coffee—while the eggs and bacon no doubt burned—just thinking about her telling me yes?

“You're looking mighty cheerful,” a voice suddenly said from the doorway. “Already planning exactly what you're going to do once you're rid of us?”

I turned and saw that Avery's friends had already started arriving, and had evidently taken it upon themselves to come right in without knocking. Or maybe Parker had let them in.

I didn't know, and I didn't care. Just seeing them there in the doorway sent all the joy I'd been feeling right out the window.

“Hardly,” I said, knowing my voice was coming out harsh. “Parker's been no trouble at all, and having Avery here hasn't been nearly as distracting as I'd thought it would be.”

The understatement of the century. But I had no intention of telling this guy—Scott, was it?—what I really thought of Avery.

He shrugged, though, as if he couldn't really care less, and grabbed a piece of bacon, shoving it in his mouth. “You got lucky, keeping that eye candy, eh?”

And he gave me a grin so full of cheek, so disrespectful, that I had to clench my hands around my cup to keep from

punching him in the nose.

What the hell was going on, here? I'd thought Avery's band was made up of some of her closest friends. People who would have done anything for her. They'd certainly acted like they were all on the same team that first night, when I saved them from the bus. And now this guy was standing there acting like Avery was nothing more than eye candy?

Was this for real?

I felt the fury rising up quickly underneath my skin and clenched my coffee cup so hard I was surprised it didn't shatter. *You will not punch Avery's friend*, I told myself firmly. *Not worth it. It's not worth it.*

And it certainly wouldn't make Avery any more willing to consider my proposition.

Though the idea of sending that smug grin right to the ground felt awfully good.

"She's a whole lot more than eye candy," I said coldly. "In fact, she's been surprisingly helpful around here."

The guy narrowed his eyes on me, then glanced at the coffee cup in my hand, and the white-knuckled grip I had on it.

Then, much to my disgust, he barked out a laugh.

"Oh, like that, is it?" he asked. He leaned in, his face turning somehow mean. "Well, I'll tell you what, cowboy, I can pretty much guarantee she didn't like any of it. She fought awfully hard for her career and to get out of a town just like this. You think she's going to be willing to come back and live in some backwater hellhole like this, with people who don't know the first thing about the way the world out there works? Think again. I've heard her say myself that she can't wait to get away from here. Hell, I bet she's got a countdown on the wall in her room to when she gets to start her life again. Forget about this town and the no-names that live here."

He leaned back, smug and haughty and proud of what he'd just said.

I squeezed the coffee cup so hard it shattered in my hands. And not because I wanted to punch the man standing in front of me.

No, it was a whole lot more than that. Because he was right. Avery had clawed her way up out of a small town just like this one. She was a girl on her way up and away from here. A girl who was going to be a star.

And she deserved it. She deserved every single second of it.

I'd been a fool to think she might have a moment to spare for someone like me, and an even bigger fool to think she'd consider staying here. Blind, that's what it was. Blind and stupid and... and...

And lovesick.

Dumb.

Of course she didn't want to be here. Of course she wanted to move up and move out.

And of course she'd been telling her friends so, probably since the first day she was here.

God, I was a fool to have thought that what passed between us meant anything at all to her. She'd probably just been looking for something to entertain her.

Something she could write songs about, later. The stupid cowboy who'd actually thought she had feelings for him, and had taken her to his favorite spot in the world, convinced that he might finally have found someone he could care for.

I slammed what was left of the mug onto the counter and stormed out of the kitchen, not knowing where I was going or what I was doing, but knowing that I had to get out of there and be alone for a moment to figure it out.

Behind me, I heard the mocking laughter of Avery's friend as he watched me go. And my anger ratcheted up several notches at the sound.

## CHAPTER 27

## *Every*

I threw the last of my shirts into the bag I'd gotten out of the trailer and stared at it for several moments, like I was expecting it to multiply or something.

Then I turned and looked out the window, taking in the view of the place that I'd been calling home for the last several days. Of course, 'home' was a little bit generous. More than a little bit generous. I'd just been a visitor here, and I hadn't started as a welcome one. The truth was, Jackson had allowed me to stay with a whole lot of protest.

He'd hated it at first. I was sure of it.

Then I'd managed to charm him into actually being happy I was here.

I smiled at the thought, remembering the way he'd looked at me when I finished playing for him, and the laughter at some of my childhood stories. Yeah, Jackson might have immediately regretted saving us from that creek, when it became obvious that he wasn't going to be able to send us all packing the way he wanted to, but I was pretty sure he liked me okay, now.

More than okay, if the heat of his kisses was anything to go by.

My eyes flitted from the barns sitting just below the house to the fields in the valley, the woods running along one side and the creek along the other. The water was down a bit now, with the rain having let up, and I wondered how long it would be until Jackson let his cattle back out into the fields. I wondered if he'd patched that fence yet, and if he'd thought up

a better way to get the cattle up into the barns in a hurry, if he needed to.

I wondered if he'd thought any more about getting help on the ranch, to play right-hand man to him in case of an emergency.

Or Girl Friday, as the case might be.

I'd been up most of the night thinking about it, going over my plans again and again and looking for holes. So far, I hadn't found any. Okay, that was a flat-out lie. There were plenty of holes in my plans, starting with the reputation my label wanted me to keep and ending with the fact that I knew from everyone I'd ever talked to that trying to maintain a relationship while on the road was nearly impossible. I'd be out there with hundreds of fans—thousands, if I was lucky—and Jackson would be stuck here, wondering where I was and what I was doing. We didn't even know each other that well yet, so it was sort of crazy to just think he'd manage to trust me, or I'd manage to trust him, while we were separated. And even when I got back, I wasn't sure what my schedule would be. The label would want another record, I was sure, and then I'd be out on the road again.

And Jackson couldn't just up and leave, I didn't think. This ranch wouldn't run without someone here to run it.

But none of that altered my thinking. Because somewhere between Jackson snarling at me that he didn't have anywhere else for me to go and the cows in the mud and the barn door and whiskey and hot chocolate, I'd...

I'd fallen for the hero who saved us. I hadn't even seen it happening at the time, and I was just as surprised as anyone else might be, but that didn't change the truth of it. And it sure as hell didn't change the fact that I didn't want to leave him.

There was something between us. Something that made the world look more colorful, more alive. Something that made me *feel* more alive. I wanted to explore that, see what it was. See what it could be. And though I couldn't stay here to do it, I was willing to bet that with a phone call every day, we'd get



a pretty good start at getting to know one another a little bit better.

Of course I'd need him to agree to that plan. And I was intending to talk to him just as soon as I went down for breakfast.

Which would happen as soon as I finished packing. And had a shower. And dried my hair and did my makeup and checked to make sure Parker was feeling better.

Okay, okay, so I was procrastinating. Because as soon as I went downstairs, two things would happen: One, I'd have to actually hear what Jackson had to say to my plane, and two, it would be time for us to go.

