

KATHARINE SADLER

How  
to  
DATE  
a  
Billionaire

# How to Date a Billionaire

Katharine Sadler

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## CHAPTER ONE

Bailey gripped the cardboard box tighter with one arm and used the other to pull herself up another rung of the ladder toward the barn loft. Her arm shook with the weight, her biceps burning. She should have asked the college kids to stick around another day, but she hadn't realized how much work there was still to be done.

"Mom," seven-year-old Lily whined from the foot of the ladder. "Melody ate the last cookie."

"No, I didn't," nine-year-old Melody shouted. "You ate it. You just don't remember."

"I saw you." Lily's voice rose to a painful pitch. "Mom, I saw her eat it. That was supposed to be my cookie. You made them for me."

Bailey made the cookies because Lily had been having nightmares and she could think of nothing better than filling their small rental house with the warm scent of melting chocolate to cheer her up.

"They aren't just yours." Melody's shrieking tone meant she was about to truly lose it and go after her sister with slaps and kicks. "Everything isn't for you all the time, Lily, with your perfect hair and your perfect clothes. You probably aren't even having nightmares. You're probably just trying to make Mom feel sorry for you, so she gives you everything, just like she always does."

Bailey sighed and tried to calm down while also trying to make it up another rung of the ladder without dropping the box. The girls had been arguing all day, and she wanted to scream or curl up in a ball in the corner and cry, but that wasn't an option for a single mom. There was nothing she could say that would solve this situation from up on the ladder, unless...

"Girls." She spoke just loud enough to be heard over their arguing. "Can you count the horses in the pasture? Lizard was

nosing at the fence yesterday. I'm worried she found another hole and escaped."

"I'll go." Lily's voice wobbled with concern and Bailey winced. That child worried about everything and Bailey had just made it worse with a lie that was supposed to distract them.

"No, I'll go," Melody said. "I'm older."

"You both go," Bailey said. "Four eyes are better than two, but hurry because we don't want Lizard escaping again."

That got them moving, their fight forgotten for the moment. Bailey let out a shaky breath and pushed up the last two rungs of the ladder. She shoved the box of sports equipment into the loft they were using as a storage area for the fall and winter months.

Bailey was alone at the ranch with her girls, cleaning up from the first summer of Grayson's camp for foster kids and their parents. Next on her agenda was to prepare for the fall when guests would start arriving to stay in the big old ranch house Grayson had turned into a bed-and-breakfast and the cabins they used for summer campers and winter guests.

After eighteen months in Rawlton, Bailey and her girls' year spent living in Grayson's house in Vegas seemed far behind them. As much as Bailey loved being outside and working with horses, sometimes she missed the conveniences of living in a city.

As she started down the ladder, arms shaking, her phone buzzed against her butt. Hopping to the concrete floor of the barn, she slid it from her back pocket.

The repair shop's number shone on the screen. She put the phone to her ear, feeling slightly sick. "This is Bailey Tiller."

"Hey, there, Sweetheart. This is Ray from Thistledown's Auto. Got the final diagnostics on your truck."

She shuddered. Ray was her age, but he talked to her like they were still living in the nineteen fifties. She would claw and fight against the idea that a woman *needed* a man until her

dying day, but Ray made her wish she still had her ex-husband Glenn around.

Ray wouldn't talk to Glenn like he was a child, and he sure as hell wouldn't try to gouge him for car repairs. "What's the damage?"

"Well, now, honey, I'm not going to get into the nitty-gritty details that will confuse you, but your brakes are shot. We're looking at repairs that are gonna cost you in the region of two thousand dollars."

She sucked in a sharp breath as she hurried to the office and grabbed her notebook. She flung it open, taking a deep breath to calm the pounding of her heart at that number.

Ray had gouged her before when she needed new windshield wipers and an oil change. She'd found out after she'd paid him that he'd jacked the price way above normal for those repairs. It was her own fault for letting Glenn handle all the auto repairs during their marriage.

"Well, now, sugar," she said. "I'm going to need you to tell me exactly what you're doing to my truck before I'm going to fork over that kind of money." Money she did not have. Money she was going to have to ask her billionaire brother to give her. Again.

For her kids, though, she'd give up all sense of pride and ask.

"You sure, darling? Is there a Mr. Tiller around I can talk to?"

She punched the air and ground her teeth together. Fucker. He knew there was no Mr. Tiller in the picture, because he'd suggested the first time she dropped her truck off that the mister be the one to bring it in.

Unfortunately, her third-hand truck had squeaky brakes, and she'd been too nervous about how long they'd last to drive it to the only other auto repair shop in the area thirty miles away. The middle of nowhere was great for Grayson's ranch, but terrible for car repairs.

“There is no man,” she said. “Just me. So go real slow and tell me step-by-step exactly what work my truck needs and how much each item costs.”

Ray sighed long and hard. “I’ve got other customers today, sugar. You’re just going to have to trust me on this.”

She fisted her free hand to keep from yelling at the condescending prick. “I’m not giving you any money until you explain it to me line item by line item. I can’t afford over two grand to repair this truck, and I need to know what’s absolutely necessary and what isn’t.”

“Fine.” In a grating, annoyed tone, he gave her the list of parts she’d need and how much each one cost with labor added.

She scribbled it all down, even the ones she wasn’t sure how to spell. “Thank you. I’m going to look into this. Please don’t touch my truck until I call you back.”

“Are you serious? You can’t drive that truck unless—”

“It’s my truck and I’ll decide what you do to her.”

He grunted and hung up.

She took a moment to smile because he’d lost his cool before she did. It was the little things. It had to be.

A quick check of her bank account showed a much larger number than she’d been expecting. Relief rolled through her, but quick on its heels was annoyance.

She hit Grayson’s contact and waited, tapping her foot the whole time.

“Hey, Bay. How’s it going?”

“You overpaid me, Gray. Again.”

“You sent away the college kids, so you’re doing the work of six people.”

“I sent away the college kids because there’s not enough work for six people to do at the moment.”

“You do the work of six people every day, either way, Bailey. I’d pay you that much even if you weren’t family. Besides, don’t you need to get your truck fixed?”

She stomped her foot, but she didn’t really feel angry. If the money helped keep her girls safe and healthy, she couldn’t turn it away. She just hated to be dependent on her brother. “It’s too much, Grayson.”

“It’s not. You did an amazing job this summer. And I don’t want you looking for another job. I don’t want to lose you and I’m willing to pay whatever you need to keep you.”

That gave her pause. “Really? You aren’t just saying that because I’m your sister?”

He huffed out a laugh. “Really, Bay. If you couldn’t do the job, do you think I’d let you keep doing it? I would have suggested you try another position at the ranch. We could use a good accountant, for example. But you’re amazing with the horses and even better with the kids. The parents all love you. They fight over who’s going to get you as their instructor. And —”

“They fight over me?”

“They absolutely do. You’re not a burden, Bailey. You aren’t some dependent I view as taking without giving back. I love having my sister as a part of my business and I’d be increasing your wages to keep you on, even if you didn’t need the money.”

His sincerity echoed over the line, and she felt dizzy with relief and gratitude. If she didn’t have to look for another job, she’d have time to institute some new ideas she had for the ranch and for next summer at the camp. “That is great news, Grayson, because this job is the best one I’ve ever had.” And she meant it. She loved working with the horses and the families. It was so much better than sitting at a desk, crunching numbers all day.

“Good. Now, what do I have to do to convince you and the girls to move into the ranch house?”



“You need all those rooms for the bed-and-breakfast. And, as much as I love you, it’s better if we have our own space.”

He sighed. “Fine. But if you have any ideas about what your dream house might be, let me know.”

“You are not going to build me a house, Grayson Genetti.”

He did a terrible imitation of static over the line. “What... Breaking up... Love you.”

“Love you, too, you goober.”

She’d just started an internet search on brake rotors, because raise or not, she wasn’t going to overpay for car repairs, when an ear-piercing scream broke through the quiet of the empty barn.

Bailey shot to her feet, even as she sighed internally. In her life, a scream like that could mean an injured kid, a fight because one had touched the other, or general rough housing. Maybe other mothers could learn the difference in the screams, but she hadn’t. Not yet.

She raced down the aisle of the barn, unable to even hear her boots hitting concrete over the screams of... Yep, that was Melody. She picked up her pace, because of the two kids, Melody was the quickest to retaliate, and arrived around the other side of the barn just in time to see Melody shove Lily into the manure pile and push her face into the mixture of horse manure and dirty straw Bailey hadn’t yet moved to the composting bins.

“Melody,” Bailey yelled. “Stop it right now!”

Of course, Melody didn’t stop. She was in fight mode, determined to achieve vengeance for whatever Lily had done to her. Bailey grabbed Melody around her little waist to pull her off her sister, but Melody wasn’t a tiny toddler anymore and she didn’t want to stop until Lily was thoroughly covered in manure.

Bailey leaned back with all her weight, trying to yank Melody away, but Melody twisted.

“She started it,” Melody yelled. “She knocked me into the poop first.”

“And you got her back, so let her go.” Bailey twisted and turned, throwing her weight anyway she could to get Melody off her sister.

Without warning, Melody let go of her sister and straightened. Somehow Melody’s feet got tangled with Bailey’s and they both went down, right into the stinking pile of manure.

Lily sat up, screaming, and lunged for her sister, but stopped when she saw her mother also in the pile of manure. Her eyes, the only thing on her face not covered in brown muck, sparkled. She giggled. “What are you doing, Momma?”

Bailey groaned as Melody, quick to anger and just as quick to forget it, burst into laughter along with her sister.

“Hilarious, girls.” Bailey shoved Melody off her lap and pushed to her feet, which wasn’t easy when the surface she was pushing against was less than solid. “Girls? Little help here?”

Her daughters, cheerful now that she was in the muck with them, each offered her a hand and, with their help and the little ab strength she possessed, she managed to stand.

“Girls, how many times have I told you to stay away from the manure? It’s not a—”

“Lily started it. She pushed me into the poop.”

“I bumped into you.” Lily’s eyes widened and filled with tears as she tried to wipe manure off her face and only smeared it around because her hands were also covered in it. “I didn’t mean to make her fall in it.”

And there went Bailey’s damn heart, because she hated to see her girls’ sad and she believed Lily hadn’t meant to push her sister. They were both crabby and overtired and let down by the end of their busy, fun summer. They’d had an entire two months of being campers at their uncle’s amazing camp and in just a couple of weeks, they’d have to go back to school.

“It’s okay. I believe you. Just maybe you both should stay...” Her words trailed off as she looked back through the barn and saw the shaded silhouette of a man. A very large man.

Grayson and his wife Isla were in Washington State and not due back for another few weeks. All the resort and camp employees had left while the place was closed to prepare for a new season. Bailey and her girls were alone at the ranch.

Alone with a very large stranger.

The man could be a potential guest or he could be someone lost, but the pounding of Bailey’s heart and the sick twist of her gut told her he was dangerous. Not that her instincts had been on point for the last... well, she’d never had good instincts, but it wasn’t worth taking a chance.

She slid her cell phone from her back pocket and handed it to Melody. “You girls hide behind the manure pile. If I yell, you dial 911, okay?”

“Momma,” Lily said, her voice small. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s probably nothing, honey, but there’s a stranger here and I don’t know what he wants.”

The fear on her girls’ faces told her she wasn’t doing this right, but she was all out of ideas or calm.

“Just stay out of sight and everything will be okay.” She gave them a nudge toward the other side of the manure pile with her hands on their lower backs and they went, hand-in-hand, like loving sisters now instead of the possessed demons they’d been moments before.

Bailey waited until they were out of sight. Then she stepped into the barn and scanned the area for a weapon. Of course, she’d put the pitchfork neatly away in the tool closet so the girls didn’t hurt themselves with it, and the only thing she found in easy reach was a small hoof pick she’d left out on a worktable.

It would have to do, because the stranger had just stepped into the barn, clearly having seen her. He was wearing ripped jeans that looked more high-fashion than functional and a

clearly vintage Aggressive Assault tour t-shirt. Stubble covered his sharp jawline and his dark hair was long on top, falling to cover his forehead and one eye. The other eye was a striking pale blue that stood out against his tanned olive skin.

She took just a moment to appreciate his beauty, but that moment ended when he gave her a cocky smirk, like he knew exactly what his effect on her had been.

She lifted the hoof pick high and glared. “What the hell are you doing on my property?”

## CHAPTER TWO

The petite woman, covered in mud even to the tips of her wild, blond curls, spread her legs and stared Keating Sullivan down. Even in the dim light of the barn, her eyes shone. Her gaze moved intent over his body as though she was shoveling out his soul for study. He swayed toward the beautiful stranger as though his body was out of his own control.

A beautiful stranger who was making the strangest sound. Was that a growl? Was she holding a tiny hook?

And why the hell was she glaring at him? He hadn't even said anything offensive about the malodorous scent wafting from her yet.

“Hey there. I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm your neighbor, Keating Sull—”

“There you are.” Cherry power walked into the barn in those ridiculous stilettos she insisted on wearing every-fucking-where. “Did you find Sugar Lips, yet?”

Keating huffed. “His name is Zed, and I was just about to ask this nice woman if she's seen him.”

“Isn't Zed a ridiculous name for something as cute as an alpaca?” Cherry crossed the barn and stuck her hand out to the woman covered in mud.

Cherry was young enough to be Keating's daughter, and he had stopped himself many times from offering fatherly advice from how she needed to work on her organizational skills if she wanted to get her business venture off the ground to how she might be taken more seriously as a professional if she stopped wearing such skimpy clothing. She could dress however she wanted, even if she chose a too-short skirt and a sparkly halter top on a ranch.

When had he gotten so damn old and paternal?

He'd hired her on as a favor to a friend, but even he had to admit she'd had some genius ideas already.

“He’s named after the lead singer of my favorite band, Zed Warlock,” Keating said. “He’s just got that lead singer swagger.”

The muddy woman’s shoulders dropped as she shook Cherry’s hand. “Can’t say I’m a fan of either Zed or Sugar Lips. I’ve been called sugar by too many condescending assholes.”

“Which is exactly why we should take it back. Hey, wait...” Cherry leaned in closer. “I know you. Logan’s baby sister, right? Genevieve is my sister.”

The woman nodded. “That’s me. Bailey Tiller. It’s good to see you again, Cherry.”

Cherry shrugged. “That guy back there being all awkward and weird is just worried about his alpaca.” She gave Keating a sympathetic glance. “The little guy is his favorite.”

“Cherry, you know I don’t play favorites.” Keating couldn’t smile, even when Cherry was being utterly ridiculous.

“Sure, sure.”

“I haven’t seen an alpaca,” Bailey said.

“Alright.” Keating slapped his thigh and turned toward the barn entrance, ready to hunt down the fluffy escape artist. “Mind if we look around your property for him?”

“Actually, I do—”

“Mama?” A little girl, even more covered in mud than Bailey, poked her head into the other end of the barn. “Do I need to call the police?”

Aw shit, he’d seriously scared this woman and her little, muddy child. Not at all his intention. He took a step back.

“Hey, there,” Cherry hurried across the barn to the little girl and knelt in front of her. “Hi, Melody. Do you have a hose somewhere so we can get you cleaned off while the boring adults talk?”

“Okay,” Melody said, all her wide-eyed focus on Cherry. “I like your shirt.”

“Thank you. You are the sweetest.”

“That’s really nice of you,” Bailey said. “But I don’t think \_\_\_”

“It’s okay.” Cherry winked at Keating. “You two need time alone to work this out. I won’t be far, and I’m totally trustworthy.”

“I’ll watch her.” Another, smaller, girl appeared from seemingly nowhere. It looked like someone had painted her in the mud. All he could make out was blue eyes and a small form. “I’ll come get you if they’re being bad.”

The first little girl had already grabbed Cherry’s hand and was dragging her out of the barn.

Bailey’s shoulders dropped, and she tossed the tiny hook onto a nearby table. “The hose is right outside. I’m coming too.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Keating said. “Cherry will take good care of them.”

“I don’t know you well enough to trust your advice, and I barely know your girlfriend. So forgive me if I’m not willing to take your word about the safety of my children.”

She marched past him out of the barn.

“Wow.” He whistled. “Someone’s in a mood.”

“I heard that.”

He turned and followed her. She stood at the corner of the barn, close enough to see her kids and Cherry, but not close enough to interfere. Cherry had put the nozzle of the hose on top of a barrel so that the spray shot up into the air. She was under the water with the kid most covered in mud, helping her rinse it out of her hair, entirely unconcerned about how wet and dirty she was getting.

“If you followed me out here to suggest I’m suffering from PMS, I won’t be held responsible for my actions.”

Keating took a step away from Bailey. She might be petite, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t take him down. He’d learned

long ago never to judge a person's strength by appearances. "I wouldn't dream of it, honey."

Her shoulders shot up to her ears, and he had the sudden desire to massage them until they lowered. "And don't call me honey. I've had it with men who condescend and patronize me."

"Ah." An odd relief flowed over Keating. It wasn't really him she had the problem with. He hated it when people didn't like him. Apparently even tiny, grumpy mud-covered women. "Want to talk about it?"

"Don't you have an alpaca to find?"

"Does that mean I can—"

She shook her head, all her attention on her girls. "Cherry's really sweet with them. I think I've misjudged her. I try not to do that to other women, because we seriously get enough of it from men on a daily basis." She frowned. She had enormous eyes, light green with flecks of gold. "I should apologize to her."

"Apologize for a thought she doesn't even know you had?"

She spun and faced him, like she'd forgotten he was there. "I'm sure she could guess exactly what I thought of her." She rubbed a hand over her face and winced. "I just rubbed manure on my forehead, didn't I?"

He took another step back. "I thought that was mud. Why are you covered in shit?"

She glanced back over her shoulder before glaring at him. "Watch your language around my kids."

He held up his hands and gave her his most charming smile. "You can be absolutely sure I won't use any more vulgar language if you let me wander your property to look for my alpaca. You never would have even known I was here if I hadn't stopped by the barn to ask for permission."

She popped her hands on her hips, her eyes narrowing. "That would have been a mistake. I have a rifle and I shoot trespassers on sight, so if you're getting any ideas—"



She was utterly gorgeous, fierce, her eyes flashing with a protective fire. He should have been backing away slowly from the woman threatening to shoot him, but he wanted to hug her until her tense shoulders relaxed and he learned the sound of her laugh. “Damn, you are perfection.” He didn’t even try to hide the awe in his voice.

That got her. Her brave facade cracked, but instead of a smile, her face crumpled, before she straightened her shoulders. “Save your charm and lies for someone else. I’m not that easy.”

“Good. I’ve never been a big fan of easy.”

She rolled her eyes. “That was my very first thought when I saw you. This is a man who’s had a hard life.”

He bit back a smile. This woman was doing her damndest to piss him off. Too bad for her, he didn’t get angry easily. “I promise I’m not here to make your day more difficult. I’m the fun guy, the guy who makes everyone’s day better. Take a breath, chill out, and you’ll see nothing’s as bad as you think it is.”

Bailey’s eyes sparked and her glare sharpened. “Thank you, Lord.” She slapped her hands together in front of her chest and looked heavenward. “My prayers have been answered. A man has been delivered unto me to fix all my problems. Please tell me, wise man who can’t even tell mud from manure, what can I do to be a more chill woman? Please, I’m dying to know, how can I be a woman of whom you will approve, because in all things, I seek the approval of a man?”

“Look, Firecracker, I’m not the—”

She threw her arms up. “Oh, yes, and please call me by patronizing, belittling nicknames.” She spun toward the kids, splashing with Cherry. “Melody, Lily, the day has finally come. A man has arrived to solve all our problems.”

The girls stopped spinning in the rainbows created by the spray and gave their mother matching confused looks. Now that they were somewhat clean, Keating could see they were adorable, with big eyes like their mother’s.

“Momma, come play with us.”

“In a minute. I have to get the obnoxious man to leave first.”

The girls nodded as if that made perfect sense and went back to dancing. Cherry had never stopped. She appeared entirely unconcerned with defending Keating’s honor.

Bailey turned back to face Keating. Her expression was still fierce, but she suddenly looked exhausted. The woman was covered in shit and he’d scared her by showing up unannounced.