That last part was the one that was giving me an ache deep in my chest, right where my heart should sit.

Still, it wasn't going to get any better by me refusing to do it. My mama had always told me that the longer you let something sit, the worse it got, and she'd been right about that. I laid my hand gently on the window, memorizing the view in front of me, and then turned and walked toward the door.

Which promptly flew open to reveal a Jackson that looked just as angry as the one I'd met that first night.

Angrier, actually. This Jackson wasn't cold and collected like he had been that first night. He looked...

He looked furious. And hurt. And like he was about to break something.

"Time to go," he ground out.

I reeled back like he'd just slapped me. "What?" I glanced down at my phone and saw that it was only 7 in the morning. "I thought the bus wasn't getting here until—"

"It's already here," he said, striding into the room and grabbing my bag and my guitar case. "You got everything?"

"Um, yeah," I said, my brain stopping and starting and stopping again as it tried to understand what was going on here. Where was the Jackson I'd been with last night? The one

I'd gotten to know over the past three days? Why did I have this version of him...

And what had happened that my Jackson was gone and this one was here instead?

The man in question didn't seem to have any interest in talking about any of that, though. He launched himself out of the room without so much as a backwards glance for me, and then thundered down the hallway and down the stairs into the kitchen.

Here I saw a spread that told me he'd been cooking breakfast—he could cook?—and that he'd been doing quite a job of it. Hash browns, grits, eggs, toast, bacon, sausage...

If he'd cooked all of this, why weren't we eating it? Why was he rushing me right out of the house? Where was everyone else, and did they understand what was going on?

We went around the corner into the living room, Jackson walking so quickly that I was jogging just to keep up with him, and I saw Scott and Lucas on the couch, each of them shoving toast into their mouths.

"Time for you lot to get out of my hair," Jackson told them bluntly. "Get your things. Let's go."

They looked at him in shock, and then turned their eyes to me. I had enough time to notice Scott smirking—what the hell was he so happy about?—and then I was being grabbed and ushered out the front door. There, I found Olivia, Parker, and Amos in the driveway, looking like they'd also been literally shoved out of the house. Shane waved at me from behind the wheel of our bus—which looked a whole lot newer than the other one—and fired up the engine. He grinned like a maniac when the thing started.

I guessed it didn't take much to make him happy.

I also guessed that no one else would be feeling quite as confused and rotten as I was at the way we were being told to go. After all, none of the people around me had started to fall in love with their host.

I turned, my mouth open to demand that Jackson tell me what was going on

Only to find Lucas and Scott standing behind me, toast still in their hands and their bags on the ground at their feet.

Behind them, the door to Jackson's house was already closed, and probably locked and bolted against anyone finding their way back into it. I had a brief thought that it was a good metaphor for what he'd done with his heart... and then I realized what that meant, and what it said about his feelings for me, or lack thereof.

And the world around me went gray.

When Parker took my arm, muttering something about overstaying our welcome and guiding me toward our new tour bus, I didn't answer. But I also didn't stop her from forcing me up the steps and through the door, and then toward a seat that faced the road ahead of us.

Instead of the house I was going to be leaving behind me. And the man who lived there.

## CHAPTER 28

## **O** ne Week Later

I leaned my forehead up against the wall and listened to the crowd on the other side of the curtain chanting my name. And I tried really, really hard to be excited about it.

Son of a nutcracker, I would have settled for a whole lot less than excited. Happy. Satisfied. Fulfilled.

I would have settled for something as simple as being okay.

Instead, I was...

Depressed. Confused. Heartbroken.

We'd been on the road for a week, now, and this was my second show, now that we'd caught up with the tour in Kentucky. A small venue, this time, which meant that there were fewer people in the building, but that I could also look them in the eyes as I sang. Get a better connection to them. Actually laugh with the audience rather than playing to some faceless, anonymous crowd.

I'd already done one of those, in the big stadium in Louisville, where I'd played at Cardinal Stadium. The place hadn't been sold out, not even halfway, but I'd still been on a stage on the field, with grass surrounding me rather than people. The crowd had been far enough away that I couldn't see them clearly, and it had been night, which meant that

between the darkness around us and the lights shining up at me, I'd been almost completely isolated.

Alone in a sea of screaming people.

People who had been screaming for me, just like those people out there were, right now. It was everything I'd ever wanted. A tour with my name at the top of the bill and a band backing me up. A warm-up singer who got the crowd riled up and then turned them over to me. An hour of playing time at every stop, with no one to give me any trouble if I went for longer than that.

My name in lights.

I'd been dreaming about this for years, ever since I could remember, and I'd worked for years in Nashville to make it happen. This was my goal. I'd made it happen, with the help of some of my closest friends. And a major music label.

So why did I feel so empty?

I knew the reason, and it had a name and a face and wore a cowboy hat and owned a ranch in Arberry, North Carolina. But I'd been working very, very hard not to think about that. Or him. Or what I'd left behind.

Because what was the point, when it all came down to it? We'd shared a couple of magical days, and then one super-magical afternoon. He'd told me secrets I didn't think he'd ever told anyone else, and I'd opened myself up to him in a way I'd never thought I would be able to.

I'd trusted him.

And then he'd come charging into my room and practically thrown me out without so much as a 'hey, honey, have a good trip.' Nothing. Not even a goodbye hug. Just a shove out the door, and that was it.

I didn't understand what had happened, and I thought that might be the worst of it. If I'd known what was wrong, or if he'd told me what I'd done, maybe I could have made up for it. Or at least come to terms with it. Instead, I was left with...

A hole in my heart that was shaped an awful lot like that cowboy I was trying not to think about, and an aching feeling that told me I wasn't going to get over it anytime soon. I should be furious. I knew I should. He'd been absolutely horrible to me, and to my friends as well, and normally that would have gotten my temper up and running. I'd be sitting down every night with Parker to figure out how we were going to get revenge on him.

But it was awfully hard to feel anger when I was so numb I could barely breathe.

I mean if the cheering fans out there couldn't get me excited, was it any wonder I couldn't get up the energy to plan my revenge?

The truth was, I wished like hell I could just leave him behind. Forget about him and move forward with my life. Take advantage of this tour and the boost it was giving my career. Hell, I'd never been more center-stage than I was right now, and every business-minded bone in my body was screaming that I needed to do what I could to make it last.

In the past, I might have been able to do it. I'd gotten over relationships before when they didn't work out, and always by turning to my music and throwing myself into it. Writing a new song or coming up with a new routine or play list or idea for a show. My music had always been my safe haven. The balm to cure any ill.

Until Jackson.

I pulled myself off the wall, focusing on that fact... and for a moment, just a second, I felt a glimmer of something. A nudge of something other than depression and sadness. Just a flash of it. What was that?

Anger, I realized. Anger and frustration that I was feeling this way for a guy who obviously hadn't taken me as seriously as I'd taken him. Sure, he'd told me something he said was a secret, but how did I know it was even real? How did I know he hadn't been acting the whole time, just to get something out of it?

I'd thought he liked me for who I was rather than what I was, but what if I'd been wrong? What if he had just been playing me to get to say he had Avery Dawson dancing to his tune for an entire week?

What if I'd been nothing more than a story he'd curried so he could brag to his friends?

A flush of heat ran through me, and I grabbed it and held onto it. There it was. There was the anger I'd been missing up to this point. There was the self-preservation instinct that I'd somehow lost in the wilderness around Arberry.

I let it wash over me, its heat replacing the coldness I'd been harboring since we drove out of Jackson's driveway. Thank God, I thought. Something other than sadness.

Something that made me feel alive again.

I turned, focusing on that energy, and listened to the crowd chanting. They were calling for *me*. This entire tour was about *me*. This was my big chance, and I owed it to myself and my band to see it through and succeed.

Because people had faith in me to do just that. People who weren't named Jackson Pole.

People who mattered a whole lot more than him.

I straightened my shoulders, lifted my chin, and gave my band a nod to show that I was ready. Then we flooded through the curtain and onto the stage, smiles plastered on our faces and our hands already reaching for our instruments.

I had a show to play, and I wasn't going to let the memory of what Jackson had been to me stop that.



## CHAPTER 29

## *Jackson*

I forced myself to my feet, leaving the remains of my breakfast on the table, and got out the door and into the bright sunshine, lifting my face up to the light and praying for some warmth from it.

Unfortunately, there was no warmth in that sunshine. Because it was the middle of February and the sun was fighting its way through the remainder of another storm, weak and watery and more light than actual warmth.

There was also the small matter of the black hole that was currently living inside me and sucking all the color out of the world. Awfully hard to get warm when you have such a thing living inside your heart. Believe me, I'd tried. I had a fire burning constantly, and had stood so close to it that I now had ember marks in my favorite boots. I'd turned the heaters on for the first time this winter, and had taken to sleeping right next to one. And I drank hot drinks and whiskey like they were going out of style.

Nothing helped. Nothing warmed me on the inside.

But I wasn't willing to admit defeat. Not yet.

I glanced down at the list I had in my hand, scanning the contents. First up: the roof of the barn. The big barn, not any of the smaller ones, of course. Because that was just how my life went. The thing had needed replaced for some time, but hadn't been a real problem until it started raining.

And once it started raining, it was impossible to work on the roof. Vicious cycle.

Now that it was sunny out, of course...

This had been on my list for some time, and I finally had some time to get it done, now that the house was empty and I didn't have any guests taking up my time.

Guests. The word sent a knife right through my heart, and I closed my eyes again allowing myself one moment of remembering. Her voice, singing through the rain to the cows. That moment up against the barn, my body covering hers. Hot chocolate and whiskey and stories in front of the fire, and a steamy afternoon in my truck up at the lookout point.

God.

My phone rang, yanking me right out of the memory of her lips on mine, and I jerked it out of my pocket, eternally grateful for the distraction.

I wasn't supposed to be thinking about Avery Dawson, anyhow.

"Yep?" I asked, slamming the phone against my ear.

"Jackson, I need some help."

My focus immediately changed from Avery to my friend. Connor. His parents owned one of the ranches across the valley, and I counted him as one of my best friends. One of the only people I could turn to no matter what, and no matter what time of day or night it was. The man was a freaking rock. Stronger and better than anyone else I knew, including me.

He hadn't been home long, either. He'd been in Nashville for the last year, and had recently come home to help his parents with the ranch. Dad had cancer, mom was struggling with everything from day-to-day chores to getting the bills paid. The moment she'd called for help, Connor had ditched his music career and come running home.

It was just who he was.

And if he was calling me for help...

I was already on my way to my truck, my keys in my hand.  
"What do you need?"

A beat of silence, and in that beat I read gratitude and desperation. Connor never called for help unless it was absolutely necessary.

“It’s my dad. He’s taken a fall, and I...”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” I said. “Five if I can do it.”

I jumped into the truck and threw my phone on the passenger’s seat. And then I drove as fast as I could toward my friend’s house, all thoughts of the barn roof put on the back burner.

\* \* \*

When I skidded into Connor’s parents’ driveway, I saw that his dad had fallen down the steps from the front of their house. The old man had bone cancer, and it had made his bones brittle and his steps unsteady.

He shouldn’t be taking those steps by himself in the first place. But I knew Mr. Wheating, and I knew he’d never admit to his own weakness.

Connor and his mom probably hadn’t even known what his dad was doing.

He was at least sitting on the bottom step now, a wry grin on his face. So they’d been able to move him from the ground, which was where I assumed he’d ended up. I jumped out of the truck and moved toward them, listening to the conversation they were having.

Honestly, most of it was Mrs. Wheating gasping for breath. “Don’t you ever—” She poked his arm firmly. “—Do that—” Another poke. “—Again. Do you hear me? If you’re going down the stairs, you need me or Connor with you, and that’s final. Do you hear me, Armie? Do you?”

Poke. Poke. Poke.

Poking at him was a front, though. She was trying to be bossy, pretending to give him orders. The truth...

The truth was that she was a whole lot closer to leaning her face on his shoulder and sobbing, and anyone in their right mind would have been able to see it. Her voice was breaking and her lip was trembling and she looked white as a sheet.

This was a woman who'd always been stronger than almost anyone else I knew. I hadn't known her when I was young, but when Connor and I met at the age of sixteen and he started bringing me home, she'd been the mother I'd never had. The creator of chocolate chip cookies and the giver of hugs and advice.

The rock in my own personal storm.

I'd seen first-hand how much she and Mr. Wheating loved each other. And I'd envied them every second of it. Coming from a broken home as I had, with a mother who'd preferred drugs and alcohol to time spent with her own kid, I'd known how lucky Connor was to have her. When he offered to share her with me, I'd jumped at the chance.

So seeing her on the verge of breaking right now... It killed me. Ripped my heart out and threw it on the ground and stomped all over it.

She and Mr. Wheating loved each other so much that I didn't know how one would survive without the other. It felt wrong to think about either of them alone. Crushing to think about her losing him, or vice versa.

I couldn't even begin to imagine how it must feel to be in her shoes right now, watching her husband die in front of her face and knowing that this was the one thing in her life she couldn't fix with chocolate chip cookies or a hug.

I felt a crack open up in my chest at the thought of it. The thought of loving someone so much you didn't want to live without them. I'd never thought I would have that in my life, never even thought I wanted it, but standing here, watching her poke at him in desperation at her inability to do anything else...

I wanted it. I wanted that sort of love. The sort that filled you up and blocked out everything else in your life and gave

you something to live for. I wanted someone who would sit on the step and poke at me and lecture me if I'd done something stupid. I wanted someone to feel as though they'd die if I left them, and to wonder how they'd go on after I was gone.