Even so, he wasn’t going to go down easy. He crossed his arms over his chest. He would win her over if it killed him. “I’m sorry about showing up here unannounced and scaring you.”

Her brows furrowed, suspicion clear on her face. “Okay... Well, I accept your apology.”

She was fucking adorable, and he wanted to punch whoever had made her day harder. Hell, he wanted to punch himself for making her day harder. “Want to talk about it?”

“About when you’re going to get off my property?”

He bit back a chuckle. “About who pissed you off today.” He softened his tone and gave her his most charming smile.

She glared back at him. “First, I’m here at the ranch alone with my little girls and you scare the crap out of me. Second, you want to wander around the ranch when I know nothing about you or your intentions and you act like I’m the asshole when I say no. Third, you patronize me. It’s looking like *you’re* the one who pissed me off.”

He rocked back on his heels. “That’s fair.” He couldn’t deny the truth. “I guess I didn’t do a good job looking at things from your perspective.”

“That’s right.” She pointed at him like she was ready to fight. Her eyes widened as she processed his words. She dropped her arm. “Oh, well. You definitely didn’t.”

“But I get the feeling I’m not the only bad part of your day. Want to talk about it?”

“Other than me and the kids all ending up in a pile of manure?” She shook her head. “I had to deal with a patronizing, overcharging mechanic.”

“What did he do?” Keating had an alpaca to catch before it crossed the county line, but he was far more interested in hearing what had this woman so upset.

“Just talked to me like I’m an idiot. I’m pretty sure he’s gouging me on price.”

“Want me to help?”

She brightened, those eyes of hers lighting up with relief this time. “You understand cars?”

“Not even a little. But I can talk to the guy and make him think I do.”

She sagged again. “It’s nice of you to offer, but I’ve got this. I made a list of everything he said needs to be fixed and I just have to search the internet and find out how necessary each repair is and how much it should cost.”

“Great. Why don’t you do that while Cherry and I watch the kids? Then I can call him and make sure he doesn’t railroad you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, wariness creeping back into her gaze. “I appreciate the offer, but you have an alpaca to find, and I can handle Ray, the misogynist.”

“I don’t doubt you can, but you could still use a friend to watch your kids while you get a shower and figure out the numbers, right?”

She glanced back over her shoulder, where the dancing was slowing and the kids were clearly getting bored. “I should get them towels. Do you think Cherry needs a change of clothes?”

“That would be great, thank you. I’m Keating Sullivan, by the way. I live next door.”

Her brows rose. “Keating... Grayson mentioned you’d moved in next door a couple weeks ago. You and he worked together?”

“We play poker when we’re both in Vegas.”

She didn’t look impressed, and he hated to leave folks unimpressed. “Right. Well, if you’re friends with Grayson, I suppose it’s safe to let you wander his property. Feel free to look for your alpaca.” She turned away from him, her hips swaying as she crossed the lawn toward her girls. “Alright, girls, it’s time for an actual shower with shampoo and soap. Maybe a call to the doctor about eating manure.”

“I didn’t eat any,” Lily said. “It just got up my nose a little.”

“Doesn’t seem better. Cherry, can I get you a towel and a change of clothes?”

Cherry’s clothes were molded to her body, but Keating couldn’t take his eyes off Bailey’s backside. She was wearing a baggy t-shirt, but her jeans molded to her soft curves. Even covered in manure, she was sexier than any super model he’d ever dated.

Or pretended to date for publicity reasons. His real dates had been few and far between, and he’d never made it past the third date with any woman. It had never bothered him. He’d had a career to build and no interest in getting tied down to a relationship.

“I’ll drip dry,” Cherry said. “But thanks, Bailey. It’s good to see you.”

“You, too. I’d hug you, but...” Bailey held up her arms to show off her manure covered body.

“Another time. Your little girls are amazing.”

“Thank you.” Bailey’s voice was tight. “I’m sorry I misjudged you.”

Keating held his breath. Hopefully Cherry wouldn’t attack their new neighbor.

“No worries,” Cherry said. “I get it. Unfortunately, women can’t be pretty and wear tiny, sparkly clothes without people

assuming we're air-headed gold diggers.”

“You're right,” Bailey said, all vehement sincerity. Keating's feet moved him toward the women without him giving them the directive. “That's exactly what I thought of you. I'm as bad as the misogynist I was just railing against.”

“No way. Those guys never admit they were wrong, so you're like five steps ahead of them there.”

“I want to do better. Can you forgive me for thinking you're a shallow gold-digger?”

“Of course. I mean, I totally am on the shallow side. I like pretty things. And I'd love to marry a billionaire, because who wouldn't? But there's more to me than that. We could totally be friends.”

“Oh.” Bailey was clearly taken aback. And by clearly, she was literally leaning away from Cherry. “That is really sweet, but I'm not sure we have anything in common. We're very different.”

“Different is fun. I'll call you.” Cherry spun on her stilettos and marched over to Keating, linking her arm through his. “Ready to hunt down Sugar Lips?”

Cherry was soaking wet and quickly soaking his t-shirt and jeans as she leaned into him. It actually felt good, because it was fucking hot out there and jeans weren't the right fashion choice for the weather, even if they consisted of more rips than material. If he could find a pair of shorts that didn't make him look like a hipster, he'd wear them in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, he cared about his appearance and fashion more than comfort.

He waved to Bailey as she hustled her kids toward the oversized farm house. “Call me if you change your mind about my help.”

“I won't.”

He watched those swaying hips until she'd gone inside, the door closing behind her.

“Look at that,” Cherry said cheerfully. “Keating has a crush.”

“She’s a gorgeous woman.” He knew better than to lie to Cherry. She was smarter than he was, though she hid it well.

“Even covered in horse manure, you’re watching her walk away like you’ve just seen heaven. Which means you like her.”

“She hates me.”

“You’ll win her over.”

He looked down at Cherry. Her make-up was mostly washed off and her hair hung limp around her face. She looked like a teenager instead of her actual age of twenty-five. “Why would I want to?”

“She’s the one, Keating.”

“Did you miss the part about her hating me?”

Cherry shrugged, her smile wide. She held up her hand and started ticking off items finger by finger. “One, she’s attractive. Two, she’s already got kids, so you’ll have that big family you want off to a good start before you get too old for it. Three, she’s not afraid to live on a ranch in the middle of nowhere. And four, she doesn’t put up with your crap.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “Isn’t that everything on your perfect wife, happy life list?”

“Everything except that part about her not taking my crap. I don’t serve up crap for anyone to take.”

Cherry blinked. “Huh, what was that you tried to serve me this morning, then?”

“It was a kale smoothie, Cherry. It’s good for you.”

She snorted. “Right. My point is she’s perfect for you. She won’t run away like the last one did.

“Lyssa didn’t run away from *me*. She ran away from the ranch. She’s a city girl.” A problem that had caused his fiancée of three weeks to dump him six months ago. He hadn’t made it

past date three with her, either. They'd just been an incredibly intense three dates.

Cherry's smile was over-the-top sweet, like she was placating him. "I'm sure it had nothing to do with her actually having to share a house with you for longer than a weekend."

He glared at Cherry, but couldn't come up with a good counterargument. "What's the plan for winning Bailey over?" Because why the hell not? He wasn't convinced she was the right woman for his ten-year plan, but he definitely wanted to get to know her better.

"Leave it to your elite, top-of-the-line life designer."

"Do I know one of those? Because all I've met is an overpaid life coach who eats all my muffins and has yet to figure out what kind of ranch I should have."

"It's a process." Cherry smiled, unfazed by his criticism.

At least, he would have thought she was unfazed before he'd gotten to know her. After living with her for a week, he noticed the tiny tick down around her mouth, the tightening around her eyes. Like the rest of them living the high life and trying to roll with the big fishes, Cherry was an actress.

Bailey wasn't an actress. She was the most real, most honest, most irritating person he'd ever met. If she was even mildly attractive under the horse shit, he might just have to marry her.

## CHAPTER THREE

Bailey's phone rang as she drove one of Gray's farm trucks up the dirt drive toward his ranch house. A glance at the screen told her it was Ray, the misogynistic mechanic. To set a good example for her girls in the back seats, she parked in the driveway and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello, Ray."

"Need a decision from you on your truck."

She stretched out an arm and grabbed her notebook from the passenger seat. "Here's the thing, I've called around to three different auto shops in the region and all three quoted me about a grand lower for what you say needs to be done to my truck."

"Those places won't do the job as good as I do, sweetheart. I've got top of the line mechanics and they ain't cheap. You get what you pay for."

"Even if I pay to have my truck towed to the repair shop in Milford, I'll come out ahead."

"You're not understanding what I'm telling you." He spoke in a slow, entirely condescending tone. "I do the best work. You want your truck to be safe for them little girls of yours, you need to have the best work done on your truck. That's me."

"Be that as it may, I want to get a second opinion." She'd have to pay a babysitter and white knuckle the drive to Milford, because there was a good chance all she really needed was new brake pads. She didn't want to fork over the cash to have it towed. "I called the previous owner of my truck and he said he had all the things you listed replaced a year before he sold it to me. It seems unlikely it would all need to be replaced again so soon."

"Listen, why don't you just leave the mechanic work to the actual mechanic who knows what he's doing? You don't



question your doctor when he tells you what's wrong with one of your precious girls, do you?"

An alpaca with fluffy fur moseyed out in front of the truck and stopped, blocking the drive while it stared at them and chewed its cud. The girls shrieked and started begging to get out and pet it.

"I've got to go Ray. I'll be by to pick up my truck soon."

She hung up on his sputtering.

"Stay in the car, girls. I have no idea whether alpaca are dangerous."

She dialed Gray and crossed her fingers that he'd actually answer. No luck. He must be out in the field or taking a much deserved sleep-in while he was in Washington State with Isla and their son, working on getting another community center like Vegas Proud up and running. She stared at Sugar Lips, who stared lazily back, and tapped her thumb on the steering wheel.

"Your owner is really worried about you," she said in a soft voice. "Any chance you might run on home to him and Cherry? Cherry... I can call..." She was already scrolling through her phone.

"Please, Momma," Melody said, that familiar whine entering her tone. "Can I just pet it?"

"Not until Mr. Sullivan is here.

"Hello," Gen said. "Bailey? Is everything okay?"

Damn it. She liked Genevieve, but she hadn't been the best about forming a real, sisterly relationship with her sister-in-law of two years.

"Everything's fine. Do you have Cherry's number? She's staying with her boyfriend who lives next door and his missing alpaca is on my property, but I don't have any way to get in touch with him to let him know."

"Boyfriend? Alpaca?" Gen chuckled. "I guess Cherry's going to have a good story to tell me when she gets back from her job with Keating. I didn't even know she'd met anyone."

“Keating is the boyfriend...” Bailey’s brain wasn’t operating at full speed. “Wait. She’s working for Keating?”

“She’s got a new business as a life designer, and Keating is her first client. I’ll text you her number?”

“Thanks, Gen. Let’s get together for lunch the next time I’m in Vegas.”

“I’d love that.”

Bailey hung up and dialed Cherry’s number, but before Cherry answered, the girls yelled, “He’s running away.”

The alpaca was not running away. He was ambling across the dirt drive like he had nowhere to be.

“Hello?” Cherry answered, her voice groggy.

“It’s Bailey. The alpaca is here. At Gray’s ranch.”

“Really? That’s great news. I’ll get Keating and we’ll be right over. Where is he?”

As though he could hear them talking about him, Sugar Lips picked up his pace and trotted toward an outbuilding. “He’s near the drive up to the house, but he’s on the move.”

She swung a hand at the girls in the back seat to let them know it was okay to get out. “Stay on the phone. We’ll follow him and let you know where he’s headed.”

She hopped out of the truck. The girls were already running after the alpaca. “Don’t chase him!”

The girls slowed a bit, but they were laughing about the impromptu alpaca hunt and the alpaca was picking up his pace to get away from them.

“Don’t let him get away,” Cherry said. “I’m looking for Keating now.”

“Just call me back when you’re on your way here and I’ll tell you where we are.”

She hung up, shoved the phone in the back pocket of her cut-off jean shorts and took off after her girls.

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Bailey wrapped her arms around her girls to hold them still so they wouldn't scare off Sugar Lips. A bead of sweat rolled down her face from her hairline, but evaporated before it reached her chin. Her clothes were stiff with salt from all the sweating she'd done and her head was pounding from the heat and the exertion.

The alpaca stood, munching on a patch of grass, just twenty feet away. It was the first time in the past forty minutes the damn animal had stopped.

"You found him." Hot breath wafted against Bailey's damp neck and she screamed.

Melody and Lily, who'd been so still watching the alpaca, also screamed and leapt away from Bailey.

Sugar Lips took off like he was in a race for his life.

"Shit," Keating said. "Sorry."

He ran after the alpaca and Bailey let him go. He was wearing work-out shorts and a tank top that showed off rounded shoulders and firm biceps, his large body moving gracefully as he sprinted away.

Bailey had to drag her eyes away from the sight.

"Sorry it took us so long," Cherry said as she joined them. "Keating was out for his morning run and I had to get in the Range Rover and track him down. Then we had to find you."

"Why didn't you call?"

"Momma, can we help catch Sugar Lips?" Melody asked.

"No, baby. We need to get back to the house. We've been out in this heat for too long without water."

Melody pouted, and Lily's eyes filled with tears.

Cherry squatted in front of them. Today she was in sneakers with an elevated heel, tiny, shiny shorts, and a bra top. Her dark hair was in a high ponytail on top of her head. The only sign that the woman had hurried to them was her make-up free face.

“When Keating catches Sugar Lips, you two can pet him as much as you want.”

“Yes.” Melody pumped her fist and shook her little booty.

Lily looked up at Bailey. “Can we, Momma?”

“Of course. Now, let’s get back to the house, get some water, and head to the stables. The horses must be starving.”

A sure sign of the girls’ exhaustion was that they didn’t take off running for the house, but paced sedately alongside Cherry and Bailey as they walked the half mile over dusty, scrubby desert terrain.

“I’m not dating Keating,” Cherry said.

“Okay.”

“My sister called after you did, all concerned that I was dating Keating.” She laughed. “He’s like literally twenty years older than me and he’s...” She huffed out another laugh. “Last night he suggested I add some vegetables to my dinner, because he’s worried about my vitamin intake. He’s such an old dude.”

Bailey couldn’t help smiling at the picture Cherry had painted. “He’s not that old. What is he? In his late thirties?”

“Forty-three. I mean, I don’t judge, but I’m not going to date someone twenty years older than me, no matter how rich he is. I want to grow old with someone.”

Something twanged under Bailey’s ribcage. She’d wanted that once. Had thought she’d have it with Glenn.

“Women do live longer than men,” Bailey said. “Probably best to go for a younger man.”

Lily crouched to look at a tiny cactus with a yellow flower and Bailey grabbed her under the arms and pulled her up. “Not that much farther, baby.”

“But I’m tired, Momma.”

“I know. We can rest when we get there. I think there might still be Popsicles at the house.”

“Really?” Melody said. “Can I have one, too?”

“Sure. But we gotta get there.”

That got the kids moving. They didn’t sprint toward the house, they weren’t that excited about sugary ice, but they picked up their pace.

“Maybe,” Cherry said, and it took Bailey a moment to catch up. “But younger men are so immature and you’re what? Thirty? Keating’s only thirteen years older than you.”

“I’m thirty-two.” The last time Bailey had looked in the mirror, she’d noticed lines around her eyes and a gray hair at her temple. Cherry making her two years younger felt pretty good. “But I’m not interested in dating.”

“I don’t blame you,” Cherry said. “You’ve got your little girls to think about. You need someone who’s in it for the long haul, who’s looking to settle down and build a family.”

“I’m really not—”

“Keating retired from running all three of his companies and moved to the ranch because he wants to live a simpler life. He’d love to have a ready-made family, because he worries sometimes he’s too old to start on the big family he wants.”

“Good for him.” Bailey started up the rise toward the house, thinking only of wetting her parched throat.

“What do you want? Think you want a big family?”

“I have my family. It’s complete.” And if that was a lie, Bailey wouldn’t examine it too closely, because supporting her family and keeping the three of them safe was all she had the bandwidth to focus on.

Cherry hummed contemplatively before running to catch up with the girls. Bailey followed and definitely didn’t let herself think about what her future might be with a big family and a guy like Keating by her side.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Come on, Zed. There’s fresh oats and hay at home.” Keating tugged on the lead he’d attached to Zed’s halter, but the alpaca stood firm and unmoved by the promise of food, water, or a bath.

“I know you’re lonely, man, but your new friends aren’t arriving until next week, so you’re going to have to be patient.”

Zed snorted and tossed his head.

“You have the goats to keep you company and the chickens. It’s really not so bad, is it?” Keating was still working out just exactly what kind of ranch he wanted to run. He’d considered having a cattle ranch, but it had taken just one look at the big, brown eyes of a cow he was considering buying to know he could never send one off to slaughter. Not to mention he’d need about a hundred acres more grazing land to sustain even one head of cattle.

According to the internet, a ‘head’ of cattle equaled a hundred cows and owning a cattle ranch in Western Nevada would be more work than he wanted to do during his retirement. He still wanted to travel and spend quality time with his family. He had no interest in working from sunup to sun-down.

He’d decided to try chickens, which so far had been pretty easy and produced a good quantity of eggs. Then he’d seen the goats, Maude and Maurice, at the feed store when he’d gone to buy chicken feed and hadn’t been able to resist. They’d been so starved their ribs were showing.

He found Zed down the road at an elderly neighbor’s house where he’d been selling eggs, because he’d gotten side-tracked with the goat project, had missed the deadline to get a booth at the farmers’ market, and hadn’t wanted the eggs to rot in his fridge.

The neighbor had practically given Zed away for free because the beast kept escaping.

Keating had taken Zed home and started researching why an alpaca might run away. Turns out, Alpaca need a herd, so he'd put out \$30,000 to get three more alpaca to keep Zed happy.

Unfortunately, they were being driven to him from Illinois and wouldn't arrive until the middle of next week.

"Come on, Zed. Let me pet that fluffy fur." Fur he needed to shave off, if he could get the beast to stop running away every time he started up the clippers.

Zed glared at him and pawed the dirt.

"Aren't you thirsty? Want some water?"

"I've got some water."

Keating turned to see Bailey striding toward him, her quads flexing as she walked in those short cut-offs. She had a water bottle in each hand and a bowl under one arm.

"How'd you find me?"

"Cherry tracked your cell. You can't see the house from here, because the barn's in the way, but you aren't far."

"Doesn't matter when I can't get Zed to walk an inch." He took the cold bottle she handed him and drank half of it. Damn, he hadn't realized how thirsty he was until he felt that cool water on his tongue. "Thank you. Why didn't you send Cherry out?"

"She's playing a heated game of Candyland with the girls. It's the first time in a week my girls haven't been at each other's throats."

He chuckled. "I have five brothers. It was non-stop fighting all summer long. I thought it was awesome."

She raised her brows. "Really? That's good to know. I honestly have no idea what's normal for sibling relationships."

"Didn't you and Gray fight when you were kids?"

She dropped her gaze to the ground and walked over to Zed. After she set the bowl on the ground, she filled it with water from the bottle. Zed immediately dropped his head and started drinking.

“He’s sweating under all this fur,” she said. “No wonder he doesn’t want to move.”

“I need to shave it all off, but he runs every time I come at him with the clippers.”

“Have you ever sheared an animal before?”

Keating crossed his arms over his chest, the lead for Zed still firmly gripped in one hand. “How hard can it be?”

Bailey took a sip from the water bottle she’d used to water Zed. “You been spit on by Zed? Kicked by him?”

“He doesn’t really let me get close enough for any of that.”

Her laugh was unselfconscious and full-throated. “When we get Zed back to the house, I’ll call the vet who sees our horses. If there’s someone around here who can teach you how to clip an alpaca, Doc Ventura will know where to find them.”

Keating felt oddly defensive. It had been a long, long time since he’d been so out of his depth and he hated looking incompetent. “I figured I’d just watch a bunch of videos after I got the goats squared away.”

“You have goats, too?”

He nodded. “I want to have a working ranch, but I’m still trying to figure out what kind. Cherry had the idea for goat’s milk soap and cheese.”

“So why’d you get the alpaca?”

Keating dropped his arms, any hope of preserving his pride down the drain. “Thought he looked cool, and the owner wanted to sell him. Poor guy needs a herd. He’s lonely.”

Instead of Bailey’s smile dropping, it softened. “You rescued him.”

Keating waved her off. “There was nothing heroic about it, trust me. He probably would have been better off if I just let his original owner sell him to someone else.”

She studied him for a long moment before turning to the alpaca and reaching out to pet him. Zed sidestepped out of her reach.



“That’s how we can get him home. I’ll lead him and you try to pet him.”

Her grin lit her eyes and her heart-shaped face. “Worth a try, Sullivan.”

She picked up the empty bowl from the ground and tucked it under her arm. When she reached out for Zed, he stepped away while Keating pulled.

Keating could hardly believe it when it worked. He was careful not to yank as Bailey chased Zed with the threat of running her elegant hands through his fur. Not a good indication of Zed’s intelligence, in Keating’s opinion.

“My kids are going to be so disappointed they can’t pet him, but he’s clearly too skittish for that,” she said, when they got to her barn. “Pick any stall. You can leave him here while you get your trailer.”

Keating cleared his throat and glanced at the big farmhouse where Cherry and the little girls were probably still playing Candyland. “I don’t have a trailer.”

Bailey stepped toward Keating and Zed skittered back toward him like he was looking to him for protection. Progress!

“We’ll use Grayson’s. Put her in this stall for now.” Bailey swung open the nearest stall door, but Zed took one step toward it, sniffed, and planted his feet, refusing to go inside.

“Come on, Zed. This is a cool place to hang out. Look at how clean and pretty it is.” Keating pulled gently, but the alpaca didn’t budge.

“You might need to use more force than that.” A smile tickled Bailey’s lips, and the wind blew a loose curl across her face. Keating got distracted for a moment by her beauty. “He probably doesn’t like the horse smell.”

Keating gave another small tug. “I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Not to suggest you are anything less than a burly man, but he’s a huge animal. You won’t hurt him by pulling on his lead.”

Keating pulled a little harder. “Can’t we just lure him in with food?”

“There’s hay in there. And there’s no fruit at the main house since I don’t live here. You need to pull harder.”

Keating held the lead out to her.

She stared at it, then looked up at him, brow creased. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but I have no fucking clue what I’m doing here. You handle horses all day. Show me how it’s done.”

She stared at him a moment longer, eyes wide, before she shook her head and took the lead. She clucked her tongue and pulled hard. Zed moseyed on into the stall like he’d been waiting for a formal invitation.

The triumphant grin Bailey threw Keating as she stepped out of the stall and closed the door made him lean toward her, wanting to soak in the beauty of her triumph.

“Listen,” he said. “I want to apologize again for being a dick yesterday.”

“I don’t think you’re a dick.”

He blew out a breath. “That’s a relief, because—”

“I think you’re an entitled man-child.”

He stepped back and stumbled on a rock. “Entitled? Man-child? You don’t even know me.”

Her smile was a revelation, slow and effervescent, like she was proud of herself for shocking him. “I know enough. You retired from your life to live on a ranch and play cowboy. Doesn’t get much more man-child than that. Where are the lost boys? Will they be joining you soon?”

“No.” He crossed his fingers that she never found out about the guys’ weekend he had planned with his six best friends. “I might not know how to be a rancher, but my decision to retire was about the most adult thing a man can do.”

“Oh, right. Cherry told me about that. You want to find a wife and an instant family. Very mature. Especially when you set your sights on a woman you barely know.”

She turned and headed out of the barn.

“I haven’t set my sights on anyone. Cherry’s the one playing matchmaker.” Bailey didn’t need to know how much he liked the idea, especially when it sounded so stupid coming from her. Not just stupid, but desperate. “I made a plan. A rational, well-thought out plan like I’ve made for every business I’ve created. I want to be married and have a family. That’s the place I’m at in my life. Pretending I don’t want those things and hoping they happen for me is no way to achieve my goals.”

“Well, delete me from the spreadsheet. I’ve been married and I’m never doing it again.”

Why did her words make him feel like she’d just laid down a gauntlet? Man, he loved a challenge. Loved being the underdog even more. The thrill of winning when no one thought you could do it was like no other. “Ever think your marriage didn’t work because you didn’t have a plan?”

She spun on her heel, color high, eyes flashing with anger. “You don’t know a damn thing about me, Sullivan. Or my marriage.”

He should have backed down. She was right. He’d overstepped. Unfortunately, he’d never been good at backing down. “I know it failed. And I know enough to believe any man who’d lose you is an idiot. Clearly, you didn’t choose your husband well.”

Again, she stared at him, obviously thrown for a loop and clueless how to react. “That’s possibly the only thing you and I will ever agree on, Keating Sullivan.”

His smile felt like relief. “I seriously doubt that.”

She huffed and spun on her heel again. “Come on, you can help me get the trailer hitched to the truck.”

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Keating followed Bailey around to the back side of the barn where a trailer was parked. She bent over the hitch, adjusting chains and wires, and Keating looked at the clouds above to avoid staring at her very shapely ass. It felt wrong after she'd made it exceedingly clear she wasn't interested in him.

“Okay, that should be—” Bailey paused and pulled her phone out of her back pocket. “This should just take a second.” She put the phone to her ear. “Hey, Kendra. Thanks for getting back to me... Yeah, I was hoping you might watch the girls for a few hours this afternoon. I need to get the truck... Maine? Really?... No, that's an amazing surprise anniversary gift. You've got a good boyfriend.”

She hung up and slid the phone back into her pocket.

“Everything okay?”

Bailey smiled, but it looked forced. “Sure. Let's go get my truck and get hitched up.”

Keating put a hand on her shoulder. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

She twisted her head to frown down at his hand and he pulled it away. “I said it's fine. I'm not a damsel in distress who needs some wise old man to rescue her.”

Wow, he just kept missing the mark with this woman. Clearly, he needed to accept she wanted nothing to do with him.

Ahead of him, Bailey wrapped her arms around herself. She dropped them quickly, but it was as though she'd given herself a hug, maybe even a pep talk, and it struck him as the loneliest thing he'd ever seen.

Hurrying up to her side, he walked silently beside her. He got into the truck next to her and ignored her when she glanced his way. Staring straight ahead, not making direct eye contact, like an elderly cowhand had told him to do with a bull. Don't make eye contact, because that's viewed as a challenge.

Bailey wasn't a bull, but she seemed as territorial as one.

He helped her hitch the trailer to the truck without a word and then walked with her to the barn to get Zed.

She grabbed his arm right before they stepped into the cool, hay scented space. “Alright, what’s going on? I know you aren’t trying the silent treatment as a way to get me to tell you all my problems.”

He stared at her, making eye contact now, unable to look away, the fire in her eyes was tinged with something that made his blood run cold: fear. Fear didn’t belong anywhere on her face. Even a hint of self doubt was unwelcome on this fierce woman.

“You were right when you said I overstepped. I do that a lot. I’m not trying to manipulate or punish you. I’m not that guy.”

She stared him down, the challenge obvious. Someone had hurt this woman. Someone had taken her trust and her generous spirit and shit all over it. If he ever found that person, he would destroy them.

She started toward the barn, a definite gloom settling around her.

“I do have one thing to say.”

She huffed, her brows high as she turned to face him like she knew what he was going to say, and he’d already disappointed her. “What’s that?”

“I am not old.”

Her lips twitched, but that was the only sign of emotion she revealed. “You have gray hair.”

He gasped, playing it up. “A few strands. And they are silver. Very distinguished.”

She snorted. “You could practically apply for the senior citizen discount.”

“I’m only ten years older than you and I’m fitter than most people half my age.”

“When you were twenty-one, I was ten,” she said. “I could practically be your daughter.”

He laughed, relieved that her expression had lightened. “I would have to have had a child at ten-years-old.”

She looked him up and down, considering. “How old were you when you started flirting and seducing girls, Keating? I’d wager you weren’t much older than ten.”

That made him laugh even harder. “That’s how you view me? A preteen Casanova?”

“Are you saying it’s not true?”

The truth wasn’t one that would paint him in the best light. “I wasn’t even thinking about girls at ten. I can say that much for sure. I was obsessed with racing my brother on our dirt bikes and setting a good example as the oldest of the crew.”

That gave her pause. She pursed her lips. “Your brothers are all younger?”

“Their smaller size gave them an advantage on the dirt track.”

“I never would have pegged you as an oldest child.”

“I spent the first eighteen years or so being responsible and leading the pack. I needed an extended vacation after that. And by extended, I mean almost thirty years.”

“You had a good childhood.” That decided, she turned toward the barn and headed inside.

Keating stared after her. He hadn’t expected her words. Usually, when he talked about his childhood, folks commented on how competitive his family was. Bailey was right, of course. He may have often felt left out of the sibling dynamics, but he’d had a damn good childhood. It made him wonder what her childhood had been like, because based on the little Grayson had let slip, he was certain it hadn’t been a good one.

Together, they loaded Zed in the trailer, then Bailey checked in on her kids.

“They’re playing hide-and-seek,” Bailey said as she slid back in behind the driver’s wheel. “They seem to be having a blast.”

“Why don’t you stay here with them? I can drive Zed over and get him back in his stall on my own.”

Bailey snorted. “Just like you got him in the stall here on your own and into the trailer on your own?”

“I have apples at my place.” He waved toward the house. “You’ll feel better if you’re with your kids.”

Her shoulders drooped, and tension seeped out of her. “It’s not that I don’t trust Cherry. It’s that I don’t know her and what I do know...”

“So get to know her. I gathered from that phone call you need a babysitter. Cherry would happily hang out with your kids for an afternoon.”

Bailey straightened her shoulders and stuck her finger in his face. “If you put even one scratch on Grayson’s truck...”

“I’ll buy him a new one. Hell, I’ll buy two, just for your pain and suffering.”

It took a moment for her glare to recede, like she was expecting him to be a jackass.

He patted her hand on the wheel. “I got this. Go take care of your girls.”

She nodded and got out of the truck. “Thank you.”

He slid into the driver’s seat, pulled the door shut, and watched her walk into the house, her arms again wrapped tight around herself. He started slowly down the driveway.

A few feet from the main road, his phone rang.

Putting the truck in park, he answered. “What do you want, Sloane?”

“That’s no way to greet your favorite brother, dear Keating.”

“It’s the way I greet my brother, who ran off to Vegas to get married just to win a bet.”

“She turned me down.”

Keating's spirits lifted. "Smart woman. What's your back-up plan?"

"I want to know how you're doing. Need to monitor the competition."

Keating had agreed to this bet with his brothers, but only because it coincided with his grand plan. Of course, he also wanted to win. Mostly because he always wanted to win at everything, but also because the prize was an old family recipe guaranteed to win him baking contests from one end of the country to the other. If he was going to be retired, he'd need lots of hobbies.

"There is no competition if you have to start from scratch," Keating said.

"Already got a date for tomorrow night. And you have the advantage of all that money. You ought to be able to snap your fingers and find a bride."

"Except I want a bride I actually like who's also willing to live on a ranch in the middle of nowhere."

Sloane laughed, and Keating bristled. "That's right. City boy billionaire is going to be a rancher. How's that going for you, man?"

Keating hung up on him and tossed his phone on the passenger seat. No matter what he did, Keating's family always saw him as the overachiever who didn't know how to slow down. And every time he talked to one of them, he wondered if he was making a mistake retiring to live on a ranch. What if they were all right about him?



## CHAPTER FIVE

Shouts of laughter sounded from outside the barn. Bailey closed her eyes and pulled in a deep breath. That slightly manic sound meant her daughters were right on that edge between fun and all-out war. It was a fragile balance between sisters, that love/hate dynamic always in play, always ready to flip from one to the other.

Unfortunately, Bailey was currently in the middle of picking out Azalea's hooves and the wary horse was sidestepping every time one of her girls shouted with laughter.

Not to mention all the horses needed to be exercised, and Bailey was wondering if she'd made a mistake not looking for additional help for the fall and winter seasons. With only eight horses, she'd been sure she could handle it, at least until she found a full-time job, but she hadn't anticipated how difficult it would be when the girls weren't in school.

She should have known better.

"It's okay, Azalea," she said in a gentle, sing-song voice. "The girls are just having fun."

"I've got them. If that's okay?"

Bailey, who was in a half-kneeling position with Azalea's front left foreleg resting on her thigh, startled and fell onto her butt. Azalea took her foot back, but just shied away a few steps rather than rearing.

From her spot on the ground, Bailey stared up at Azalea, who, for a split second, she'd believed had spoken to her.

"Bull pucky," Cherry said, offering Bailey a hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Bailey chuckled at her own silliness for believing, even for a millisecond, that the horse had spoken to her. "You just startled me."

Cherry helped Bailey back to her feet. Today, Cherry was in cut-off jean overalls with a sports bra underneath, both of

which were studded with shiny rhinestones. She also had on cowboy boots, which were at least more suited to ranch life.

Her hair was in a sleek ponytail and she had on light make-up and big hoop earrings. As much as Bailey wanted to be judgy and say it was ridiculous for Cherry to dress like that for the ranch, she had to admit it came from a place of jealousy.

Not only hadn't Bailey taken a shower that morning, she hadn't even brushed her hair. Half awake, Melody dancing around her feet and talking a mile a minute about the bizarre dream she'd had, Bailey had shoved her bedhead into a messy bun and pulled on a shirt and shorts that needed to be washed.

Bailey missed getting dressed up and taking time with her appearance. She missed going shopping for new clothes alone. She missed feeling beautiful. Bailey loved working with the horses and focusing on her kids, but just a day now and then when she didn't walk around with mud on her face would be nice.

"Good morning," Bailey said, not sure how to ask what the hell Cherry was doing there without being rude. "Did Zed run away again?"

"Sugar Lips is safe at home. I'm here to hang out with your girls and keep them occupied so you can get some work done."

"Um..." After spending time with Cherry and the girls the day before, Bailey had to admit Cherry was great with them. They loved her and Cherry had been surprisingly responsible, deftly deterring them from sliding down the stairs in a laundry basket by showing them how to play five-card stud. And Cherry had seemed to have fun too. "That would be wonderful, but don't you have work to do for Keating today?"

"This is my work for Keating. Are the kids—?" Before she could finish the question, the sound of the girls' laughter, still manic, filtered into the barn. Cherry patted Bailey's shoulder and skipped toward the sound. Shouts of joy filled the barn, making it clear Cherry had found the girls.

Bailey, still confused, but too relieved to question it, bent back over to lift Azalea's leg.

"Good morning. Did Cherry clear everything with you?"

Bailey straightened and turned to see Keating walking toward her. He was wearing jeans, cowboy boots, a threadbare Athens Fall tour t-shirt, and a cowboy hat. The boots and hat looked like they'd just come out of the box. She wanted to laugh at him playing dress up, but those jeans wrapped around his strong thighs like a lover and that t-shirt showed off a broad, toned upper body that made Bailey forget where she was for a moment.

Why the hell did he have to look so good?

His long strides ate up the space between them far too quickly, and Bailey hoped he couldn't tell what those few simple steps did to her.

She was strung tight, wanting, enjoying the sight of the handsome, sexy man heading her way with purpose and warmth in his gaze. She couldn't remember the last time any man had made her feel that way.

Since long before Glenn had left her. She'd sacrificed chemistry and lust in her marriage, because she'd believed Glenn was a good man who could offer her and their kids the kind of security she'd never had in her childhood. She'd thought that was enough.

More than enough.

The way Keating could make her feel just by crossing the barn floor, though, made her wonder just how much she'd been missing out on.

"You okay?" Keating asked. "You look like you're about to faint."

She swallowed hard and got her head back into the game. Great sex was a luxury for single women with no responsibilities and enough money of their own to buy designer clothes.

Bailey didn't need great sex.

She didn't even want it.

She just wanted to be able to support her kids, so they never had to know hunger or fear or the darkness of a night without electricity because she couldn't pay the power bill.

“Why are you here? And why did you ask Cherry to babysit my kids?”

He grimaced. “Cherry was supposed to explain all this. She's babysitting your kids so you can teach me all about taking care of horses.”

She stared at him, running his words through her head. “What? Why?”

“I'm thinking about getting a few horses for my ranch. I've got a dirt bike and a four-wheeler for checking out the fence lines or whatever it is I'm supposed to check, but a horse might be fun, too.”

“Do you know anything about horses?”

“Not a thing,” he said, all smiles. Everything was so easy for him, everything another fun adventure in a lifetime of them. “That's why I want you to teach me. I'll pay you.”

Those words lightened her mood considerably. “How much?”

“Will six hundred dollars an hour cover it?”

She put a hand to her head to make sure she wasn't experiencing a delusion brought on by heat stroke, then she literally bit her tongue to stop herself from telling him it was too much. By now, she was an expert on horses and she had no idea what the going rate would be for this sort of education. If her expertise was worth that much to him, who was she to tell him otherwise?

Unable to trust her words, she nodded.

Keating clapped his hands together with a loud smack and Azalea trotted forward, pulling at the lead keeping her in the barn.

“First lesson of working around horses,” Bailey said. “No loud, sudden noises or movements.”

He pulled his phone from his back pocket and spoke into it, “no loud noises and no sudden movements.” He looked up at her. “Great, what’s next?”

“Okay. Well, I only have an hour because I have to pick my truck up from the mechanic this morning, but we can start with what I’m doing now, cleaning Azalea’s hooves. This has to be done once a day for every horse. You start by...”

Bailey walked him through the steps of hoof cleaning and by the second horse, he was doing it on his own, a pro at the simple task. With his help, they got all the horses’ hooves cleaned in half the time it typically took her alone.

“The mechanic fixed your truck for a reasonable price?” Keating asked after they’d let the horses out into the pasture.

Bailey leaned against the fence and propped one foot on the bottom rung. The sun beat down on her and she closed her eyes for a moment to soak it in. For just a few seconds, she imagined she smelled sunscreen and heard water splashing in a pool.

Immediately, she felt guilty. She didn’t need a vacation. She had two daughters who were her life, and she had a good job working for her brother and taking care of horses, something she’d discovered she loved with a passion. It was everything else that weighed her down and made her feel bone weary in body, mind, and soul. The bills to pay, wondering if her daughters could be happy without their father in their lives, feeling guilty for mooching off Grayson and wondering if she should find a professional job.

Which for her would mean sending her kids to daycare and only seeing them in the evenings and on the weekends she didn’t work overtime. She didn’t want to go into an office every day for a job she hated and see less of her kids.

Anger vibrated through her, a near constant emotion in her life. Anger at Glenn for leaving them and taking all the money she’d helped him save by clipping coupons and finding sales

and never asking for too much. Anger at men like Ray the mechanic who tried to take more of her money and treated her like she had no brain in her head because she had a vagina. Anger at the last three men who'd refused to hire her because she'd been out of the workforce for nine years and no one wanted to employ a single mom who'd need time off for sick kids and school plays.

That anger was like blood in her veins at this point, hardening her and making her feel less and less capable of being the happy, hopeful, joyful kind of mother she wanted to be.

She had so much to be grateful for, yet that anger and a very real fear of getting tricked again by someone she trusted made her want to curl up in her armor like a turtle and hold very still until she could figure out how to feel safe on her own.

The genuine concern on Keating's face as he waited for her answer made her want that armor more than ever before, because she wanted so badly to believe in him, but experience and reason told her she shouldn't.

Instead of leaning into him, as she ached to do, she straightened. "It's taken care of."

She stalked toward the barn and hoped he wouldn't follow.

She should have learned years ago to give up on hope.

"What does that mean? Did he do it for a reasonable price?"

She spun and faced him. "I've got it handled, Mr. Sullivan. You're going to have to trust me when I say I am fully capable of handling my own affairs." Why the hell was she talking like a character out of one of the historical romances she loved so much? She couldn't seem to stop. "I will instruct you on equestrian care and riding and ask that you stop offering to help me when it's not needed. I'm fully capable of taking care of myself."

He stared at her, clearly fighting a smile, though his eyes danced with it. "I assure you, madam, I find you entirely competent."