And I didn't just want anyone for the job.

I wanted Avery Dawson.

The realization blew through me with the force of a hurricane, the answer so obvious, so natural, that I was calling myself every sort of name for not having realized it before. My house had been so empty since she left, my heart even emptier, and though I'd reminded myself time and again what her band mate had said about her not actually caring that much about me and being anxious to get out of town as quickly as possible...

It hadn't felt right. It hadn't felt like *her*. It had felt like something someone else said that she would have argued with.

Believing it felt like something she would have called me stupid and stubborn for. And she would have been right.

The problem was, I'd believed it in the moment, and then allowed it to rile me up. I'd let my pride get in the way—partially because I'd felt stupid at having opened myself up to her if she truly didn't want anything to do with me—and then I'd thundered into her room and kicked her out of my house.

I hadn't even bothered to say goodbye.

I was a fool. Ten, fifteen times over. And now, looking at Mr. and Mrs. Wheating and realizing what they had...

God, I was stupid. Even stupider than I'd ever realized. And now it was too late. I had no way of getting in touch with Avery, and even if I did, what would I say? How would I tell her that I'd been stupid and regretted every single syllable of what I'd said to her on that last day? How did I tell her that I was wrong, and that I did want her to stay?

But most importantly, how did I even get to her?

I'd neglected to get any contact information for her, so getting in touch with her... I didn't see how it could be done.

It wasn't like I could just walk into an Avery Dawson concert and find her. And even if I did, I was the one who sent her away.

She probably hated my guts.

She probably had a plan for exactly how she was going to make me pay for what I'd done, if she ever saw me again.

And I wouldn't even blame her for it.

## CHAPTER 30



## Every

I held my hands up as the last notes of the last song died away, grinning out at the crowd and letting their applause rush over me. This was it, I told myself. This was what I'd been waiting for. This was where the high always got me. In their excited faces, their screams. The moments when they sang my songs with me.

I'd never been happier than I was when I was on stage, and even if I wasn't feeling that right now, I knew my fans were counting on it. So I did the best I could to *look* like I was enjoying the hell out of the night.

"Thank you, Lexington-Fayette!" I shouted into the microphone. "I have to say, playing big stadiums is amazing, but I have never loved anything more than playing a small club like this, where I can actually see the people I'm playing for!"

The crowd went wild at that, as I'd expected them to, and I laughed. A real laugh, this time.

"You've been amazing, and I hope you'll all see me again when I'm back in town!"

I waved again, turning to look at individual faces in the crowd, and then hustled off the stage, listening to the audience calling for another encore behind me. I'd already done two encores, though, and I didn't think I'd make it through another one.

They were just going to have to be satisfied with what they'd got out of me. I didn't have the energy or the pep for

anything more. Honestly, I was surprised I'd gotten through the entire show, with how I was feeling right now.

I headed for the table that held the water, anxious for a drink and some peace and quiet. I already knew what I wanted for my night. I was going to go back to my trailer, order some barbeque and whiskey, and spend the rest of the night by myself. I loved life on the road, the excitement and rush of it, but right now I desperately needed time with myself.

I needed to have a firm conversation with myself. Get my head in the game. And I wasn't going to be able to do with that with a ton of other people hanging around.

I'd just reached the table when a hand grabbed my arm and twirled me around, and I found myself engulfed in the arms of someone who had just spend an awful lot of time sweating in front of stage lights.

"That," Scott said, "was the best show you've ever put on. I'm sure of it. You sounded amazing."

I pulled back, annoyed at the intrusion. I wasn't on hugging terms with any of my band mates, and Scott knew it.

He was also either lying or clueless. I'd gotten through the show, but it hadn't been a good one. My voice had been rough and my energy had been down. I was a mess. And the fans deserved better.

I also suspected that anyone else in the band—and Parker, and probably the roadies who were here—would have noticed that I hadn't been up to my usual standards

So what the hell was Scott doing? And why did he think he had the right to hug me? I'd told the guys in my band a long time ago that I didn't appreciate being forced into shows of affection.

Particularly when the hugger was covered in sweat.

"It wasn't a great show, Scott, and I don't appreciate the sweaty hug," I said bluntly.

His face fell and then turned angry, and I backed away. I couldn't blame him, really. That had been rude of me, and I

was never rude to the guys . In fact, I prided myself on always putting a happy face on everything, regardless of how I was feeling.

At least I had before.

Before I was so sad.

The worst part was, I couldn't even claim to be ignorant of the change. I was miserable, and my misery had a first name. *J-A-C-K-S-O-N*, I sang to myself. It was stupid and pointless and masochistic to even be thinking about him right now, but I also couldn't seem to stop doing it.

The harder I tried *not* to think about him, the more he was in my mind, with his dark eyes and wry smile and gruff voice. I wanted to know why he'd done what he did. And I wanted to know how he felt about me. Whether there had been something between us, or if it had just been in my head.

Wishful thinking.

I was very, very worried that it was the latter. He hadn't even tried to contact me since he shoved me out his front door, and that didn't seem to bode well for that spark between us having been real. If it had been, surely he would have been desperate to talk to me. No, he didn't have my phone number, but there were tons of ways he could have found me. The hotel. My label. My managers.

Hell, he could have bought a ticket to one of my shows and pushed and shoved his way to the front of the crowd, just to get my attention. It was what I would have done if someone I loved was out there touring and I had a bone-deep need to see them and tell them how I felt.

He hadn't. He hadn't done any of those things. And maybe that was my answer right there. Maybe I didn't actually need to see him or ask how he felt about me or why he'd done what he'd done.

Maybe I should just take his lack of action for what it was: a sign that he didn't miss me, and actually hate my guts.

For reasons I still didn't understand.

## CHAPTER 31

## *Every*

I got away from Scott as quickly as I could, both to keep myself from saying anything else and to... well, get away from Scott, and made for my dressing room. This wasn't a big club, so the dressing room also doubled as a storeroom—with a mirror in one corner for putting on my makeup ahead of time—but I hadn't cared.

It had given me a place to be alone, and when you're on tour with a bunch of guys and sharing a tour bus with them for hours at a time, a place to be alone is basically like heaven on earth. Sharing that tour bus had become even harder once we left Arberry, and by the time we'd arrived in Lexington, and then Lexington-Fayette, I'd been desperate to be in a room where I didn't have to pretend to be okay.

A room where I could sit and stare at the wall, wondering what the hell had gone wrong.

Though by the time we arrived here, I'd been trying really, really hard to get out of that particular funk and into something that felt more like anger and frustration. Because I'd never been good at being sad. It just didn't fit right. No, I wasn't great at being angry, either—it went against pretty much every aspect of my personality—but at least there was forward momentum to it.

A willingness to forget, and do something with your life other than sitting around feeling sorry for yourself.