She huffed, her cheeks heating. Where the hell was her turtle shell when she needed it? She crossed her arms over her chest and steeled herself as best she could without one. “So, you weren’t asking about the truck because you want to rescue me?”

“No.” The amusement left his expression. “You didn’t ask for my help. I didn’t offer it. I was merely making conversation.”

“Ha!” She snorted. “So if I’d said, ‘no, Keating, the patronizing misogynist mechanic didn’t offer me a lower price and I’m pretty sure he’s lying about what’s wrong with the truck,’ you would have just nodded and said, ‘I’m sorry that’s happening to you?’”

He tilted toward her. It was slight, but she could feel him enter her vicinity, his breath becoming her air, his body close enough to press her own against. “Is that what happened?”

“Yes.” She shoved herself into his space, daring him to fight back, wanting him to. He closed his eyes and breathed deep like he was breathing her in.

All she wanted was to lean on him. He didn’t have to kiss her, though she’d probably like it, and he didn’t have to press his big hand against the small of her back like he was her support. All she wanted in the world at that moment was to feel for a second like she wasn’t the only adult in her world.

He opened his eyes, and she waited. This was the moment he’d let her down. This was the moment he’d prove himself exactly the kind of man she’d decided he must be.

“That’s too bad. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

She stared. Her lower lip trembled and then all that anger and fear and loneliness converged into tears that filled her eyes and her throat and damn near threatened to drown her.

“Oh, honey.” He stepped forward, wrapped those big arms around her, and squeezed tight.

It was way too hot for a hug, but nothing had ever felt better in her life. She laid her cheek on his hard pectoral muscle and she cried. She let out those tears she felt like she’d been

holding back for the three years since Glenn had walked out of her life, and it felt so damn good. So good she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to stop.



## CHAPTER SIX

Bailey fit against Keating like she belonged there, and he held on like the grateful asshole he was. He wanted to go tell off the misogynistic mechanic and every person who'd made this woman's life more difficult.

She'd let him barge into her world twice now, when he'd done less than nothing to deserve it. She'd walked him through how to pick out the horses' hooves when it was clear she had other things she needed to do. And, every time she looked at her children, her entire expression lit up with a love like nothing he'd ever experienced.

She didn't deserve to get jerked around by a mechanic or by anyone. Her tears, though, had to be about more than just one mechanic and Keating wanted to know what had made her so sad and so defensive against men who wanted to help her.

Grayson was a billionaire and one of the best men Keating knew. He wouldn't let his sister struggle if he could help it.

Bailey was a tough, beautiful woman with defenses so thick he might never get through them.

And that would be a tragedy, because he wanted this woman. He wanted her smiles and her laughter. He wanted her perfect body pressed against his. He wanted to take every one of her tears and turn them into diamonds or more horses or whatever would make her happy.

Bailey Tiller was the kind of woman a man built a life with. The kind of woman who fit perfectly into his ten-year plan.

He pressed his hand to her lower back to hold her closer against him, and she let out a sigh. He moved that hand in circles, but kept the pressure on, wanting to make her feel better.

When the tears let up, he bent his head, his lips against the shell of her ear. "Okay?"

She nodded and pulled away. "I'm sorry about that." She gestured at his torso. "I soaked your shirt."

“I needed a good soaking. Cooled me off.”

She gave him a shy smile, and he thought he’d glimpsed the woman behind the walls, the woman who didn’t have to be the strongest and the most confident and the most together. “I should get the girls.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her back to him. She didn’t pull away, and he dropped her hand as soon as she was next to him again. He hadn’t meant to grab her. It had been pure instinct, a need for her not to leave yet.

“It’s none of my business,” he said. “And I won’t ask again, but if you’d like to talk about it, I’d like to listen.”

She stared out over his shoulder, teeth gritted, and he braced himself for her to push him away again, to raise her walls and keep him out. He was about to give her an out, to stop pushing for something she clearly wasn’t ready for, when she lowered her gaze to meet his.

“I’m going to take the truck to Milford to get a second opinion. Ray’s saying the brakes need to be replaced, rotors and everything, but that doesn’t make any sense. I haven’t put many miles on the truck and the brakes were in great condition when I bought it. I suspect I just need new brake pads.”

“Makes sense.” Keating could have left it at that, but he hadn’t gotten where he was in life by never taking a risk. “So why do I feel like you’re unhappy with that decision?”

“What if I’m wrong?” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “What if I’m wrong and the brakes give out on the drive to Milford? I want to leave the kids with a babysitter, just in case something happens, but I can’t find anyone who can take them for a few hours. Everyone we know is out of town on last-minute vacations before school starts up again.”

Keating’s first instinct was to offer to drive her truck to Milford and get the brakes fixed, but he was nothing if not a man who could learn from his mistakes. He understood her need to do things for herself, to prove she could be independent.

In his own business, it had taken him years to delegate, because he'd been so fiercely adamant on proving... He couldn't even remember what he'd wanted to prove. But he'd been fierce as hell about it.

“Can I do anything to help?”

“Do you think...?” She pulled in a deep breath. “I mean I guess I should ask Cherry, but she's working for you, right? Would you be able to spare her for an afternoon so she can watch the kids? If she wants to, of course. I'll pay her.”

“I think I can manage on my own for an afternoon. She's been a bit bored.”

Bailey took a step back. “What is she doing for you, exactly? She said she's a life designer.”

“It's her latest business venture.” He chose his words carefully. Cherry had had a tough couple of years and was, in her own way, as determined to prove she could make it on her own as Bailey was.

Cherry's mother had raised her to believe the ultimate goal in life was to land a rich husband, but Cherry decided she wanted more. And she'd chosen to accept very little help from her billionaire sister. She'd worked as a waitress and a concierge to put herself through college courses in psychology, but she still had a long way to go to get a degree.

This latest venture of hers was a chance to increase her salary and get herself through college more comfortably. Keating was her guinea pig. He didn't really need her services, but he was happy to pretend in order to recommend her to others in his tax bracket. “Same thing as a life coach, but with a fancier title to appeal to a higher end crowd. Basically, she can help a person round out their lives, find new joy, and she has the skill set to help them dress the part or bring their house up to the level necessary to impress others in their circle.”

Bailey's eyes twinkled with mischief and he was glad to see the light shine in them again, even if he was certain it was at his expense. “And what's she doing for you, besides helping

you figure out what kind of rancher you want to be and find a little lady to settle down with?”

It was too hot to know if his cheeks heated, but he wouldn't have minded Zed showing up to give him an excuse to run away. “She told you all that?”

“The ranching part was obvious. I figured out the other when she tried to convince me I should date you. Not sure why she thinks I'd make a good wife to a rancher billionaire.”

He forgot his embarrassment as surprise overtook him. “Why wouldn't you be? You're beautiful, strong, incredibly good with both horses and children, and you're loyal as hell.”

She stared at him, her expression caught between disbelief and a kind of longing he didn't understand. “I'm just a mom. A tired, frumpy mom who's jaded on men and romance. I'm also incredibly boring. My favorite way to spend an evening is curled up on the couch with my kids watching nature documentaries.”

“You think being a mom makes you less desirable?” He stepped closer, his hands going to her hips. He didn't mean to invade her personal space, but he needed to touch her to make her believe what he was saying. “Being a mom makes you gorgeous, because the love you have for your kids shines through. And there is not a single frumpy thing about you. You are all soft curves and strength. I can't take my eyes off you when you're near me.”

She shook her head, but she didn't push his hands away. “Or maybe you've let Cherry convince you that you need a ready-made family and you're just seeing what you want to see?”

He gave her a little shake. “I'm not speaking as a man who wants to settle down with a family. I'm speaking as a man who knows a beautiful woman when he sees one. You are beautiful inside and out and there's nothing boring about you. I hate nature documentaries, but I'd happily watch them if it meant I got to sit next to you.”

She laughed. “You're a smooth talker, I'll give you that.” She stepped out of his reach and headed toward the barn. “You

know what else smooth talkers are good at?" she asked over her shoulder.

"I'm not lying to you, Bailey."

She shook her head and kept walking, out of his reach, her walls firmly back in place.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Thanks again for agreeing to watch the kids,” Bailey said.

Cherry sat at the kitchen table creating desserts from a play dough kit she’d brought over for the girls. Bailey had no idea where she’d found it on such short notice, but the girls were all smiles as they investigated the kit.

“No problem. Melody and Lily are way more fun than Keating.”

“Mr. Keating doesn’t like play dough?” Lily, ever serious, asked.

Cherry’s mouth pulled down in an exaggerated frown. “No, he doesn’t. He just wants to talk all the time.”

“I’m standing right here,” Keating said.

“Talk, talk, talk,” Cherry continued, ignoring him. “He wants to know what kind of rancher he should be, then he wants to change his wardrobe and interior design every time he decides to be a different kind of rancher—”

“Alright,” Keating said. “Time for us to go.”

Bailey, biting back a laugh, waved to her girls and headed out. She’d already given them hugs and kisses and they were having too much fun with Cherry to care that their mother was leaving. It was good to see.

After their father left, both girls had gone through a hard time, but Lily had been especially upset. She hadn’t wanted to let Bailey out of her sight, and she’d blamed herself for Glenn leaving. Every day Bailey watched Lily laugh and play like a regular kid, she was relieved her little girl had recovered from that hurt.

Bailey followed Keating out and got into the passenger seat of his Range Rover. Inside, it was clean, and the seats weren’t cracking.

“Fancy,” she said as she strapped on her seatbelt.

“It gets me where I need to go.” Keating gave her a warm smile.

They made the drive into town and to the misogynist mechanic’s shop in silence. Bailey enjoyed the new car scent and Keating focused on the road, being uncharacteristically quiet.

“Want me to go in with you?” he asked. “In case he gives you any trouble?”

Bailey wanted so badly to say yes. Ray was a big guy, taller than Keating and broad. But she needed to know she could do this on her own. She needed to know that when Keating inevitably got sick of ranch life and moved to some tropical island, she’d be able to handle this sort of situation alone.

“I can do this,” she said, as much to him as to cheer herself on. “Thank you, though.”

“Of course.”

She paused at the door, waiting for him to argue or offer advice on how to talk to Ray. It’s what Glenn would have done, his advice patronizing as often as it was helpful. But Keating said nothing. He pulled out his phone and started scrolling, either confident in her ability to handle Ray or apathetic.

Except apathetic didn’t fit this man, who’d gone out of his way to find out what was bothering her, and taken time out of his day to give her a lift.

She hopped out of the big vehicle and crossed the pavement to the shop, muttering under her breath as she went. “I’m a capable woman, and this man has no right to make me uncomfortable. I’m a strong woman and this misogynistic mechanic is the one in the wrong.”

Blowing out a steadying breath, she grabbed the handle and pulled open the heavy door. She stepped inside to the chime of a bell. The scent of oil and lemon-scented cleaner blasted her, and country music played over the speakers.

She crossed the linoleum, past the waiting area, where a few people stared at their phones or the muted television, and

stepped up to the counter.

Ray took several long moments to turn his head from his computer screen and blink up at her. “Help you?” He might have been a handsome man if his lips didn’t tip up in a perpetual sneer and his eyes weren’t so beady.

“Bailey Tiller. I’m here to pick up my truck.”

He frowned. “Truck’s not done, Miss Tiller. Not sure you recall, but we’re still waiting on a decision from you on whether you want those brakes of yours replaced. You do understand that without working brakes, your truck won’t stop, right?”

“Oh, I understand, Ray. I also understand that you think I’m an idiot. I’m going to take my truck to Milford and get a second opinion.”

“Calm down, Miss Tiller.” Ray raised his hands as though she was coming at him with a loaded gun. “I understand all this mechanical lingo is probably confusing and the price tag is likely upsetting, but you need to let the experts handle this for you. No one wants to see you or your little girls killed or maimed because you couldn’t—”

“Enough.” Bailey rolled her eyes, no longer intimidated by this big man or even angry. He was too ridiculous for words. And if belittling women was how he got his kicks, he wasn’t worth another wasted moment of her time. “Give me the keys to my truck and close my account here. I won’t be returning.”

“Now, Miss—”

“Do it now. Before I call my lawyers.” She didn’t have lawyers and had no idea if a lawyer would get involved in something like this, but the threat seemed to work.

Ray’s eyes popped wide, and he handed over her keys. “No need to get so emotional—”

“Calm down, Ray. Maybe try therapy. It could help you figure out where your deep-seated hatred of women comes from.”



With that, she spun on her heel and came face-to-face with Keating, who had a big grin and a strange look on his face.

Annoyed, she marched past him and out of the shop.

Once outside, Keating clapped and whooped. “Hell, yeah, Bailey. That’s the way to do it.”

She bit back a growl. “What the hell are you doing? I thought you trusted me to handle this on my own.”

“I just wanted to see the show.”

She bit back a smile. “I did good, didn’t I?”

He swung an arm around her shoulder. “Hell, yes, you did. Now, where’s your truck?”

She pointed to the far side of the lot. “It’s right there. Thanks for the ride. I can take it from here.”

She started across the lot, and he stayed by her side.

“Are you walking me to my truck?”

“I’m going to Milford with you.”

She stopped and faced him. “You aren’t invited.”

“So invite me.” He crossed his arms over his chest, and she hated herself for admiring his forearms. The man had delicious forearms. He also had a smug, self-assured expression on his face.

She hated him.

“The whole point of Cherry watching the kids is so that if the brakes give out, I’ll be the only one who dies.”

Keating smiled. “Why’d you bring the truck in?”

“The brakes were squeaking.”

“Right. Not because they stopped working.”

It was possible Bailey overreacted with mechanical stuff like cars because she didn’t understand it.

“So you don’t think they’ll give out on the way to Milford?”

“No,” he said on a laugh. “We’ll be fine. There’s a guy in Milford I want to talk to about alpaca fleece. You’re just my chauffeur.”

She popped her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “Really. And you just happened to plan that meeting for today?”

“I hate to drive.”

She studied him for a long moment, but couldn’t see a lie in his blank expression. Truth was, she wouldn’t mind the company, because she was still nervous as hell about her brakes giving out on the way to Milford.

“Fine. I’ll be your chauffeur, but if you try to take over at the repair shop in Milford, I’ll revoke your privileges to visit our horses.”

He chuckled and started for her truck. “You’ll put me in a time out, Mom?”

“Yes. Exactly. I’ll put you in a serious time out.”

They’d only been on the road for about ten minutes, Keating scanning through the radio stations until he found one with classic rock, before she couldn’t stand it any longer. “So, you actually think you need to change how you dress and your interior design to be a goat farmer?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Keating leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. Maybe if he pretended to be asleep, Bailey would forget her question.

“You were just changing radio stations,” Bailey said. “I know you’re not asleep. I also know the answer’s going to be fantastic. So, talk.”

Keating groaned and sat up. “It’s actually totally boring. I’m dressing for the job I want. If I want to be a good goat rancher, I have to dress the part and I need to come home to a setting that reinforces that role in my mind.”

Bailey made a sound that might have been a hiccup or a snort. He’d go with a hiccup. “Don’t you think you should wait until you’re sure what kind of rancher you want to be before you redesign your entire house?”

“The point is preparation. My career until now has been about as far from ranching as a person can get. If I’m going to succeed, I need to believe in this new role one hundred percent.”

“Okay, but don’t all ranchers dress the same and live in the same sort of house? What changes?”

Keating watched the wide open desert land of Nevada go by out the side window, the sun bright. He was an odd guy, he readily admitted that, and most people loved his quirks, but Bailey was the most down-to-earth, least quirky person he knew, and he wanted to impress her. He wanted her to like him.

He *needed* her to like him.

“That’s Cherry’s department. It keeps her busy, allows her to feel like she’s doing something for me, and gives her the chance to try out her skills. She’s a baby entrepreneur and I’m giving her wings. I’m helping her get her new business off the ground as a favor to a friend... Every new business needs supporters, and every entrepreneur needs starter clients to

practice on. Particularly for the kind of business Cherry wants to start.”

Why the hell couldn't he shut up? He pressed his lips together hard.

“Keating, it's okay. I know I haven't been the friendliest, but I can promise you this is a safe space. You can be honest with me. I won't judge.”

“What makes you think I'm not being honest with you?”

“Other than the verbal diarrhea? The way your voice went oddly robotic. Not a good liar?”

Ah, what the hell. Nothing else had worked with this woman. “I'm usually a pretty good liar when I have to be. You just make me incredibly nervous.”

She laughed so hard, he worried she might drive them off the road.

Just as he was reaching over to grab the wheel, she got a hold of herself. “That's the funniest thing I've heard all month. And my girls say some pretty hilarious stuff. Try again, Sullivan.”

“I wasn't making a joke. You make me nervous as hell.”

She stiffened, glanced over at him, and then back at the road. “Why would I make you nervous? Is it the brakes?”

“Not the brakes. It's just you. I like you and I want you to like me. Simple as that.”

“But you're a billionaire. You've dated models and actresses.”

“You've been looking into me?”

“You're friends with my brother. And I'm possibly Hailey Brent's biggest fan, so he told me when you were dating her. What is she really like, by the way?”

“She's high maintenance and funny as hell. Great in the—”

“You know what? Maybe I don't want to know.”

“I was going to say, great in the ropes course celebrity challenges we held at my Las Vegas adventure park. Which is why she and I were really hanging out. It was a publicity stunt. There was nothing real between us.”

“Now I know you’re lying. No one sits across a table from Hailey Brent without feeling something real.”

“Why do I get the feeling *you’d* like to date her?”

“I’ve never been attracted to women, but Hailey Brent might be able to change that for me.”

Keating pressed his eyes closed hard and tried to wipe from his brain the image Bailey had just put there. Okay, maybe not wipe it from his brain. Just save it for later.

“She’s beautiful, but we don’t have anything in common. I can only listen to a conversation about song lyrics for so long before I zone out. Though I did like talking to her crew about her pyrotechnics display.”

“So you’re not awed by celebrity. Still not getting why you’re nervous around me.”

Because it had been years since he’d felt this kind of attraction to a woman he was also coming to really like. A woman who could make him laugh and make him want to be a better person all in the same instant.

He wasn’t sure she’d believe any of that, or that he could explain it in a way she’d understand. “For the past twenty years of my life, my focus has been on building my business, on creating the kind of parks I wished existed when I was a kid. I spent every waking moment thinking about building a better zip line or ropes course, about what I could add to make my parks stand out from the rest. As the years went on, I had to focus more on the stuff I enjoyed less, like marketing and bottom lines. Beyond a few close friends I met along the way, I never made time for a social life and I definitely never made time for a meaningful relationship. I’ve met amazing women all over the world, but a long-term relationship was never an option for me, so I never let myself get too close to anyone. I never let myself fall in love.”

“You’ve never been in love?” She chewed on her bottom lip while she studied him. He’d give every one of a billion dollars to find out what she was thinking about him.

“Never.”

“I’m still not getting why I make you nervous.”

“Because for the first time in my life, I could fall in love. With you.”

This time, he did grab the wheel as Bailey swerved into the other lane. Thankfully, there were no other cars on that back country road.

“I’m sorry.” She barked out a nervous laugh as she straightened the truck. “I’m in no way prepared for this conversation. Can we get back to you decorating your house for the job?”

“Sure. It might sound strange, but—”

“Nope. Have to stick to the love thing. You’re probably just convincing yourself you could love me because it fits into your life plan or whatever, right? You’re so used to making business plans and sourcing materials or whatever and I’m convenient, with a ready-made family and all that.”

“Not even close.”

She glanced over at him. “It’s not that I’m not flattered, but I was covered in manure when we met. Maybe the desert heat is getting to you.”

“You were covered in manure, and I couldn’t take my eyes off your beautiful face. I was drawn to you and the fact that you’re convenient doesn’t negate the way I feel.”

“Your life is in upheaval. So many changes could make anyone lose sight of reality.”

He huffed, getting annoyed. “You know when I decided I wanted to build adventure parks for a living?”

“No.”

“When I was ten. I know what I want out of life, Bailey. I always have. You can question my instincts all you want, but I

don't because they've never steered me wrong. The universe placed you in my path for a reason, and I felt it from the first moment I laid eyes on you. I'm not going to question that. I'm going to do everything in my power to get to know you and find out if we've got something real here, because I believe you're going to be the love of my life."

She was quiet for so long he opened his mouth to continue his argument.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"Okay, I won't question you anymore. You believe in love at first sight and I one hundred percent do not. You've got a fantasy about some magical, romantic connection between us and that's very pretty, but it's not real. We'll just have to agree to disagree."

He huffed out a laugh. "I can agree to that, but you're wrong."

"Wouldn't be the first time," she muttered. "Now that's out of the way, tell me the deal with your interior design. If I'm your soul mate, surely I'll understand."

## CHAPTER NINE

Bailey stared at the blacktop of the road, any concern about the brakes failing forgotten. Keating Sullivan believed he could love her? Some long-buried romantic part of her wanted so badly to believe him, wanted to wrap herself around this man she barely knew and hold on for what would likely be the adventure of her life.

Probably not until death do they part, but fun. At the very least, based on the way she kept leaning toward him, the sex would be good. Her body wanted him, even if her brain knew better.

“... we all come from stardust,” Keating was saying. “We are a part of something so much bigger—”

“Hold on.” She was totally out of her depth. “I want to hear what you’re saying, but I missed that first part. Can you repeat it?” No reason to tell him her brain had gotten caught up on the whole love at first sight thing.

He huffed out a sigh. “I know it sounds strange, but I’m a big believer in the power of envisioning the future you want. Details matter if you want the universe to pick up on the vibes you’re throwing out.”

“Spoken by a man who’s always gotten everything he’s wanted,” Bailey muttered.

“What?”

She sighed. How the hell did this guy think he could love her when all she felt was angry and bitter and lonely all the time? “I had a vision and a plan, too, Keating. First, I’d get my accounting degree, because the world always needs accountants, and then I’d get a good job to support myself. I didn’t have any big ambitions or dreams. All I wanted was to have enough food to eat every day, to never worry that the bank might show up to take my house or the power company might shut off the lights because I couldn’t pay my bills. That’s all I wanted. I worked so hard to get there and, even with my brother Logan’s help, it was so hard. When a man



came along and told me he loved me and would take care of me, I believed him. When I found out I was pregnant, I made a new dream. I had a new plan, too. But nothing could prepare me for that man leaving and taking away every bit of security and stability I'd built. Visions and plans might work for you, but they've never worked for me, and you know why?"

"Why?" Keating's voice sounded oddly choked, but she didn't look at him.

"Because I depended on other people. I bet you never depended on anyone else, did you?"

"Of course I did." Keating cleared his throat. "I never would have gotten where I am today alone, but you're right that I never depended fully on another person."

"Exactly." Bailey focused on the road and pinched her lips shut. "Anyway, go on about your interior design. Maybe that's what I've been missing my whole life."

"It sounds stupid. I get that. I really do. But it works for me. It makes me happy to walk into my home and see my dream reflected on the walls. I see pillows made of alpaca fleece and funny photographs of goats and cows. I see riding tack used decoratively and I'm reminded that I'm home, living inside my new dream. When it gets hard or when I've had a shit day and think I'm a total failure, those minor details can be the difference between throwing in the towel and getting up the next day to do better."

She hated how much sense his words made. Home was the heart of her life. When she was a kid, that heart had been rotten to the core. It had made her think she'd never be secure, that she'd never be happy. "How close to failure have you come?"

"I've never hit rock bottom." He tapped his fingers on his knees. "But I've come close. I've had doors closed in my face and I've had deals fall through. A closed door isn't the end of everything, as long as you're willing to get up the next day and take another risk."

“A woman with two kids who depend on her isn’t free to take risks.”

“You have to consider your risks more carefully, sure, but without risks, there can’t be any growth. Staying stagnant because you’re afraid to rely on anyone isn’t good for you, either.”

His words hurt, not least because they felt too damn true. “You don’t know me or what’s good for me.”

“I know you’re a wonderful mom and a kind person,” he said. “Have you ever thought about it? What kind of risks you’d take if you were fearless?”

“I have never been fearless.”

“You looked fearless when you stood up to that asshole mechanic. You’re a smart, strong, good person, Bailey. People like Ray and your douchebag ex should be the ones afraid.”

She laughed. “You’re delusional, but I like your delusion. I just...” She sighed. “There’s no room in my life for risk or adventure. I’m just trying to keep the focus on my kids. Where it should be.”

Before he could argue, she hit her turn signal and pulled into Sunrise Auto.

She parked and got out of the truck. She waited for Keating while she tried to put on her game face and square her shoulders.

“You’ve got this,” Keating said as he stepped up next to her.

Together, they walked inside.

## CHAPTER TEN

“Holy wow.” Bailey pulled out of the lot of the auto repair shop and stepped on the brakes a couple times just to hear them not squeak as she started down the quiet street. “That went so well. I can’t believe it was that easy and cheap.”

“You did good. Take a left up here and get onto 220. The farm’s about three miles down the road.” She took a left, still smiling. “How’s it feel not to have to worry about your brakes giving out?” She’d been right. All the truck needed was new brake pads. It had only taken a couple of hours.

“Ah-mazing.” She grinned over at him. He loved to see her so happy. Amazing how such a small thing could change her mood. He knew people who spent thousands on every luxury they could find and still weren’t happy. It wasn’t the brake pads, as much as it was her fixing a problem she’d doubted she could solve. “Tell me more about this alpaca farm we’re going to see.”

“I don’t know much about it, honestly. They own about five hundred alpaca, and they send the fleece off to be processed. It’s not their primary source of income, but it seems to work for them as a side business, with most of their income coming from selling the baby alpaca.”

Impossibly, her smile got brighter still, lighting up the interior of the truck more than the sun outside. “Do you think we’ll see babies today?”

He reached over and squeezed her shoulder, determined to find baby alpaca for her if they didn’t see them at the farm. “Hopefully.”

She followed his directions and started down a dusty dirt drive. Over a small hill and around a curve and the alpaca came into sight, grazing in fields that must cost a fortune to keep green.

“This doesn’t look like the typical retirement hobby,” Bailey said.

“They aren’t typical retirees. This farm belongs to Jill and Ronnie Penton.”

“From the Penton resort chain?”

“I worked with them a few years back. Built a scaled-down version of one of my adventure parks at their South Carolina resort. I actually chose this area for my ranch because they retired out here and couldn’t stop talking about how much they love it.”

“Really? I mean, I grew up in Vegas, so of course I love the desert, but if I had the choice of retiring anywhere in the world, I’m not sure I’d pick the Nevada desert.”

“They have a private plane to travel the world whenever they want, but they love the heat, love being close to a city like Vegas where there are shows and great art. It works for them.”

“And you?” she asked. “What about this area speaks to you?”

“Where else can you live in the middle of nowhere and be within reasonable driving distance of one of the most exciting cities in the world?”

“Huh.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Just that I expected you to talk about the heat or the wildlife, the mountains or the opportunity, but what you love most about being out here is how quickly you can get back to civilization? Sounds to me like you aren’t one hundred percent sold on this plan of yours to settle down as a rancher.”

Her words socked him right in the gut and he fought the urge to get defensive. Fought and failed. “It’s not a bad idea to leave my options open. It’s nice to have a place I can get away from ranch life just down the road.”

“Except that according to your worldview, you’re essentially setting yourself up for failure, right? If you want to Feng Shui your life, seems like having a constant reminder of the way you used to live, the excitement and the city, within view means you’re not fully committed.”

“It’s also where my friends have property. You know there were a lot of—”

“Wow.” Bailey’s eyes widened as the Penton’s enormous house, all one story and covering at least an acre of land, came fully into view. “Is that their house? How many people live there?”

Maybe Keating was jaded or just used to large homes, because the Pentons’ home seemed average for the circles he was in. “Just them. They have three kids and six grandkids who visit regularly.”

He was very glad he hadn’t taken Bailey to see his ranch house when she’d helped him get Zed back into his pen. He had a feeling seeing such grand evidence of his wealth would change the way she treated him.

She glanced down at her jean shorts and short-sleeved blouse. “I’m not dressed to meet anyone this fancy.”

“You’re gorgeous. And their equal in every way.”

She looked over at him, brows high. “I’m a single mom who barely makes enough money to make ends meet. Or I would be if Grayson didn’t help me out.” She winced like she regretted her words, then focused on slowing and parking her truck in front of the house.

He grabbed her hand when she moved to get out and gave it a little tug until she faced him. The full force of her gaze on him, expectation and nervousness in her eyes, made it hard for him to breathe.

He sucked in enough air to speak. “All they have that you don’t is money, firecracker.”

“They have that money because they built a global franchise of resorts.”

“What did I tell you about that? They had help. No one gets anywhere alone. What you and Grayson and Logan have achieved after growing up the way you did is as much of an accomplishment as what the Pentons achieved.”

She looked away, chewing on her lip. “Of course you know about my childhood.”

“I only know what Grayson told me. You all grew up poor, your mother died when he was young, and Logan took custody.”

She let out a breath like she was relieved, and he wondered what he didn't know about her childhood. He had a feeling it was nothing good. “You can say that about Grayson, but it hardly applies to me.”

He brushed a strand of hair off her smooth cheek and tucked it behind her ear. “You have raised two healthy, smart, amazing little girls, and you kept them safe after their father abandoned you all with nothing. Do you know how many people would have just given up? How many people would have gone to their billionaire brother instead of demanding Ray treat her with respect?”

She didn't smile as he'd intended she would. “I did give up. I did break down. For months, all I did was let Grayson support me and dig up just enough energy to take care of my kids.”

“Doesn't sound like giving up to me,” he said, meaning every word. “That's fighting. That's surviving the hard stuff and fighting to get back on top. You are a solid gold person, Bailey Tiller, and that's something no amount of money can buy.”

Her eyes looked suspiciously damp when she glanced out the windshield. “You're making it really hard to hate you, Keating Sullivan.”

He squeezed her hand. “What's so bad about that?”

When she looked at him again, she didn't hide her fear. “Because I've survived a long time on rage and distrust. Opening myself up to a new friend, especially a powerful man like you, seems like a terrible idea.”

She pulled her hand from his and hopped out of her truck. He watched her stalk toward the house for a long moment before he got out and followed her.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bailey couldn't stop staring at Keating as she chewed her burger and sipped her rich chocolate milkshake. She couldn't figure the guy out. He'd been polite to their hosts at the alpaca ranch and thoroughly interested in everything they had to say, and she hadn't, not for one moment, felt like he'd forgotten about her.

He'd made sure to include her in every conversation and, even when they were apart, she could sense his awareness of her, like he was always ready for whatever she needed. And he'd not only made sure she got to snuggle alpaca babies, but he'd turned into an ooey-goey mess over them himself.

For a high-flying playboy, he was incredibly kind and down-to-earth.

Keating shoved aside his plate, got to his feet, and held out a hand to her. "Let's dance."

"We really should get back." She glanced around at the couples dancing to Elvis in the 50s style diner just outside Milford. She loved to dance and she couldn't remember the last time she'd done it with anyone other than her kids in the living room. Glenn had never been much of a dancer. "The kids will—"

"The kids are fine. That movie they're watching with Cherry is three hours long."

He wasn't wrong. She'd called Cherry four times and talked to her kids. Every time, they'd all been fine, happy, having more fun than they did with any of their other babysitters by the sound of their laughter. She missed her kids with a constant ache, but she also wasn't having a terrible time being out with an objectively handsome and charming man.

The alpaca farm tour had been fascinating. The Pentons had been warm and welcoming and patient with every question Keating had. He'd carried around a notebook and written down everything they told him.

And it had been hard to hold on to the idea that Keating was superficial and out of touch when the Pentons seemed to so obviously like and respect him. Of course, they could also be bad people hiding behind the facade of down-to-earth grandparent types, but believing that seemed like stepping out of hurt and bitter right into paranoid and delusional.

That was a step she refused to take.

So she stood and let Keating take her hand and lead her onto the dance floor. The song was upbeat, but Keating pulled her into his arms and started a slow waltz.

“Um, what are you doing?”

He looked down his nose at her, his lips twitching. “Dancing.”

“A waltz doesn’t exactly fit the music.”

“It’s the only dance I know how to do.”

She laughed. “Did they teach it to you at billionaire school?”

He smiled, and the warmth in his eyes did something to her on a molecular level. Like a key clicking into a lock, she felt connected to him, pulled into the maelstrom of his orbit. “They did not. I had to pay someone to teach me how to do this, so I didn’t look like a complete idiot at society functions.”

Bailey looked around at the other dancers, who ranged in age from early twenties to seventies. Every one of them was just bopping along to the music in their own way. “Not sure if you noticed, but this isn’t a society function. I don’t see any professional dancers here, either. I think it’d be okay if you just danced like you do in your living room.”

His brow furrowed. “I don’t dance in my living room.”

His genuine shock made her laugh. “In your bedroom, then.”

“Not there either.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Unless you’re talking about the horizontal tango.”



“I am not.” She pressed a hand to her chest, playing up her astonishment. “Are you telling me you’ve never just let go and danced?”

“I sing in the shower if there’s a good song playing.”

She rolled her eyes. “For an adrenaline junky, you are strangely inhibited.”

“Not liking to dance doesn’t make me inhibited.”

Pushing his arms away, she stepped out of his embrace. She swayed to the music, not even moving her feet. “Just let your body move to the beat. There’s nothing complicated about it.”

He stood stock still, frowning in concentration. “I don’t hear a beat.”

She laughed, but he didn’t appear to be joking. She danced closer, shaking her booty and raising her arms in the air, being as silly as she was with her girls, not at all what she’d consider sexy.

But Keating was looking at her with an undeniable heat in his eyes, his gaze tracking over her body with such intimacy she felt it like fingers on her skin. He still didn’t move, didn’t tap his foot, didn’t shake his hips, just watched, until she was close enough for him to grab.

Then he put one big hand on her waist, grabbed her other hand, and started moving them through the steps of the waltz again.

She laughed so hard she almost tripped over his big feet, but he held her up, not breaking concentration for a moment as he took her through the steps. “Are you serious? You won’t even try?”

“I’m dancing,” he said. “And I’m leading, so you have to do the dance I choose. That’s the way it works.”

“That is patriarchal bullshit.” She wanted to be more annoyed than she felt.

“Probably, but right now that patriarchal bullshit is saving me from embarrassment with a woman I desperately want to impress, so can we just go with it?”

She shrugged. “If you insist.” She’d meant to smirk up at him, maybe tease him some more about his dancing, but he smiled down at her and she noticed his cheeks had gone pink. Had he really meant it about wanting to impress her? She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had worried about impressing her, and she had to admit, it felt pretty damn good.

Also, she felt tender toward him, protective of this vulnerability he’d revealed.

He pulled her closer as they moved across the floor, his arm tight on her waist, his strength and warmth surrounding her.

The music changed to a slower song and Keating slowed his pace. He met her gaze when she looked up, and she got lost in him. The pale, pale blue of his eyes should have been cold, but it was molten heat.

The planes of his face held the afternoon shadow of a beard and the rougher, messier look fit him, made him seem more approachable. His nose was a bit too long for his face, the only part that didn’t fit, but it brought attention to his soft, pillowy lips.

“Bailey.” His voice was little more than a whisper. “I want to—”

She knew what he was going to say, and she popped up onto her toes, because it had been too damn long since she’d done something just for herself, too damn long since she’d gone after something she wanted without worrying about the consequences.

She pressed her lips to his and let herself go. She forgot all her worries, all her stress, all her doubts, and leaned into the feel of his lips against hers, the strawberry milkshake taste of him when he opened his mouth and touched his tongue to hers.

He pulled her in tighter against him, his mouth hot on hers as he devoured her like he knew exactly how she loved to be kissed, even though she couldn’t have described it a moment earlier.

Her body lit, and pure feeling and desire rushed through her. She wanted this man.

She plastered herself to him, wanting to feel every inch of him against every inch of her. It felt so good that her belly vibrated against his—

She pulled away from his mouth. “Your phone.”

He blinked at her, dazed. “What?”

“Your phone. It might be Cherry and the girls.”

He didn’t argue, didn’t tell her it was probably nothing. He pulled out his phone, put it to his ear, and walked off the dance floor.

He went back to their table with a quick “hold on” to whoever was on the phone while he dropped a few bills next to their plates. Then he reached back for Bailey’s hand and pulled her out of the restaurant and into the dark of the night.

Chilly air hit her, and she shivered immediately. She hadn’t expected they’d be out until night and hadn’t brought a jacket, even though it got down into the low sixties after dark in late August in the desert.

“Stay in the house, Cherry. Lock the doors.”

Bailey forgot the chill, terror making her heart race. “What happened?”

Keating passed the phone to her.

He tried to wrap an arm around her, but she stepped out of his reach.

This is what happened when she left her girls alone to have fun for herself.

In the time it took for her to take the phone from Keating and put it to her ear, she’d already had that thought and imagined five million worst-case scenarios of what was happening back at the ranch, not the least of which being a zombie attack.

“Cherry,” she said. “What happened?”

“A man’s here.” Cherry sounded tense, possibly on the verge of tears. “I left the girls in the kitchen to answer the front door, so he never saw them, Bailey. He doesn’t even know

they're here, but he won't leave. He's sitting in his car in the driveway."

"Who? Cherry, who's in the driveway?" She imagined a debt collector, a kidnapper, a vampire pretending to be human.

"He says he's the girls' father. He said his name is Glenn Tiller."

Bailey's knees went weak like overcooked noodles. When Keating grabbed her this time, she leaned into him.

She slumped for a moment, and then she got her shit together. A calm like nothing she'd ever felt before washed over her and she straightened, adrenaline powering her upright. "What did he say he wants?"

"He asked to see you first. Then he asked to see the girls. I told him I'm the only one here, and I didn't know when you'd be back, but he said it's been three years and he's not leaving until he sees his daughters."

Emotions warred, but Bailey couldn't deal with them at the moment. She needed to keep her daughters safe until she knew what the hell Glenn was doing in Nevada. "If he comes to the door again, don't answer. Keep the girls away from the windows, but don't tell them why, okay? I don't want them to know what's going on."

"I told them it was a delivery guy at the door. They're still watching the movie and are fine. I know, Bailey, what it's like to have a father who shows up and drops out of your life whenever he's in the mood. I'll hide with them in the basement if I have to."

The ferocity in Cherry's voice surprised and warmed Bailey. She wasn't sure how, but Cherry had become fiercely protective of her girls after knowing them for such a short time. "Thank you. We'll get back as fast as we can."

"We're fine. There's no need to rush. That bastard can sit out there all night."

Clearly, Cherry had some deep-seated daddy issues. Bailey could hear it in the anger in her voice. "That won't be necessary. We'll be there in less than an hour."

Bailey hung up and passed the phone back to Keating. “Can you drive? I need to make some phone calls.”

“Of course.” Keating took her keys when she passed them over. He didn’t ask what she was doing or offer his opinion about how she should handle this, and she’d never in her life been more grateful or felt more supported.

As she walked around to the passenger side of the truck, she’d already pulled her cell phone out of her bag, dialed, and put it to her ear. Grayson answered as she slid into the seat and Keating started the engine.

“Glenn’s back, Gray. He’s at the ranch house. The kids are there with Cherry, and I’m an hour away with Keating.” Standing on her own and being independent no longer meant a thing. She’d use Grayson and his connections every step of the way.

“Get home to the girls, but don’t agree to anything with Glenn until I talk to the lawyers and the PI.”

“Yeah. Okay. I can do that.”

She dropped the phone onto her lap and stared at it, tapping her fingers on her knees.

“Grayson taking care of it?” Keating asked.

“He’s on it. It’ll be okay.”

“Are you okay?”

She glanced over at him. Her whole body tensed, ready to fight but with no opponent to face. “He’s there with my kids and I’m here. In what universe would I be okay?”

He ran a hand through his hair and took a left onto the road that would take them back to Rawlton. “Of course you’re worried about your kids and how it will affect them, but what about how it will affect you? Are you ready to face a man you once loved enough to marry?”

“Wow. Never thought I’d meet anyone blunter than me.”

“You’re deflecting.”