I walked over to the small vanity in front of the equally small mirror, leaned my hands on it, and looked up and into the eyes of my reflection. “You have got to get it together,” I told

Mirror Avery sternly. “You have to remember what you’ve done to get here and how hard you’ve worked, and take advantage of it, instead of walking around like some sad sack of potatoes.”

“Are potatoes generally sad, or just the ones in your particular sack?” a voice asked from the doorway.

I would have jumped in surprise or even embarrassment at having been caught talking to myself, but there was no need. Because the owner of that particular voice already knew exactly what was wrong with me.

Or at least enough of it to be able to guess.

She also wouldn’t judge me for it. Because Parker Pelton had known me for a long time, and she’d been my best friend for pretty much all of it.

When I looked up at her, I could see that she was also worried. Because in all the years she’d known me, and through everything we’d done, she’d never seen me take anything this hard. God, even in the years of being on the road and staying in crappy hotel rooms that could barely fit the two of us, I’d managed to stay optimistic. I’d never allowed either of us to get depressed, because I’d known that at some point, it had to get better.

I’d also never allowed myself to get wrapped up over a freaking *guy*.

So basically the first time I fell for someone, I also got my heart broken. Right before a major tour where I was headlining. And during the period of time when I was supposed to be writing new material.

Wasn’t that just a kick in the pants.

“That bad, huh?” she asked softly, making her way into the dressing-slash-storage room and closing the door behind her.

“Oh, you know. Just gathering material for my new record,” I told her, forcing a grin onto my face. “All good country songs are about boys who hurt you, right?”

Parker forced an answering smile onto her own face and slid into a chair. “Well, half of them are. The other half are about happy endings.”

I sat down in the chair in front of the vanity. “Something tells me I’m not going to be getting one of those anytime soon. Which means this album is going to be all about the heartbreak side of things.”

She made a face that told me she understood... but also didn’t want to poke too hard at a wound I still hadn’t completely revealed to her. Sure, I’d told her a little bit about what had happened. I’d told her where Jackson had taken me and what we’d done there while she was laying in bed coughing her lungs up.

I hadn’t told her that he’d let me in on secrets he hadn’t told anyone else. And I sure as hell hadn’t told her how I’d felt about him by the end of that week in his house.

Part of it was that I was trying to protect myself, I knew. And the other part of it?

Well, why tell your best friend about a love affair that was never going to come to anything? What was the point? Just a waste of breath and a confirmation that the first time I allowed myself to fall in love, the guy I was in love with had rejected me. I’d never been rejected by anyone before, and I wasn’t exactly keen to have this first experience spread around to the entire band.

Not that Parker would do that. But even so.

“He was older than me, you know,” Parker said softly. “By the time I went to the elementary school, and then middle school, and then the high school, he’d already moved on to the next step on the ladder. So I didn’t know him personally.”

I looked up, knowing I had my heart in my eyes. I’d nearly forgotten that Parker had grown up in the same town as Jackson.

Which meant she might know more about him than I did.

“But there were stories,” I guessed.

She nodded carefully. “There were stories. He was the kid everyone felt sorry for. No dad. Abusive mom. Everyone knew she was on drugs, and that she hit him whenever she was drunk. He didn’t get to go to school with the rest of the kids but he came into town for supplies, and people saw the bruises.”

“Why didn’t anyone save him?” I whispered, horrified at the idea that they’d known what was going on, and done nothing.

Another shrug. “I guess they didn’t think they could. It’s not that easy to just take a kid away from his mom, especially if that kid isn’t willing to tell the truth about what’s going on, and from what I heard, he was always...”

“Stoic,” I guessed. “Too brave for his own good. Not willing to let anyone in.”

She pointed at me. “Exactly. People asked him, but he always said he was fine. Said he could handle it.”

How very much like Jackson, I thought with a bit of a smile. Never wanting to admit that he needed help, or that he might need someone else. Because admitting that you needed someone else meant letting that someone else in, and as far as he was concerned, that was a good way to get hurt.

The pieces that I’d been collecting of him, all the things that I’d seen and not understood, started falling into place.

And the picture they were creating...

God, he needed a friend more than I’d realized. More than that. He needed someone to say they’d take care of him, and mean it. He needed someone who actually cared enough to put him first.

Parker tipped her head at me. “Why do you care, anyhow? I thought he was just some guy you had to stay with when the bus was broken. Some guy you couldn’t wait to get away from.”

I frowned. “I never said that. Why the hell would you think I thought that?”



It was the furthest thing from the truth. Okay sure, it might have been true at first, but after that first day... No. I'd never put it that way in my mind. And Parker should have known that. She'd been right there. Sick, but right there to see that I was out with him every day.

"What do you mean why would I think that? Scott said that's what you said."

My heart dropped right into my cowboy boots. "Scott said what?"

"Scott said you told him you'd hated every minute of it. Said you thought Jackson was a stick-in-the-mud cowboy and couldn't wait to get away from him."

"And you believed that?" I asked, so surprised that my voice hardly wavered. "Parker, you actually heard that and... *believed it?*"

She opened her mouth... and then closed it again. And when she opened it again, she was talking a whole lot more quickly. "I didn't know. I didn't think it sounded like you, and it didn't match with the things I knew, but hell, I'd been sick, so I didn't know if I'd been imagining things. And then Scott said that like he knew them for a fact, and I—"

"Oh my God." I jerked forward and grabbed her arm, interrupting her. "When did he tell you that?"

"As soon as we got on the bus. You were in the bathroom and we were just pulling out of Jackson's driveway."

My mind raced back to that day. The morning that the bus was due to arrive. Jackson and I had been fresh off that afternoon on the mountain and I'd wanted to talk to him about seeing whether we could stay in touch. I was positive he'd wanted that too. Positive that he'd at least consider it.

And instead he'd come storming into my house talking about how it was time for me to get out of there and how I'd probably be happy to be finished with my stay.

And my band had already been there when I went downstairs. Waiting to get on the bus.

My band.

Scott.

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.

“Why would he say that?” I whispered. “Why would he say that to you? What if he said that to Jackson? What if... What if...”

“What if Jackson kicked us all out and hasn’t called you since because Scott told him you thought he was just some dumb cowboy and couldn’t wait to get away from you?” Parker asked. “I can tell you why Scott said it. He’s been in love with you since day one, Avery. And you would have seen it if you’d bothered to look around you sometimes.”

I slapped my palms to my eyes, groaning.

Of course I hadn’t seen it. I wouldn’t, would I? I was here working on my career, trying to move forward into the life I wanted, and I’d never wanted a man along for that particular ride. I’d wanted to go it alone, make my own path.

Until Jackson.

When I uncovered my eyes, Parker was staring at me with her mouth open. “Why would you care if Jackson thought you’d said that?” she asked quietly.

I just stared at her, unwilling to answer.

Unwilling to even look at the answer in my own heart. It was too big, too terrifying. Too real.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “You’re in love with him.”

The moment she said it, the truth slammed its way into my heart... and my brain finally started moving. Hell’s bells, she was right. I was in love with him. In love with him and yearning for him like I’d never yearned for anything in my entire life.

Even my career.

I’d never wanted anything as badly as I wanted Jackson. And instead of going after him, instead of demanding that he tell me what had changed and why he was acting the way he

was, I was sitting here in a store room in Lafayette-Fayette crying about him not calling me.

That wasn't who I was.

That wasn't even *remotely* who I was.

“We have to go back,” I told her quietly, counting on my best friend to jump right along with my train of thought. “Parker, I have to know what he’s thinking. I have to know if he feels the same way I do.”

She took half a beat to catch up to me, and then grabbed my arm and jerked me up. “You’re right. And I know exactly how we’re going to get there.”

We raced out of the room, me still in my stage clothes and makeup and my brain racing ahead of us toward the road and Arberry and Jackson and an answer to the questions burning their way through my heart.

I was in love with that man. And I needed to know whether he was in love with me, too... or if he regretted the night he’d decided to play hero and then invited me into his life.

## CHAPTER 32

## *Jackson*

I got to the wall of the living room and spun on my toe to walk the other way, passing the fireplace for the millionth time and pausing only when I got to the table in front of the couch. I swept the mug of hot chocolate off the table and kept walking, letting the warmth of the mug make its way into my skin, and from there into my bones.

Bones that had felt cold and brittle since the morning of Avery's departure.

The longer I thought about it, the stupider I felt for having believed that boy when he said what he said. I should have known better. Should have given Avery the benefit of the doubt. Should have asked her before jumping to any conclusions.

Because if she'd really thought that way, if she'd really been in a hurry to get out of my house, she would have told me so. I'd known right from the start that Avery was a girl who was told anyone who would listen what she thought about everything, and expected the listeners to just accept what she'd said. They might not agree with her, but I didn't think anyone had ever given her trouble for sharing her opinion.

No one had ever told her she wasn't allowed to have an opinion, or that they didn't want to hear it. And she'd definitely never been hit for speaking up.

I put that thought back in the locked chest where I normally kept it, and kept pacing.

Yep, if I'd been smarter, I would have gone right up to her room and asked her if it had all been an act, and I was willing

to bet the whole farm, so to speak, on her having told me the truth. And probably smiling when she said it, looking at me with those wide blue eyes and knowing that I wouldn't be angry at her for telling the truth.

But I hadn't, had I?

No, because I was even stupider than my mother had always told me I was. Instead of asking Avery, the girl I'd started to care about, whether she cared for me too, I'd believed some bum off the street—okay, he was her band mate, but still—when he said she didn't care about me.

“Idiot,” I muttered, punching the other wall when I got to it, then spinning around again.

God, I was dumb.

Even dumber when I added that I hadn't bothered to get her phone number or email address, and so had no way to get in touch with her. Sure, she was a world-famous country star, and that made it easier to track where she was. But it also made it virtually impossible to speak to her in person. I couldn't just call her manager—who hated me—or driver—who also probably hated me by now—and tell them I needed to talk to Avery and tell her how sorry I was and how wrong I'd been.

I certainly couldn't talk to her band mates, who must have all been laughing at me, the lovesick fool dumb enough to fall for a singer on her way through town.

A crack of thunder ripped through the sky outside, and rain began to sheet down on the other side of the window, but I barely cast a glance at it. I had the cattle in the barns already, having known that this storm was coming, and had even constructed a better way to get them from the fields up to the barns so I could do it on my own.

Honestly, the storm just made me think of Avery, and her promise to protect me from the thunder. Even when she hadn't known the full truth of why it bothered me.

Hell, she hadn't even known *me*, yet. And she'd still snuggled into me, offering me her warmth and protection from

the world outside.

And wasn't that just Avery in a hand basket? The girl had enough spark and love in her to share it with everyone in the vicinity, and then some. She'd been doing it the entire time she was here, from helping me with the cattle to going into town and helping townsfolk she didn't even know.

She had enough spark to bring me up out of the fog I'd been living with and make me want to see the world again.

And here I was, brooding in my house about wanting her back and not doing anything about it. After having sent her away for no good reason.

Out on her tour, where she'd be meeting thousands of people and maybe even finding a man. A man who didn't have baggage like I did, or a stubborn streak as long as the Mississippi.

A man who couldn't possibly give her all the things I'd give her. Because I'd known from the moment she left that I would have crawled across burning coals to have her back. Cut every inch of my skin to shreds if it meant I got five more minutes of that smile.

Admitted whatever faults she needed me to admit just so she'd give me a chance to fix them.

Because when she left, she'd created a hole in my life that no amount of whiskey had been able to close up.

I jerked myself to a stop, forcing my brain to actually work rather than running around in circles. And then I had an idea. An idea that might actually work.

I grabbed my phone off the table, brought up a search engine, and typed in her name, then the name of her tour. I needed to know where she was right now, and how long she'd be there.

And then I needed to figure out how long it would take me to get there and find her.

## CHAPTER 33



**T**his rain was going to kill me.

I skidded through the intersection, not even bothering with the brakes, and hit the next puddle with so much speed that the water washed up over the hood of the truck and onto the windshield.

“Good thing we have the windows up,” Parker snorted from beside me.

I didn’t bother to answer her. Controlling this beast of a truck was already more than I should have taken on, and I was a little bit afraid that if I took my mind off the driving and put it toward conversation, I’d end up overturned in a ditch, with water pouring through the broken windows and Parker and I drowning.

The truck didn’t belong to anyone I knew. Lucas’ brother lived in Lexington and had a friend with a truck he wasn’t currently using, and when Parker and I had run to Lucas and Amos, talking five million miles an hour about needing a way to get back to Arberry, Lucas had made the call. His brother’s friend had been surprisingly happy to lend the truck to us—probably because the name ‘Avery Dawson’ was thrown around liberally—and at 4 this morning, Parker and I had found ourselves in the cab of an enormous red truck, hauling ass for Arberry and Jackson Pole.

At least I hoped we were.

The rain had started within ten minutes of us getting into the truck, and as soon as we were out of town the coverage had become spotty. Parker had downloaded the directions to

Arberry while we still had coverage, but out here, without any signal, it felt like our chances of getting lost were...

Too good for comfort.

And that made me distinctly uncomfortable, considering everything that was riding on this particular trip.

“How long is it going to take us to get there again?” I asked, feeling breathless and overstimulated.

God. I felt like I was running there on my own two feet rather than driving. What the hell was that about?

Parker, who'd already answered this question for me three times, groaned. “Three hours, give or take. More if we get lost. Less if you keep driving like a bat out of hell.”