He was right, but she wasn't interested in a deep heart to heart with the man who'd made her forget for a moment she was a mother. If anything, she needed to put distance between them, because he made it too difficult to focus on what mattered: keeping her kids safe. "Just get me home, Keating. That's all you need to worry about."

Even in the dimming light, she could see his jaw clenched tight. He gripped the steering wheel like he was thinking about ripping it off.

She watched the scenery passing by and tried to remember to breathe.

Her phone rang when they were ten miles from the ranch house. "Grayson, what have you got for me?"

"The PI tracked Glenn to Tahiti last week, but couldn't nail him down. Now that she knows Glenn's in Nevada, she's going to work back from there and figure out what he's up to. It's going to take her a few days."

"Okay. And the lawyers?"

"He's got no rights to the kids, Bailey. He's going to have a hell of a fight on his hands to have his parental rights reinstated, if that's what he wants. You don't owe him a damn thing. If he gives you any trouble, call the police."

"Okay." Relief filled her. It hadn't been easy for Bailey to terminate Glenn's rights as a parent, but she hadn't been able to find him. Practically it had made sense. Now, she was so glad she'd gone through with it. "Thank you, Grayson."

"Call me or the attorneys if you have any problems. They're keeping their after hours line open for you. Do you need me there? I can get there in—"

"No. I can handle Glenn." He was her mess. She'd clean him up. "You enjoy your vacation."

"That changes," he said. "Call me. I'll get there."

"Thanks, Grayson. I love you."

"Love you too, Bay."

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Bailey's heart thudded when Keating parked next to a two-door sports car with a rusted paint job. Whatever Glenn had been doing, it didn't look like he'd been making money.

"Want me to stay?" Keating asked.

Sadness nearly overwhelmed her. She barely knew Keating, but she really liked his face. Liked that he'd asked what she wanted. Liked that he was looking at her with an expression full of concern.

She was going to miss him.

"Why don't you get Cherry from the house? You two can pick up your Range Rover from Ray's and come back here to drop off my truck."

His jaw worked. "I should have made myself clearer. There are three things I'm willing to do. I can stay here in the truck, I can stand by your side, or I can go inside with Cherry and the girls. Leaving you and your girls alone with this asshole isn't something I can do."

*But he will.* So why get used to leaning on him now? Except that *fuck* did she want him by her side. "Why don't you text Cherry to let you in and hang out with her and the girls? It might ease Cherry's worry."

His chin jerked down in a sharp nod, but his frown deepened. "I'll do that, because you asked, not because I want to. I'm not your ex, Bailey. Leaving you alone in this is not my choice."

"I'll get out first. I'll lead him away from the house."

Keating's expression softened like he was gearing up to ask nicely or to say the sort of thing that would erode her resolve, so she hopped out of the truck before he could. The night air was cool, but that wasn't why her teeth were chattering and her whole body felt on the verge of collapse.

God, she wanted to wrap her arms around her girls and hide from this.

Glenn stepped out of his car and she was shocked by how he'd changed. Maybe it was the house lights casting unflattering shadows, but Glenn looked as though he'd aged a decade, his hair now more gray than blond, dark circles under his eyes. He was only fifteen years older than her, but he looked thirty years older.

"Bailey," Glenn said. "You look as beautiful as ever."

It was a compliment she hadn't heard from him while they were married. If he'd spoken to her at all, it had been about the budget or groceries or the kids, and she'd been okay with that, because that's what she thought happened to all married couples. Life got busy, and you took certain things for granted.

And she never questioned it, because she never took the security Glenn provided for granted. She was willing to be whatever he needed in return for him showing up at the end of every workday and earning enough to pay the bills and keep them fed and clothed. She'd thought she was happy, but what she'd really been was unafraid of the bottom falling out for the first time in her life.

"Why are you here?" she asked. Because suddenly all the other questions seemed less important. It didn't matter why he'd left or where he'd been. All that mattered was how badly he was going to fuck up the life she'd been building for their daughters.

Behind her, the truck door slammed. Glenn looked over her shoulder, eyes going wide. Keating took his time getting to the house, his glare laser centered on Glenn as he walked.

"Who's that?" Glenn asked.

"He's not your business."

Glenn opened his mouth, his eyes flashing with a heat she'd known once known well. He hated it when she talked back to him, when she kept any part of her life secret from him. But he snapped his mouth shut and straightened the threadbare polo he wore tucked into faded khakis. "I just want to know the people in my daughters' lives."

"What do you want, Glenn?"



“I’ve missed you.” Glenn took a step toward her, arms outstretched like he thought she might walk right into them. “I’ve missed my wife.”

She crossed her arms over her chest to keep her hands from shaking and studied the man she’d once been married to. She was torn between hating him and feeling some bit of fondness for the good days, for the comfortable life he’d provided.

And underneath it all, was guilt for not being a good wife to him. Not really. “I’m not your wife anymore, Glenn. We’re divorced.”

He froze, arms dropping to his sides, his smirk familiar. “That’s not possible, baby. I never signed anything.”

“You didn’t have to sign anything. I put the notice in the paper and you never responded. The judge awarded me an uncontested divorce.”

There was that flash in his eyes again, this one hotter, and his smirk became a sneer. “How long did you wait to divorce me, Bailey?”

“About as long as you waited to fuck your mistress after you cleaned out our bank accounts, I’d imagine, Glenn.”

He took a step back, and she relaxed. Glenn had never been aggressive toward Bailey and the girls. If anything, he’d been a bit milquetoast, rarely showing much emotion at all.

But she’d divorced Glenn and ended his parental rights without his permission, so she couldn’t blame him if he got angry. She’d be furious if their roles were reversed.

She wasn’t sure what an angry Glenn might do. She wasn’t at all sure who he’d become in the three years since she’d seen him last.

As for her own anger? It was still there, simmering as it always was, but she’d lived with it for a long, long time and fear was the winning emotion at the moment. Fear of what he might do if he decided he wanted their daughters.

Glenn smiled. “Gayle seduced me, baby, and I got caught up in a romance that wasn’t real. I miss you and I want you

back.”

“No.” The word burst from her like it had been waiting for its moment. The very idea of taking Glenn back, of returning to the life they’d lived, made her want to grab the girls and not stop running until they were so far away he’d never find them again. “You and I are divorced, Glenn, and that’s never going to change.”

His smile didn’t slip. “You’re angry, but you’ve never been one to let emotion dictate your decisions. Gayle is out of the picture, Bailey. She can’t hurt us anymore. Take me back and you’ll remember how happy we were.”

“Is that why you’re here? You thought you could just return to the happy little family we used to be?”

He held up his hands as though she’d screamed at him. “You’re upset right now. I get it. Let’s just take some time, cool off, and we can talk again tomorrow. Will you meet me for lunch?”

She wanted to turn him down so badly she felt sick with it. But she would never do that to her little girls. “If I can find a sitter, I’ll meet you at noon at Tate’s Diner.”

“Why don’t you bring the girls? I want to see them, too.”

“Do you have any idea how much you hurt them when you left? I’m not letting you anywhere near them until we’ve talked and figured out exactly how we’re going to navigate your relationship with them going forward.”

“Navigate?” His voice rose to a near shriek. “They’re *my* daughters.”

Maybe it was instinct or self-preservation, but telling him in the dark that he no longer had parental rights felt way too dangerous. “Your leaving traumatized them. Lily blamed herself for months. She thought you’d gone because you were mad at her. I won’t put them through that again.”

He deflated, his eyes going shiny in the light from above. “I never meant for her to think that.”

“Be real, Glenn. You weren’t thinking about any of us when you ran off with Gayle. I never saw it coming, but I’m prepared this time and I’m going to make sure you don’t hurt them again.”

He stepped forward, reaching for her. “Bailey, I—”

“You need to leave. I’ll see you at noon tomorrow. If I’m not there, do not come to the house. Call me, and I’ll let you know when I’m free again.” She didn’t want to get close enough to him to enter her number into his phone, so he recited it aloud as she entered it into her phone under Fuckface Glenn. “There, I’ve texted you, so you have my number.”

“Are the girls healthy? Are they happy now?”

“Yes. Now leave before I call the cops.”

He raised his hands, palms out, and backed toward his car, his mouth twisted in a mocking smirk. “No need to draw your weapon. I’m leaving.”

She watched him get into his car, watched until his taillights were all she could see, watched long after she saw no more sign of the man who’d once given her everything she ever thought she wanted only to rip it away again.

“You okay?”

She jumped and squeaked, slapping a hand to her chest.

“Shit.” Keating stepped into the light. “I’m an idiot.”

She punched his shoulder. “What the hell? I thought you were in the house.”

“I might have lied earlier. There was a fourth option I didn’t know about until I tried to go inside and discovered I couldn’t make myself do it.”

“What’s the fourth option?”

He ducked his head. “Hide in the dark and eavesdrop.”

She sighed. She didn’t have the energy to get mad at him and, frankly, she was glad to know he’d been there. A feeling she wasn’t at all interested in investigating. “What do you think he’s really after?”

“You don’t believe he wants you back?”

“I didn’t hear a word from him for three years. He’s not back for me.” He certainly wasn’t back for the woman she’d become in his absence. She didn’t think he’d like angry, bitter Bailey if he got to know her.

“Then he’s an even bigger idiot than I thought. And if he doesn’t want you back... I noticed he didn’t even ask about the kids until the end of the conversation.”

“I caught that, too.” Her heart sank. “I don’t want to keep my kids from their father, but it seems likely he’s only going to hurt them again.”

“Maybe,” Keating said. “But if he’s really back for good, I’m not sure how you’ll prevent him from seeing them. If they find out years from now that you kept them from their father...”

“Then I’m the bad guy.” Her stomach flipped at the thought. She’d give anything to go back in time and figure out how to make sure Glenn never intruded on their lives again. “But I’d take it, Keating. I’d take their lifelong hatred to keep them from hurting now.”

He pulled her into his arms and wrapped himself around her like he was her lifeline in the middle of a tornado. It felt so good tears of relief sprang to her eyes.

“You can’t protect them forever, Firecracker. You can just be their support and their comfort when they get hurt. That’s how they get strong.”

As quickly as he’d grabbed her, he let her go and stepped back. It’s what she wanted, she reminded herself as he walked toward the house. She might be sad he’d decided she was too much trouble, but it was for the best in the end.

He stopped on the bottom porch step. “I’m going to lunch with you tomorrow.”

She gasped. “What? Are you crazy? Absolutely not.”

He chuckled. “It was worth a try. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, then.”

“What’s tomorrow morning?”

“You’re training me to be a horse rancher. And you’re going to need me and Cherry here to babysit during lunch.”

“Keating, I...”

“Sorry, firecracker. You aren’t getting rid of me that easily.”

He stomped into the house and she followed, because she needed to see her babies. She needed to wrap them up in her arms and squeeze them until they pushed her away.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Glenn stood from his seat at the table as Bailey crossed the small diner. He didn't look better under the glare of fluorescent lights than he had in the dim light of the night before. He looked worn and weary. Any soft edges he'd had when he was her husband had roughened and hardened.

She slid into the booth across from him and he took his seat.

"You're late," he said. "So I ordered for you."

She glared at the glass of iced water in front of her. Glenn had always ordered for her at restaurants. It had irked her, but it's not like she hated the food he chose. He'd been good to her and kind and seemed to adore her, so she'd put up with the parts of him that annoyed her. That was compromise, that was a relationship. At least, that's what she'd believed.

He was no longer her husband, though, and she no longer needed his support or his paycheck. "I'll be right back." She pushed to her feet and wove between tables to the counter, behind which a server scribbled on a pad.

"Excuse me."

The server, a woman in her early twenties with her hair in an untidy ponytail and a streak of ketchup across her cheek, looked up at Bailey and gave her a huge smile. Her name tag identified her as Riley, and she reminded Bailey so much of her perpetually messy Melody that her heart constricted.

"Can I help you?"

Bailey pointed across the diner at Glenn. "My ex-husband over there took the liberty of ordering for me, and I'd like to change that order if it's not too late."

"Of course not." Riley walked to the pass through between the front of the house and the kitchen and returned a moment later with a slip of paper. She winced as she read the order. "Oh, yeah. He always order salad for you?"

"Always."

Riley looked up at her, all sympathy. “I love our food, but...” She glanced around before leaning in and lowering her voice. “This is not the place to order a salad.”

Bailey laughed, wishing she could eat lunch with Riley instead of Glenn. “Can I get the tuna melt and fries instead?”

Riley scribbled on the paper as she bobbed her head. “Much better choice.”

“Thank you.” Bailey started to turn away, but stopped. “Also, can I get an iced tea instead of water?”

“Sure thing.”

Bailey returned to her seat to find Glenn staring at her like he didn’t recognize her. “You like salad.”

“Sure. When I’m at home and I have fresh ingredients, I love a good salad. But when I’m out and someone else is cooking, I’d rather eat whatever the restaurant is known for doing well.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You never told me you didn’t want a salad.”

“I did.” Bailey had been a young, insecure woman when she met Glenn. “You ignored me or didn’t hear me, and I decided not to rock the boat.”

Glenn folded his hands on the table. “You’re saying I didn’t pay enough attention to you.”

Bailey was tempted to let him take all the blame, but it was hard when he was being so reasonable. She’d held onto her anger for a long time, but faced with Glenn, she had to admit she blamed herself as much as she blamed him. “You aren’t a mind reader, Glenn. And I wasn’t honest with you. I thought being a good wife and mother meant giving up the parts of myself that might disrupt our peace.” *That might make him leave.*

She’d had a year of therapy after Glenn left, as had her daughters, and she’d learned enough to know abandonment issues from her childhood had played a big role in her

marriage. Her mother had left Bailey and her brothers over and over again, for drugs, for men, and ultimately, in death.

As a child, she'd tried to be well behaved and agreeable to keep Mom around. Even after Logan took custody of Bailey and Grayson, she'd wanted to make things easy for him. That pattern repeated with Glenn, especially when she noticed signs of him pulling away.

Consciously, his affair had been a shock, but the therapist helped her realize she'd sensed it coming for years. Or maybe sensed it was already happening. Bailey had no idea how long Glenn had been seeing his assistant before they ran off together.

"I want to do things differently this time." Glenn leaned across the table and placed his hand over hers. "I want us to be honest about what we need and want."

"This time? Glenn, I—"

"One grilled chicken sandwich." Riley set Glenn's meal in front of him. "And one tuna melt." Riley placed Bailey's sandwich in front of her. "I'll be right back with your tea."

"Tea?" Glenn asked as Riley walked away. "Since when do you drink tea? And you hate tuna."

"No." Bailey reached for a fry. "You hate the smell of tuna, so I stopped buying it. I love fish. In all its forms."

Glenn smiled and pointed at her. "That's what I'm talking about. I need to know all these things about you, so we can have a marriage that's a true partnership."

Bailey put down the sandwich she'd just picked up. "Glenn, we're divorced. I told you that last night. I'm not your wife anymore, and I have no interest in being married to you ever again."

Glenn picked up his sandwich, clearly certain he was winning this debate. "You're angry, babe. I get that. Earning your forgiveness is going to take some time."

Bailey stared at him as he chewed, his jaw clicking in that way that always made her twitchy. "You might earn my



forgiveness, Glenn, but I'm not going to marry you again. I don't love you."

"Don't confuse anger with hate. I'm going to woo you like I've never wooed you before and I'm going to win you back."

She crossed her arms over her chest, that anger she thought had fled returning with a vengeance. "You're going to win me back?"

"Sure. We were good together, babe. The best." A tiny piece of lettuce shot out of his mouth and landed on the edge of her plate. "There was an unfortunate blip, but we can get past that. We owe it to the girls."

"We. Owe. It. To. The. Girls?" She clenched her teeth together so hard she could barely get the words out.

"Right," he said around a bite of sandwich. "The girls will be so happy to have us together again. When can I see them?"

Bailey reached across that table, took Glenn's sandwich out of his hands right before he was about to take another bite, and threw it across the diner.

It landed in the center of a table where two elderly women were seated. Okay, maybe she hadn't thought that one through.

"What the fuck?" Glenn bellowed into the suddenly silent diner.

Bailey ignored him, got up, and crossed the floor to the table she'd hit. She grabbed a napkin and bent over to look each woman in the face. Both women had lined skin and bright brown eyes and looked enough alike to be sisters.

"I'm so sorry I hit your table," Bailey said. "I lost my temper."

One of the pair grinned up at her. "Did he deserve it, dear?"

"He ran off with his mistress three years ago and he just showed back up yesterday. He thinks he's going to marry me again for the sake of our two little girls."

The old woman patted her hand. "Kick him in the balls when you're done with him."

“Good idea.” Bailey grinned at the thought. “I think I got some mayonnaise on your table here. Would you like me to clean it for you?”

“It’s not bothering us. I wouldn’t say no if you want to add my lunch to your ex-husband’s tab.”

Bailey looked up as Riley approached. “Please add their bill to my husband’s tab. I’m sorry about the mess.”

“No problem. But if you throw anything else, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“I’m already headed out. This is probably going to get even uglier.”

“Want me to box up that tuna melt for you?”

“That would be amazing, Riley. Thank you.”

Bailey chucked Glenn’s sandwich in the nearest trash can, walked back to the table, and grabbed her purse.

“Bailey, what the hell has gotten into you?”

She faced the man she’d been married to for six years and couldn’t remember what she’d ever seen in him. “Nothing has gotten into me, Glenn. I just don’t care anymore whether you like me.”

With that, she spun on her heel and headed outside. She found a picnic table next to a dumpster behind the diner and took a seat. She breathed in slow and deep. Counted to ten.

Counted to one hundred.

Counted to two hundred.

But she couldn’t find calm.

What the hell was he thinking? Did he honestly think he could show back up after three years and she’d be *grateful*?

Either he was delusional or she’d once been that spineless. She couldn’t think about that now, because she wasn’t ready to investigate just how much of a limp noodle she’d been with Glenn.

“What the hell, Bailey? You can’t just throw my lunch across the diner and stick me with the bill.”

“Fifty thousand dollars, Glenn.”

“What?” His face was red and his hair was flapping in the breeze to reveal a bald spot on the crown of his head.

“That’s how much you took from our savings. The savings I helped build by clipping coupons and buying your suits on sale. Fifty thousand dollars that was supposed to be our daughters’ college fund.” Fifty thousand dollars had been the only thing she’d ever argued with him for. She’d wanted that savings as an emergency plan and a fund for their daughters’ future.

He’d wanted to buy a brand new car and a trip to Vail.

She’d fought with him to build that savings account repeatedly. He’d given in and she’d always thought it was because he loved her and wanted her to feel safe. Now, she wondered if it was just guilt because he was cheating on her.

“I earned that money,” Glenn said. “It was never yours.”

Her eyes stung with an unexpected hurt, but she shoved that down and clung to her anger. “That’s not what you said when I dropped out of college to be a stay-at-home Mom. You said raising our kids was a tough job and if I was paid for the hours I worked, I’d make more than you did.”

Glenn sucked in a deep breath and stared out at the parking lot for a few beats of her heart before turning to look at her with a forced smile. “I didn’t come here to argue, babe. I just want my family back.”

“How long were you fucking Gayle before you ran off with her?”

He took a step toward her and she wished for a cross and elephant garlic to ward him off. “What Gayle and I had was purely physical, Bailey. You never wanted sex anymore and I —”

Damn, she wished she had something else to throw at him. “Are you actually trying to blame me for your affair?”

“Of course not. But you were so involved with the kids, I barely got to spend any time with you. I was lonely and Gayle made me laugh. I got caught up.”

“I thought you said it was just physical.”

Glenn’s face twisted in frustration. “It doesn’t matter what it was, because it’s over now, and I’ve come back for you.”

“And the kids?”

“Of course. You and the kids. I miss my girls so much. When can I see them again?”

“Do you have any idea how much it hurt them when you left? Melody cried for months and Lily just shut down.” Bailey’s throat went tight at the memory. “I didn’t know how to reach her. She was so little, and it was like the light just went out of her.”

“Lily’s always been too serious. But the girls are fine now. Kids are resilient. Maybe we should all get together for a family game night like we had when they were little.”

The family game nights Glenn often missed because he had to work late.