Instead of slowing down, like she'd maybe expected, I hit the accelerator harder, grinning as I did it. Parker shrieked and grabbed for the bar on the roof above her door, and I saw her shoot me a look of pure disgust.

“So, faster it is, then?”

I turned my grin on her, just for a moment. “Faster it is. I've got a man to find, and I don't particularly want to take my time about it. If it's all the same to you.”

A grin curved the corner of her mouth, and she shrugged. “Hey, what are best friends for if not to go on an insane road trip to find the love of a girl's life and possibly die in a fiery crash on the way there?”

I turned back to the road, my grin turning more determined. “We won't die in a fiery crash, Park. It's raining.”

\* \* \*

We got to Jackson's house in two hour and sixteen minutes.

And I wasn't about to apologize for having broken every speed limit on the way there. I also wasn't going to apologize for whatever damage we'd done to the undercarriage or shocks

of Lucas' brother's friend's truck on the country roads, which I'd refused to take slowly.

If there was damage, I'd pay him back.

I went skidding over the bridge we knew so well, and then swerved around the turn into Jackson's driveway, wondering exactly how top-heavy this truck might be. Then I hit the gas again and roared up the hill to his house, my heart roaring nearly as loud as the engine of the truck. This was it. The moment of truth, the moment when I'd find out whether Jackson had missed me at all or had gone on with his life like nothing had happened and he'd definitely never had a girl he cared one whit for staying in his house.

This was the moment when I finally laid my heart bare to him, to take or send away again.

The more rational part of my brain thought I was completely insane to be taking the risk. My heart, however, was all in on this plan. And regardless of what happened, I didn't think I'd regret being here.

I needed to know.

And I didn't think he was going to send me away again. My gut was telling me that he'd have realized he made a mistake. I just hoped I was right about that.

We hit the top of the hill and I screeched to a stop... then sat in the truck for a moment, just staring at the door of Jackson's house.

If I'd thought he was going to come rushing out the moment I arrived, I guessed I'd been wrong. The doors remained stubbornly closed, the farm around us quiet now that the truck's thunderous engine was silent.

Right, but Jackson wouldn't have expected me to arrive in a truck. So he wouldn't have heard it and assumed it was me.

That had to be it.

I got slowly out of the truck, my eyes on the doors ahead of me and my heart strangely still in my chest, like it was

holding its breath. Waiting to see whether I'd made a colossal mistake or not.

Still nothing from the house. Still no Jackson.

I trudged up the steps, the silence bearing down on me, and lifted my hand to knock.

"He's not here," a voice said suddenly. "Help you with something?"

Surprised, I turned toward the voice to find Connor walking around the corner of the house, work gloves in one hand and a shovel slung over his shoulder. When he saw me, his face went from confused to happy... and then back again.

"Hey, Pixie," he said, using the nickname he'd given me on the day we were helping the townspeople. This was followed, though, by a frown. "Aren't you supposed to be on tour right now? Singing to the masses and all that?"

I nodded, but skipped past the question with one of my own. "Jackson's not here?"

A shadow passed over his face, and I could see him start to say something... and then stop himself. "Went on some sort of road trip," he said slowly.

Obviously a lie. Or at least only a partial truth.

What wasn't Connor telling me? What was he covering up?

And where the hell had Jackson gone?

I felt all my plans—such as they were—beginning to crash down around me. I'd thrown my career and another show to the wind and told the record label I was sick just to get out of the next performance so I could come here to see Jackson. I'd risked everything to drive back to Arberry and find out whether the time we spent together meant as much to him as it did to me.

I'd come back to tell him I loved him.

And he wasn't even here.

## CHAPTER 34

## Jackson

I yanked the wheel of my truck and turned too fast, nearly tipping the thing over in my haste to get back up my driveway. Once I hit the part that went straight again, up the hill, I jammed my foot down on the accelerator and pushed the truck as hard as it would go up toward the house.

Yes, it was nearly suicidal to drive this fast on this particular section of road, especially when I would get there sooner or later regardless. But I'd been miserable for days and driving for hours, in pursuit of the girl I'd been waiting my entire life for.

I didn't have any patience for this last stretch of pavement before I got to see her again.

I came to a sliding jerk in the driveway and sat there for a moment, breathing hard and doing my best to take in the scene in front of me. Parker was standing next to an enormous red truck that didn't belong to them and Connor was facing something on the steps of my house.

Something I couldn't see.

Someone I couldn't see, though I knew exactly who it was.

And at that thought, I was out of my truck and striding for the door to my house, my heart beating hard and steady against my ribs like it knew exactly what we were doing and how we were going to do it.

Of course if I'd listened to my heart right from the start, we wouldn't be having to do any of this. So I guessed it was probably about time to start doing that.

I got close enough to be able to see past the edge of the house that had been blocking my view, and I'd been right. There she was, her curls wild and untamed in the moisture and wind of the morning, her face flushed as she looked up at Connor, her mouth opened in shock and surprise.

“What do you mean he's not here?” she asked breathlessly.

I came to a sharp stop, suddenly not sure I should bust in on her like this. I didn't know how she hadn't heard me drive up—my truck wasn't exactly quiet—but maybe she'd been so intent on whatever Connor was saying that she hadn't been paying attention to anything else. Maybe she'd written it off as just freeway noise.

It didn't make any sense out here in the country, but it must be common where she lived. Maybe she'd just become immune to the sound of cars flying around turns and skidding to a stop.

Then Connor's eyes flicked up over her shoulder to meet mine, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Speak of the devil,” he said, not doing much to restrain the grin trying to crawl over his face.

And Avery was turning, her hair blowing across her face and her eyes searching for whatever he was talking about, and my breath caught in my throat. God, I'd forgotten how beautiful she was. Three days and I'd forgotten how sharp her features were, and the blue of her eyes. The way it shot right through you, made you feel all warm inside.

Was I the only one who noticed that?

I hoped I was. Because that girl was mine, and as long as she agreed to it, I was never going to let anyone else touch her again.

We were moving toward each other within seconds, both of us drawn like we were magnets, the force between us irresistible. She stopped about a foot from me, though, and I drew to a halt as well. I didn't want to. My fingertips were itching with the need to touch her, my skin absolutely buzzing with it.

But there were things I needed to say, first. Things she needed to hear... and things I needed to hear from her, too.

“Jackson,” she whispered. Then she tipped her head. “Wait, I thought you were on some sort of road trip or something?”

I laughed at the frank, confused, and brutally honest tone of her voice. It was so Avery. “I was,” I answered. “I was on my way to Lexington to see a show. And then a funny thing happened. As I was driving, I stopped at a stop sign and happened to look across the road, and what do you suppose I saw? Some girls driving a truck that was far too large for them, both of them looking so determined that I wouldn’t have wanted to get in their way. Only I wasn’t sure they’d be able to see me. The girl driving the truck was so tiny that I could really only see her hair over the steering wheel.”

That did the trick. Avery walked right up to me and started poking me in the chest.

“And what do you think I was doing, driving a truck that was too big for me, hm? I was coming all the way back here to see you, and I had to find a way to do it without having a ride, and I borrowed a truck and I could barely see over the wheel, but I didn’t want to let Parker drive because I knew she wouldn’t go fast enough, but I had to get here to ask you why you—”

I yanked her to me and kissed her, letting my lips do the answering for me, and I felt her stiffen... and then melt into me, her mouth moving under mine as if we were having an entire conversation, without any words. A conversation where I apologized for being an idiot and believing something I never should have, and she apologized for letting me be an idiot and believe that, and me apologizing again for never having told her how I was feeling about her, and her promising that in the future, she’d make me tell her.

And when I pulled back, I saw her staring at me with something that I’d never seen before.

Love, I realized. She was staring at me with love written all over her face.



“Avery,” I whispered. “I love you, and I don’t even know when it happened. Maybe on that first day or maybe not until the last day. Hell, maybe it didn’t happen until you left, I don’t know. And I think I don’t know because I’ve never loved anyone before and I don’t know how to do it. I can’t promise that I’ll always do it right. But I don’t think I can live without you. Now that I’ve found you, I don’t think I want to do this by myself.”

She reached a single finger up and brushed it down my nose. “Then you don’t have to,” she answered simply. “I love you, too. And I guess that means I’ll always be around to take care of you. Protect you from the thunder. Make you hot chocolate the right way.”

I cupped her jaw and stared into her beautiful eyes, marveling at how much personality she’d managed to fit into that tiny body. “You,” I told her softly, “are my hero.”

She smiled. “I’ll be yours if you’ll be mine.”

At that, I had to laugh, because she was right; she might be saving me from myself, but I’d saved her first, on a rainy night when I rushed out into the rain to rescue a bunch of kids who’d managed to get themselves washed off a bridge.

I’d never thought I was going to rescue the woman I’d fall in love with.

But I guessed life had decided I’d earned a little something good in my life.

“Deal.”

# *Epilogue*

## Six Months Later

I looked out over the crowd, grinning at them and letting the music from the last song die down. Then I gave them my signature send-off.

“Arberry, that’s it for me tonight. Thanks so much for coming out. You guys are...” I felt the tears welling in my eyes already, and fought to push them back down.

At least until I got through this speech.

“You’re my best friends and my family. You’re the people who make life worth living. And I’m so thankful that you welcomed me into your little town.”

I let my eyes linger on the crowd, feeling the truth of it in my bones. Those weren’t just the people of Arberry anymore. They weren’t the nameless strangers I was helping after a storm. Those were my friends and neighbors, the family that ran the grocery store and the owners of the next ranch over. They were the people I’d helped once, who had now welcomed me home, with open arms.

Sure, my old friends were in the crowd, too. Parker was on her phone, probably arranging something important, and Olivia was... I frowned, cocking my head at her. Was it just me, or was Olivia doing her best to get away from Connor, who was evidently trying to talk to her about something?

Strange.

I put that away as something I'd ask her about later, and started searching the crowd for the most important attendee. Jackson and I had decided to throw this barbecue in celebration of me returning home.

Or... Well, it was more accurate, I guessed, to say it was in honor of me making Arberry my home. I'd finished my tour—with Jackson meeting me wherever I was playing on the weekend, so we could see each other while I was on the road—and was now on a break from touring so I could write music.

During the last stop in the tour, Jackson and I had talked about it and decided that it made the most sense for me to come back home to his house, rather than going back to Nashville. Sure, I still had my apartment there—I would have been crazy to get rid of it—but this ranch, the site of my first night with Jackson, was the place I called home, these days. I'd be going back out on tour in a couple of months, and then it would be right back here.

Maybe to help Jackson run the ranch. Maybe to start a family. maybe just to write more music. We hadn't really talked about that, yet. The important thing, the thing that mattered more to me than anything else in the world, was that we'd be together, no matter what happened. I'd finally found someone strong and secure enough to keep me grounded, and Jackson had figured out how to trust me enough to fly with me.

I was deliriously happy. But I was also pretty sure Jackson had something else planned for tonight.

I might have happened across a small velvet box in his underwear drawer last week. And I might have agreed to the party tonight with the sneaking suspicion that 'party' was code for 'having our friends there when I propose.'

When I found Jackson in the crowd, heading quickly for the stage with a sly smile on his lips that told me he was definitely up to something, I laughed.

He wasn't subtle, that one, and since he'd decided to let me into his heart, he'd become terrible at keeping secrets.

But I wouldn't change it for the world.

When he reached the stage, I turned to him with my hands on my hips. "Trying to share my stage with me now, Jackson?"

His lips twitched. "I'd never even attempt it. I'd be too afraid of you pushing me right off it and into the mud."

Some scattered laughter in the crowd told me that everyone else was listening, probably expecting exactly what I was expecting, and I flashed my best smile at them. "Me? I would never."

"Liar!" I heard Parker shout.

I stuck my tongue out at her. Whose side was she on, anyhow? Then I turned back to Jackson. "So if you're not up here to share my stage, what are you doing?"

He didn't answer. He just dropped to one knee, pulled that velvet box out of his pocket, and held it up. "I'm here to tell you that you're my hero. You always have been. I didn't know it at the time, but you started saving me the day you showed up in my life. Uninvited."

He cast a lifted eyebrow at the crowd, and there was some laughter, but it was hushed. Expectant.

When he turned back to me, his eyes were wet with us he'd tears and his face was serious. No more clowning. No more performing. "Marry me, Avery. Marry me and make me the happiest man in the world. And I'll take care of you for the rest of our lives. I'll make you hot chocolate the way you like it and take you riding in the rain and drive you up the highest mountains, just for the view. I'll protect you from the thunder. Pull you out of any buses you crash. And I'll love you forever."

My knees gave out and I sank to the stage in front of him, too overwhelmed to keep standing. Putting my fingertips to his face, I shook my head. "*I'll* protect *you* from the thunder. But I'll let you do all those other things. Yes, I'll marry you."

He gathered me into his arms and hugged me so tightly I almost couldn't breathe.

Or maybe that was the breathlessness that came with knowing that I was going to marry this man, who had been so unwilling to play the hero... and yet had jumped into it with both feet when we needed him.

He thought I'd saved him, but the truth was, we'd saved each other.

And I didn't think that part was ever, ever going to end.

## About the Author

Shelby Flynn is a fan of red wine, cheesecake, perfect hash browns, and really good punk rock. She's also obsessed with everything piratical—though she refuses to admit any actual connection to pirates. She studied English and Film at UCLA and, when forced to choose a career, chose publishing rather than teaching or being a film maker. Shelby lives in San Diego with her husband, dogs, and far too many cats.

*Hero in Waiting* is Shelby's first book, though she hopes it will be followed by many more.



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