Bailey ran a hand through her hair, only to be stopped by the neat bun on the top of her head. She felt like such an idiot for spending time on her hair that morning. She’d even put on make-up after months of living make-up free. All because she wanted to look like she had it all together. She’d hoped she and Glenn could talk like adults and come to a reasonable way forward.

Glenn had always been reasonable in the past. Though, the truth was, she’d almost never disagreed with him. She’d made it easy for him to be the good guy by never calling him out on his crap.

“I don’t want you to see the girls until you can prove you’re going to stick around for a while, or at least visit regularly. If you’re just going to spend an afternoon with them and disappear again, you’ll do far more harm than good.” At least, that was the conclusion she’d reached while she’d laid awake all night and tried to make sense of her emotions.

In her gut, she wanted her kids to have nothing to do with their father, because she didn't trust him anymore. She also hated him and never wanted to see him again, but she'd worked past those emotions until she'd figured out what was best for her kids.

She'd even called Logan and Grayson that morning to see if they agreed with her plan. They had. And she'd had to stop herself right before she called Keating to get his opinion.

It helped that she still didn't have Keating's phone number. Or at least she hadn't until she'd gotten to the restaurant and seen a text from Keating, who'd gotten her number from Cherry.

*Stand strong*, had been his message.

Glenn stopped pacing and faced her, his tie loose, sweat stains forming at his pits. "I'm sleeping in my car, okay. I've been looking for a job, but it's hard to find one when I haven't worked in the states in three years."

"Where are you looking for a job?" It couldn't be in Rawlton. There were only a handful of businesses there and none of them was a life insurance company like Glenn had worked for.

"I'm looking here. Milford. Anything within a few hours' drive. I'd hoped to have a job before I came to see you, but I wasn't having any luck and I couldn't wait any longer."

"That's a good start." She didn't like the way he wasn't meeting her gaze. "When you have a job and a home, we'll set up a time for you to visit with the kids."

"You're serious?" Glenn stared at her, eyes wide, jaw low. "You're going to keep me from my kids because I don't have a fucking job?"

"Yes. You burned any trust you had with me, Glenn. I'm not going to risk my kids' happiness when you could decide finding a job around here is too difficult and disappear again. I don't care if you're working as an insurance adjuster or a dishwasher, you just need to have a job."

“Bailey, come on.” His expression softened. “I’m their Dad, your husband. I miss my girls.”

He looked so genuinely sad that her resolve faltered. “I won’t keep them from you. I just need some proof that you’re going to stick around this time.”

“You’re serious.” Glenn shook his head. “You’ve changed, Bailey. You’ve gotten hard and cruel.”

Flexing her fingers to keep from fisting them, she stalked toward him. “You think I’ve changed, Glenn? Think that had anything to do with you walking out on us and leaving us with nothing? I had to call my brother to help us move because I didn’t even have the cash for a moving truck. It’s a miracle I didn’t have to short sell the house. You walked away, and you didn’t call once in three years to make sure we were doing okay. You think I’m hard? It was you who made me this way.

He squared his shoulders, a smirk twisting his face slowly. “You can’t keep me from my kids, Bay. I have rights.”

“Not anymore. I went to a judge and had your parental rights terminated. That’s what happens when a parent abandons his kids.”

His jaw ticked and his eyes heated. “You took my fucking kids away from me? How could you do that? I’m their father.”

“You *were* their father. You lost that privilege when you walked out on them.”

Rage built in Glenn’s expression and Bailey took a step back, expecting him to yell, scream, maybe even lash out physically.

Instead, he breathed in and out slowly a few times. Then he smiled. “I made a mistake, babe, but I’m going to fix it. Will you help me? Can you give me enough money to get a hotel room and—”

Just when Bailey thought nothing could shock her anymore... “I’m not giving you a dime.” She walked past him toward the front of the diner.

“Bay. Bailey. Babe.” Glenn’s footsteps tapped the pavement behind her. “I just need a couple hundred dollars. I’ll pay you back.”

Riley popped out the front door of the diner. “You forgot your sandwich.”

Bailey had never been so happy to see another person. “Thank you, Riley.”

Bailey took the to go bag and marched to her truck without looking back. Glenn didn’t follow or call after her.

She got in her truck and she drove. She drove until she’d calmed down enough to eat her sandwich. Then she drove some more. She drove until her heart rate slowed and she’d pushed back the tears.

She’d cried enough over Glenn. She wouldn’t give him anything more, not even one tear.

Once she was calm, she drove back to Gray’s ranch, where Keating and Cherry were watching the girls.

She parked in front of the house and started to get out, but movement caught her eye. She looked back toward the barn and saw a small figure standing on the roof.

“Melody? Lily?” Bailey leapt from her truck and started racing toward the barn. She was less than thirty feet from it when that tiny figure on the roof screamed and fell.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bailey raced toward Keating, and he couldn't help his wide, goofy smile.

"Hey, Bailey." He waved and took Lily's helmet. "Did you see Lily fly?"

Bailey skidded to a stop and dropped to her knees in front of Lily. "Baby, are you okay?" She patted Lily, twisting her this way and that as if looking for injuries.

It occurred to him how Lily's ride must have looked from the driveway.

"She's fine," Keating said. "She used the zip line to get down here."

"Incoming!"

Keating looked up to see Melody heading toward him and got ready to catch her if necessary.

It wasn't necessary.

Melody hit the speed bump he'd put on the zip line and slowed to a gentle stop at the base of the flagpole. He helped her unclip.

"How...?" Bailey looked at her daughters, then up at the peak of the barn. "How did you set this up?"

"When your brother designed the camp, he asked what he should have in case he wanted to install a ropes course or a zip line in the future. It was easy enough for him to have the builders add a deck to the barn roof with sturdy fittings for a zip line. He outfitted the camp flagpole and the roof of the ranch house as well."

Bailey looked entirely bewildered. "He never..." She spun, taking it all in. "Can I try it?"

"Hell, yeah." Keating had about a million questions about her lunch date with Glenn. He was guessing it had gone well since she'd spent the entire afternoon with the guy, but questions could wait. She deserved some fun. "We were about



to pack it up so we could get started making dinner, but I think we've got time for a few more runs." He looked at the two adorable little girls he'd spent the afternoon with. "What do you say, Gremlins? Want to keep the zip line open a bit longer for your Mom?"

"Can we go again?" Melody asked.

"Sure." Keating ruffled her messy hair, and she grinned up at him.

"Incoming!"

Keating looked up to see Cherry flying toward them. He chuckled. "We should have let Cherry know we aren't done."

"It's okay," Bailey said. Lily had wrapped herself around her mother and Bailey patted her back absently. "I can try it another time."

"No, Mommy," Melody said. "Cherry will go back up. She loves zip lining."

"Woo-hoo!" Cherry landed on her feet at the base of the flagpole. "That was fun." She unclipped from the line and turned. "Hey, Bailey. How was your afternoon?"

Bailey pinched her lips together, her brow creased.

"It's about to get a whole lot more awesome," Keating said. "She wants to try out our zip line."

Cherry grabbed Bailey's hand and dragged her toward the barn. "You are going to love this."

Bailey looked back at him, nerves apparent in her wide-eyed gaze.

"It's okay," he said. "I'll be waiting here to catch you."

Ten minutes later, when Bailey came flying toward him, eyes bright, cheeks red, her smile huge, he didn't even wait for her to come to a complete stop before he grabbed her and kissed her with a smacking peck to her lips.

She laughed and fought free of his arms. "Not where the kids can see."

He ignored the downside of that comment, that she didn't want the kids to know about him because she probably didn't see a future with him, and focused on the good, that she might kiss him again when the kids weren't around.

They ended up taking turns on the zip line for the next half hour. Even Keating took a few turns. And, when Cherry took her final ride down, he unhooked the end of the zip line from the apparatus he'd installed and walked it back toward the barn, just in case anyone got any ideas about using it when he wasn't around.

"Time to eat," he said. "I'm starving."

Melody let out a mild whine, but he'd heard her stomach rumble. She was hungry, too.

Once he'd secured the zip line to the foundation of the barn using a second apparatus he'd installed, he stowed all the gear back in the Range Rover and met Cherry, Bailey, and the kids on the back patio.

"Cherry said you're planning to barbecue?" Bailey asked. "You really don't have to do that. You've done so much already."

"Okay. I won't barbecue." He turned to Cherry. "Got the grill going?"

"It's started up and ready for some good food." Cherry made a mock salute.

"I thought you said you weren't going to barbecue?" Bailey said.

He grinned. "I'm not. I'm from the South, where we call what I'm about to do cooking out. Barbecue involves roasting a pig all day."

Bailey crossed her arms over her chest. "Hilarious. Whatever you call it, it's unnecessary. I should cook for you since you babysat all day."

Keating grabbed her shoulders. There were so many things he wanted to say to her, but none of them were safe to say in front of her kids. "Why don't we take a vote?"

Her lips twitched, and she shook her head.

Keating let her go and turned to the kids. “All in favor of grilled hamburgers and hot dogs with potato salad, grilled veggies, and key lime pie for dessert, say hurray.”

The kids and Cherry shouted hurray.

“All those in favor of...” He turned to Bailey, eyebrows high.

She shifted on her feet. “Spaghetti and microwave popcorn for dessert.”

Crickets.

“Sorry, Miss Tiller,” Keating said. “The votes are in and you have lost. Now, go play with your kids and let me make dinner.”

For a moment, Bailey looked completely lost. How long had it been since she’d had time to just play with her kids without needing to get something else done?

She turned back to him and smiled like he was her hero. Something snapped in his chest. Bailey was real and his feelings for her weren’t another bit of fun, but something that could pull him under and drown him.

The flip side of having a soul mate was that he now had a person who could break his heart, could break him, in a way he’d never before had reason to contemplate.

Shoving that feeling aside, he helped Cherry bring out the food and got to work grilling. Bailey and the kids ran around the dusty backyard playing a game of freeze tag in the evening light. The setting sun illuminated them from behind and turned them into sparkly shadows.

“I’m going to marry her,” he said to his life designer.

“I thought we’d already decided she’s the right choice for the next step of your ‘retire happy’ plan.”

“We did, but I’m not sure I really meant it until now.”

Cherry tapped at her phone. “Want me to order you a ring? Make reservations in Vegas for the proposal?”

He chuckled. “Not sure we’re quite there yet.”

“Might want to get there, boss. Sloane’s already got a new girlfriend.”

Keating’s dreamy romantic haze vanished as his competitive drive kicked in. “They can’t be serious. He just got dumped two days ago.”

Cherry held up her phone, and he peered at it, the sun glinting off the screen and making it hard to see. “What am I looking at? A news article about some famous person?”

“That famous person is Clarion Bell, and the guy she’s cuddling up to is your brother.”

Keating snorted. “I know Clarion from when I was a kid. No way is someone with her talent going to tie herself to my brother.”

“She’s a singer, Keating. Your brother is a guitarist. And she’s known for making impulsive decisions, like moving to the middle of nowhere Virginia to live a simpler life because the paparazzi broke into her LA house.”

“That conniving, scheming, two-bit...” Keating broke off as Melody dodged within hearing range of the patio. He smiled at her as he moved his spatula over the grill like he was doing something. As soon as she was out of earshot, he turned back to Cherry. “Order the ring. Make the reservations. I want to be ready when the time is right.”

“Done and done,” Cherry said as she scrolled on her phone. “As usual, I’m one step ahead of you, boss.”

“Just so we’re clear. This stays between us. I don’t want Bailey to get the wrong idea.”

“Get the wrong idea about what?” Bailey asked.

Keating jumped and screamed like a little boy whose voice hadn’t changed yet.

“What are you?” he asked. “Half cat?”

Bailey narrowed her eyes, hands on her hips. “What would I get the wrong idea about?”

“The burgers,” Cherry said. “Keating is eating a veggie burger, and he’s worried what you might think of him.”

“Why would I think anything of him eating a veggie burger?”

Melody and Lily joined Bailey, both of them looking up at him with the same confused look their mother had.

“Toxic masculinity,” Cherry said. “You know, the idea that manly men eat meat. Keating got to know a few cows and now he can’t stomach beef, and he doesn’t want you to revoke his man card.”

Keating glared at Cherry, because really? Still, it was better than the truth.

“Seriously?” Bailey asked. “Is that something you worry about? I have two brothers and I thought I’d heard it all, but that one’s new to me.”

“Your brothers are very in touch with their femininity,” Cherry said. “I think it has to do with having a sister like you and being raised by a single mother.”

Truth was, Keating didn’t care if Bailey knew he’d given up beef or why he’d done it, but he couldn’t say that without contradicting Cherry and having to tell Bailey the truth. That hard pit forming in the center of his belly had to be about hunger and not the lie he was allowing Cherry to tell about him.

Bailey patted his shoulder. “Nothing to be embarrassed about, Manly Man. I think it’s sweet you love cows.”

“I love cows,” Lily said. “Can I have a veggie burger?”

“Me, too!” Melody said.

“I have hot dogs for you girls,” Keating said. “They aren’t made from cow, they’re made from pig.”

“Pig?” Lily’s voice pitched so high Keating’s ears rang. “Pigs are the smartest animals in the world. I can’t eat pig.”

Bailey gave Keating a look he understood meant he’d started trouble she was going to be cleaning up. “We can all

have veggie burgers,” he said. “I bet Cherry’s even got some veggie dogs in the house.”

Cherry had brought over enough food from his house that morning to feed them all for a month. There had to be veggie dogs in there somewhere. “Nope,” Cherry said. “No veggie dogs, but I’ve got plenty of veggie burgers.”

The kids cheered and ran off, calling Bailey to join them. “I still eat cows,” she said, leaning toward Keating. “Make my burger real beef.”

“As you wish,” Keating said with a grin.

Bailey ran off after her kids and Cherry brought out a sleeve of frozen veggie burgers. “You’re welcome.”

“Toxic masculinity? Really? She’s going to think I have issues.”

“You do have issues.”

“What issues do I have?”

Cherry snorted and ran off to join Bailey and the girls in their game. Keating grilled and watched them play and whistled to himself.

He could envision this as his future.

It felt really damn good.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bailey took the girth strap from Keating's hand and gave it a hard tug, tightening the saddle around Lightning, the six-year-old bay he'd be riding. "You have to pull hard or the saddle will fall off."

Lightning snorted and shuffled, and Bailey patted his soft flank. He was a sweet horse.

"I don't want to make him mad." Keating looked so truly worried that Bailey laughed.

"You'll have to get over that if you're going to be any kind of rancher, Keating. These are big animals and they've been wearing saddles for generations. If a tight girth hurt them, we'd have found out a long time ago."

"And they like this? They like having this apparatus put on them and being sat on by a human?"

"Believe it or not, I actually know the answer because Lily asked the same question, and I had to look it up for her."

"Great minds think alike."

Keating hid it well, but he had a deep empathy for humans and animals, just like Lily did.

Three nights before, when Keating had grilled dinner for all of them, she'd noticed how attuned he was to her kids and their variable moods. He'd even seen before she did Lily was drifting off to sleep over her veggie burger.

He'd helped her convince the kids it was time for home and bed and he'd helped her load them up. It had been nice. Really nice. To have help from someone who wasn't her family. To have a man stand next to her and be on her side when her kids tried to convince her they were wide awake and ready for more zip lining.

It had been heavenly to have a man who was attracted to her also seem to be utterly smitten with her kids.

It was a feeling she could see herself getting used to.

It was terrifying.

She gave the girth one more tug and fastened it. She turned to Keating to find him closer than she'd realized. "Horses were bred to be ridden, but they each have unique personalities and likes and dislikes. Some horses only tolerate being ridden and some horses hate it. Since learning that, thanks to Lily, I've tried to be attuned to what the horses want and like. Luckily, most of the horses Grayson found for his ranch have a history of being ridden and seem to really enjoy it. They also seem to like kids, which is important for camp horses."

"What would you do if you had a horse who hated it?"

"We do have one of those." She pointed to a stall at the end of the barn. "Millie is an older horse, slow and uninterested in being ridden. We try to use her only when we have no other choice and to only use her for the kids who are just learning and not ready to go faster than a walk. Millie prefers to be left alone to munch on grass in the paddock."

"Not much grass to be found out here."

Bailey nodded. "Water's a precious resource, and it doesn't make sense for us to change the natural environment by growing grass. We leave it as it is and feed the horses mostly hay. Still, they manage to find areas with wild grass to graze."

"You really love what you do here. Your eyes light up when you talk about the horses."

"I do love it." Bailey smiled. "I grew up in the city and lived in the suburbs when I was married to Glenn. Before I moved out here to help Grayson, I had no experience with nature or horses, but it feels like what I was always meant to do. I love being outside all day and I love the variability of this job. I never know quite what my day is going to be when I step into the barn each morning. Horses can be just as moody as humans."

Keating put his hands on her hips and moved in closer. Her heart picked up its pace and her gaze dropped to his lips. This man could light her on fire with just a touch. "You have a



loving, nurturing spirit,” he said. “And you’re an excellent teacher.”

Bailey had never thought of herself as nurturing. She’d always taken care of people because it was what needed to be done, but she couldn’t deny she loved doing it. Taking care of others fulfilled her in a way she’d never experienced before she had kids.

“You’re not a terrible student,” she said. “You’ve really got the hang of mucking out stalls.”

His lips tipped up, and he leaned in closer. “Are you impressed enough by my skill to reward me with a kiss?”

She looked for her kids, but they were running around playing hide and seek with Cherry, the sound of their laughter and shouts drifting into the barn. Thank god for Cherry and her seemingly limitless energy. Bailey had offered to pay her for babysitting repeatedly and told her she didn’t need to entertain the kids all the time, but Cherry insisted hanging out with Lily and Melody was the best part of her day.

“I’m not looking for a relationship,” Bailey said. “I don’t fit into your marriage and family retirement plan.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get for as long as you’ll let me. I just want to be around you. To touch and kiss you whenever I want.”

She popped onto the toes of her boots and pressed her lips to his.

Keating wrapped those big arms of his around her, the heat of his forearms against the small of her back where her tank had ridden up when she lifted her arms.

The skin-to-skin connection felt so good it almost distracted her from the kiss, but then Keating slid his tongue into her mouth and deepened the kiss and she sank into him, wanting to get closer.

Behind them, Lightning skittered back, but she’d tied him to the stall with a lead and he wouldn’t go anywhere.

Bailey hopped up and wrapped her legs around Keating's waist.

He chuckled into her mouth.

Then groaned when she nipped his bottom lip. He walked with her until her back was against a wall and he was pressing into her so she could feel the hardness of him at her center. She wanted to move against him, but he had her pinned so she couldn't.

"Think anyone would notice if we disappeared into the tack room for an hour?" he asked, his lips puffy from kissing her, his eyes so dilated with lust they were nearly black.

"The girls are going to be in here looking for lunch in twenty minutes."

He moved his hips, grinding against her, and they moaned in unison. "I can make twenty minutes work."

"Okay." So what if a quickie wasn't how she'd pictured her first time with Keating - likely or not, she'd absolutely fantasized about it - but she was pretty sure she would spontaneously combust if she didn't get this man inside her in the next three seconds. "You have protection?"

"Don't need it." He was already moving toward the back of the barn and the tack room.

Bailey glanced at Lightning, but he was munching on hay in his stall, not caring that he had a saddle on his back. They hadn't put his halter or bit on, yet, so he'd be fine for twenty minutes.

Kissing her neck, Keating carried her to the tack room and kicked the door closed behind them.

"I'm sure you think you're clean, Keating," Bailey said as he pushed her against the tack room door. "But I'm not going to trust your good intentions. Plus, I'm not on the pill and I—"

Keating pushed her legs off his hips and lowered her to stand on the floor. "Don't need protection." He leaned in close, his smirk cocky, his eyes molten heat. "Because I'm not going to fuck you in a tack room when we've only got twenty

minutes at the outside. The first time I fuck you, it's going to be on a comfortable bed where I can spread you out and explore every inch of you."

"Oh." Bailey found it suddenly hard to breathe. "So, what are we going to do?"

Keating dropped to his knees, pulled off Bailey's running shorts and her panties and pressed his mouth to her core.

"Keating. I've been working outside all day and I... Oh, God. Yes. Please. Just like that." She managed one more thought before she was lost to sensation.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Keating's cock ached, pressing against his fly, wanting so badly to be inside this amazing woman. His brain, however, was one hundred percent on board with feasting on her.

She was gorgeous.

So fucking perfect.

Her pussy was soft and tasted like sex and lust and woman and he couldn't get enough.

Couldn't get enough of her bucking against his face, couldn't get enough of her soft moans, couldn't get e-fucking-nough of the feel of her smooth legs under his hands.

He slid a finger into her, and she gasped, the sound pure pleasure and need.

"More," she whispered. She was wild with need, uninhibited, and if he was given the opportunity to do nothing but pleasure this woman for the rest of his life, he'd ask where to sign up.

He pushed two fingers into her and she rocked her hips, pulling him deeper. Damn, she was driving him crazy. He pressed a hand to his crotch to relieve some pressure, but it wasn't nearly enough.

"I want," Bailey started, but she lost her words when he didn't stop licking her, didn't stop tasting her.

He moved his tongue in a circular motion around her clit and she hissed with a nearly inhuman sound. "Don't stop," she gasped.

Fuck it. Keating couldn't take it. He unzipped his shorts, pulled out his cock and gripped it tight. He looked up at Bailey, his mouth still working her, to find her gaze on his cock in his hand.

She licked her lips. "I could help you out with that."

He took his mouth away from her just long enough to speak. "Not enough time. You want me to get us both off while you

watch?”

She nodded, clearly unable to speak. He watched her as he moved his hand up and down over himself. Her hips rocked, her eyes fixed on what he was doing, pushing him closer to the edge.

“You like this, Firecracker?”

She nodded. “I want to see it all.”

He went back to licking her while he pumped his cock. His fingers worked inside her and his tongue matched the rhythm. It was a challenge to keep everything going, but he was more than up to it. Honestly, just getting her off was going to get him close to blowing.

“God, Keating.” Her voice was a breathy moan that made goosebumps rise on his skin. “I’m so close.”

“Me, too,” he said against her.

She slapped a hand over her mouth and screamed into her palm as her body convulsed under his mouth. Her pussy squeezed his fingers hard and her pleasure, the eager movements of her body, sent him past that wall and into pure pleasure.

He came in jerky spurts all over his hand and her thigh.

“Shit,” he said. “Sorry.”

“So good,” Bailey said. “I don’t even care.”

He found a clean towel and got them both cleaned up. Bailey was just pulling her shorts back on when, “Mom, where are you?” rang through the barn.

Bailey looked at him, eyes wide. “Will they be able to tell?”

He pressed a kiss to her adorably upturned nose and smoothed the few strands of hair that had come loose from her ponytail. “They don’t even know what sex is, do they?”

“Well, they know where babies come from and the general idea of how they’re made, but—”

“Moooom. It’s time for lunch.”

“They won’t be able to tell.” Keating kissed her sweet lips. “Let’s go make those kids some lunch.”

He couldn’t read the expression on Bailey’s face, but her eyes got glassy, and she looked like she was ready to cry. He hoped she didn’t regret what they’d done.

He let himself out of the tack room to give her space, if that’s what she needed. Or maybe to give himself space. As much as he might tell himself he’d be okay with her never wanting a relationship, he was already far too attached for that to be true. If she regretted what had just happened between them, he wasn’t sure he could handle it.

Not seeming to need space, though, Bailey walked out right behind him.

Melody and Lily came running up the aisle a moment later. “There you are,” Lily said. “We couldn’t find you.”

“I was showing Mr. Keating some things in the tack room.”

“She was,” Keating said. “I’m thinking about taking a riding lesson with you girls this afternoon.”

“Mom says we’ve outgrown what she can teach us.” Melody smiled, chin high. “We’re better riders than she is.”

“I need to find them another riding instructor.” Bailey carefully avoided his gaze. “But I haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

He had a feeling her need for new brake pads might have interfered with hiring a riding instructor.

“Who teaches the kids during the summer?” he asked.

“I teach the beginners. And we found a college student among the counselor applicants who could teach the more experienced riders.”

“Ella Mae taught us during the summer.” Lily took Keating’s big hand in her own and led him out of the barn. “But she had to go back to school.”

“She’s going to be a scientist who makes medicine,” Melody said.

“Girls,” Bailey said. “I’ve got to get the saddle off Lightning for now. Why don’t you show Mr. Keating where the lunch fixings are and I’ll be right in?”

Keating glanced back at her over his shoulder. “Need help?”

She smiled, shook her head, and waved him on.

“She knows how to do all the horse stuff by herself,” Lily said in her adult-like, serious voice. “She never needs help.”

Keating glanced back again, but Bailey was already out of sight. He wondered if Bailey truly believed she didn’t need help or if she was afraid of what might happen if she accepted it.

They found Cherry already in the kitchen, a pan on the stove, butter sizzling. “Good job, girls. Did you ask your mother if she wants grilled cheese for lunch, too?”

“Lily forgot to ask,” Melody said.

Lily jerked free of Keating’s hand and faced her sister, hands on her hips. “You forgot, too.”

“Cherry asked you to do it, not me.”

“You didn’t remember either.” Lily’s voice didn’t rise in volume, but her tone was fierce.

“It’s okay,” Keating said. “Your mom will be here soon and she can tell us what she wants herself. I bet she’d like some fruit salad. Want to help me make it?”

“Lily’s with me making grilled cheese,” Cherry said. “Melody can help you with the fruit salad.”

“Great.” Keating gave Cherry a thumbs up. For a woman who’d practically grown up as an only child, she was very good at defusing the tension between the siblings. “Come on, Melody. Let’s see what fruit you’ve got here.”

Unfortunately, the fridge was mostly bare.

“Mom needs to go grocery shopping,” Melody said. “But we don’t keep much food here, anyway, because we usually eat at home.”

Keating wondered why Bailey and the kids didn't just live at the ranch house, but figured maybe she wanted to give the kids a home of their own away from their uncle's business.

"Well, it looks like we're going to be making a watermelon and banana fruit salad."

"Ewww," Lily said from the step stool she was standing on next to Cherry. "That's gross."

"You're gross," Melody said. "You aren't even supposed to be helping with the fruit."

"We can make this work," Keating said. "But the bickering has to stop or I'm going to eat my grilled cheese with Lightning instead of with you."

"I want to eat with Lightning," Melody said.

Keating shook his head and laughed. Outsmarted again by a kid a quarter of his age. "How about we eat outside on the patio? That way, Lightning won't get jealous of our grilled cheese."

"Grilled cheese?" Bailey said from the doorway. "It's ninety degrees out there today."

"All we could find in the fridge was bread, cheese and butter," Cherry said. "I'm not a fan of plain cheese sandwiches."

"Me neither," Lily said.

"Right." Bailey pressed a hand to her head like it might be hurting. "I was planning to get groceries last night after dinner, but the kids were exhausted by the time we got home and I got them fed. We can go this afternoon."

"Make a list," Cherry said. "I'll go."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You're not." Cherry pointed at Keating. "Boss man over there is paying me to do whatever you need while he's learning about horses." She gave the girls a mischievous smile. "I get into trouble if I don't keep busy."



Bailey looked at Keating, brows high. “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“Cherry’s here to work. And she refuses to let me pay her to sit by the pool and work on her tan.” He shook his head, pretending to be exasperated. “Gen Z and their work ethic, amiright?”

Bailey didn’t look at all convinced. “I can get my own groceries and I can pay for your babysitting services, Cherry.”

“You can’t afford me. Keating overpays me as a favor to my sister. They all want me to be a success at this life designing gig, and I refused to take start-up money without putting in some work.”

“Besides.” Keating rubbed at the strange ache in his chest because Bailey was looking at him weirdly. Either she really liked what he’d done or she was ready to kick him out of her life. He wished he could read her better. “I want you to teach me to ride and you won’t let me pay you. Consider Cherry running errands for you as my form of payment.” The decision not to let him pay her had come after they’d kissed and Keating was still trying to change Bailey’s mind.

“I love any excuse to drive the Range Rover around town,” Cherry said.

“Okay.” Bailey smiled. Finally. “Thank you.”

Over lunch, they made a grocery list. When Bailey and the kids headed to the barn to get the horses ready for an afternoon ride, Keating walked out to his Range Rover with Cherry.

“I’m not going to damage your baby,” Cherry said. “Don’t worry.”

“Not worried.” Keating handed her the keys. “While you’re at the store, get whatever we need for the house, too.”

“Not sure we need anything.”

“Get us some stuff we don’t need, then. When Bailey asks what the total is, tell her everything was rung up together and you’re going to need some time to calculate her portion.”

Cherry's eyes sparkled. "You don't think she'll see right through that?"

"If I did it? Probably. But you play ditsy really well when you want to."

Cherry's smile widened. "Why Keating, are you trying to flatter me?"

He chuckled. "Just asking for your help. Again." He started to turn away and stopped. "You know, I hired you on as my life designer as a favor to your sister, but you've been a tremendous help. If it weren't for you, I'd probably be back in Vegas already trying to get my old life back."

Cherry bounced on her toes and wrapped herself around him in a hug. "You're the best boss ever."

He hugged her back and sent her on her way. Cherry acted the part of the ditsy party girl, but he'd seen layers upon layers of depth in her. He'd also seen her swipe at her eyes as she climbed up into the Range Rover. His compliment had meant more to her than she wanted him to know, which meant her business as a life designer probably meant more to her than she'd let anyone know.

When Keating got to the barn, Bailey had already saddled her girls' horses and was working on saddling Lightning for him.

"Hurry up, Mr. Keating," Melody called as she led her horse out to the ring. "I want to race you."

Bailey sighed heavily and narrowed her eyes at Keating. "No racing or messing around out there. Even if you were a seasoned rider, you don't know Lightning and Lightning doesn't know you. Play it safe today."

"I wouldn't do anything to hurt your girls."

She patted his shoulder and handed him Lightning's lead rope. "It's not them I'm worried about, Manly Man."

Keating led the horse out of the barn and into the riding ring. Bailey showed him how to get onto the horse while her daughters trotted around the ring in circles.

“This is a western saddle,” Bailey said. “I thought it was a good place to start for you. Hold on to the saddle horn if you need to, but you’re meant to hold the reins in one hand so the other hand is free to lasso a calf or shoot an outlaw.”

He adjusted his seat and decided he’d impress her by keeping his right hand off that saddle horn.

“Loosen your grip on the reins,” Bailey said. “Yep, just like that.”

“Feels like I ought to be holding them in my right hand.”

“It’ll take some getting used to. But you’ll get the hang of it. I find myself steering the truck with my left hand now, because I’ve gotten so used to steering a horse with it.”

Keating tapped his helmet. “Glad I’ve got this while I get the hang of it.” Keating might be a daredevil in most aspects of his life, but he was a big believer in safety. Opening an adventure park without top-of-the-line safety protocols was an invitation to disaster. A cowboy hat might look cooler, but he’d choose the brain protection every day.

“Me, too,” Bailey said. “Now, knowing how hesitant you are to hurt an animal, I chose Lightning, because you can get him to walk with just a cluck of your tongue and a loosening of the reins.”

She clucked. “Like that.”

Keating clucked and kept his grip on the reins loose, and the horse walked forward. It took him a minute or two to adjust to the feel of the horse, but he got the hang of it.

“You’ve got a good seat,” Bailey said when he passed her. She was sitting on the fence, watching them ride. “Just remember to keep your heels down.”

Melody came up next to him on her horse. “Why haven’t you ridden a horse before, Mr. Keating?”

“That’s a good question. I guess I was always more interested in vehicles with motors. I didn’t realize what I was missing.”

“That’s what Daddy said. He said he used to work too much, but now he’s going to play with me and Lily all the time. He wants Mommy to teach him how to ride a horse, too.”

Keating’s blood went cold and, if he wasn’t on a horse, he’d have stopped moving. “When did you see your daddy, Melody?”

Melody glanced back at her Mother. “He told me not to tell Mommy. He said she’d get mad. I don’t think she’d get mad. Wouldn’t she be happy to see Daddy again?”

“It’s not a good idea to keep secrets from your mom.” Keating did his best to stay calm, while inside he was a burning inferno. What the fuck kind of father snuck around like that and came between his kids and the only parent they’d known for the past three years? It was a low, cruel, dangerous thing to do. “We should tell her after our lesson.”

Melody’s lower lip trembled and her face crumpled. “I don’t want Daddy to get mad at me. I don’t want him to go away again.”

Aw, shit. Guys like Glenn Tiller didn’t deserve amazing kids like Melody and Lily. “Your daddy won’t be mad at you, Melody. And if he is, it won’t be your fault, okay? Telling your mom is the right thing to do.”

Melody shook her head, tears starting. “He made me swear not to tell her, Mr. Keating. He said if I told her, he wouldn’t be able to see me again.”

Mother fucker.

“Everything okay?” Bailey walked across the ring toward them.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bailey crossed the riding ring toward her daughter, who was leaning in close to Keating and whispering furiously. Something was wrong and Bailey's stomach twisted with worry. Keating glanced at her, his jaw set hard, his eyes blazing.

"What's going on?"

"Go away, Mommy!" Melody glanced at Bailey and burst into tears. "I can't tell you. He'll get mad."

Immediately, Mama bear emerged and Bailey glared at Keating, her imagination already going to the darkest corners of hell. "What have you done to my daughter?" As Bailey spoke, she patted Melody's horse, Strawberry, because Melody's hysterics were upsetting the young mare.

Melody started crying harder, and Lily and Appleseed trotted over to investigate.

Keating dropped Lightning's reins and leaned forward, his expression pleading. "It's not what you're thinking, Bailey. I swear."

Lightning, feeling his reins go loose, took the opportunity to trot forward at a decent clip. Keating, not at all prepared for his mount to jolt forward, rolled right off and hit the ground hard.

Melody shrieked. Lightning took off for the other side of the ring, and Lily hopped off Appleseed, who trotted over and joined Lightning.

Bailey looked down at Lily, so young and yet so calm, though her eyes were wide. She quickly took stock of her options and hated both of them. She didn't want to leave her hysterical daughter alone on a horse who was getting antsy by the second from her screeching, nor did she want to send her baby over to check on Keating if he'd broken his damn neck.

Bailey blew out a breath. "I'm going to pull your sister off her horse, Lily bug. Can you lead Strawberry to the side of the ring, away from the other horses?"

"Yes, Mommy."

"Okay." Bailey blew out another breath. "Melody. Come on, sweetie. Let's get you off Strawberry."

She reached up for Melody, but the little girl had wrapped her arms around herself and the horse was too damn tall for Bailey to pull a nine-year-old off her.

"I'm not mad at you, baby. I don't care what you've done or what secret you've been keeping, I won't be mad at you."

Melody sniffled. "Daddy will be mad, and he'll go away again."

Bailey froze, her arms raised. Glenn? When the hell did Melody talk to Glenn? Did Keating know about it? Did he arrange it?

"Come on, Melody." Keating appeared beside Bailey. He raised one arm in the air and scooped Melody off the horse like she was weightless.

Lily grabbed the reins and led Strawberry to the fence. Keating tried to lower Melody to the ground, but she clung to him, crying.

"It's okay, sweetie." Keating rubbed her back in a slow circle, and Bailey wondered how she could have thought, even for a moment, that Keating would have done anything to hurt Melody. "How 'bout if I tell your mom? You won't be breaking your promise if I tell her."

Melody blinked up at him, lashes laden with tears, and gave a slow nod before burying her face against his chest again.

"Why don't you take her inside?" Bailey said. "Lily and I will take care of the horses and then we can talk in the living room where it's cool."

Keating nodded and carried Melody out of the ring.

“Why’d she say that about Daddy?” Lily asked when Bailey approached her. “Has she talked to Daddy?”

Exhaustion swept over Bailey, and her knees nearly gave out. She didn’t know exactly what had happened, but if it had to do with Glenn, it couldn’t be good. It had been so hard, so many sleepless nights, getting the girls back to some sense of normalcy after Glenn left, and she didn’t have the strength to go through it again. She had more than she could handle, as it was.

“I don’t know, Lily. We’ll have to get the story from Melody.”

“Why would Daddy talk to her and not me? Is he still mad at me?”

That fucking asshole. After Glen left, Lily had worried for months that it was her fault because he was mad at her. It had taken therapy and many conversations, but Bailey thought they’d gotten past it. She’d thought Lily no longer blamed herself for Glenn leaving.

It broke Bailey’s heart that she’d been wrong.

She dropped to her knees in the dirt and wrapped her arms around her baby. “He was never mad at you, sweet girl. And he’s not mad now. If he did talk to Melody, it was only because he couldn’t find you too, okay?”

Lily nodded against Bailey’s shoulder, her little arms squeezing her tight. Bailey wanted to cry. She wanted to run and hide somewhere Glenn could never find them. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option.

So, she got to her feet and she and Lily got the horses untacked and out to pasture for the afternoon.

Hand in hand, they walked inside to find Melody and Keating sitting on the big couch in the living room. Their heads were bent together and Melody was talking a million miles a minute, but as soon as Lily and Bailey stepped into the room, Melody snapped her mouth closed and covered her face with her hands.

“You don’t have to hide from us, Melody,” Bailey said. “No one’s mad at you.”

Melody dropped her hands from her tear-streaked face. “I’m sorry I kept a secret from you, Mommy.”

“It’s not okay to keep secrets. But I understand. You must have been confused when it was your dad asking you to keep a secret from me.”

Melody nodded.

“Can Mr. Keating tell us what happened?”

Melody nodded again, lips pressed tight together, new tears welling in her eyes.

Keating cleared his throat, his own eyes misty. “Melody was playing with her toy cars on the front porch here when Glenn parked in the driveway. He came up onto the porch and talked to Melody.”

Bailey pressed a hand to her chest to still her pounding heart. Her stomach tumbled and ached. “When?”

“Yesterday morning. Before Cherry and I got here.”

Bailey had been out at the barn with Lily feeding the horses their breakfast. “I left Melody on the porch by herself. I thought she’d be fine.”

“She was fine.” Keating squeezed Melody’s small shoulder. “She’ll be fine. Glenn just talked to her. He told her he misses her, and that he wants to see her, to live in her house with her again and be her dad. He asked her to convince you to let him come home.”

Bailey’s hands fisted and her vision went red. She literally saw red. She wanted to scream, to punch someone.

So hard.

She’d worked so damn hard to keep her girls safe and happy and healthy and her ex just swanned back into her life and destroyed it all.

“Did he say anything about me?” Lily asked, her voice small and choked.



Melody nodded at her sister. “He said he misses you and loves you and was never mad at you.”

Lily let out a gasp like she’d been struck and curled up into a ball on the couch next to Bailey, sobs shaking her whole body.

Melody forgot her own tears and crossed the room to curl up around her sister. Any other time, Bailey would have been thrilled by the sight of such sisterly love, but her girls were hurting and she wasn’t sure there was any good way to end their pain or make this better.

Bailey’s gaze met Keating’s and the anger in his eyes matched the fury burning her alive. She wanted to make Glenn pay, to punish him or keep him away from her girls, but that wouldn’t help Melody or Lily. She had to dig deep and be the bigger person and find a way to make this work for all of them.

She rubbed Lily’s back and wrapped an arm around Melody until Lily’s sobs faded.

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“You could get a restraining order against him,” Grayson said over speaker phone. “He didn’t do anything illegal, though, unless you want to charge him with trespassing.”

Bailey sank into her seat at the kitchen table. “If it was just me, I’d slap him with a restraining order, but the kids want to see him, Grayson, and I don’t think it’s right to keep them from him.” The girls were currently watching a movie in the den at the back of the house, and Bailey felt antsy even being that far away from them. What if Glenn broke into the house?

“You really think that’s all he wants?” Grayson asked. “Are you buying his story that he’s just back here to rebuild what he had with you?”

Bailey glanced at Keating, but he was staring down at the phone in the center of the table, expression giving nothing away.

“Not for a second, but if this is the last chance the girls have to see him...” Bailey laced her fingers together and tugged. “I

feel like no matter what I do, I'm going to screw this up.”

“You're not the one screwing this up,” Keating said, his jaw so tight the words came out clipped. “Glenn is the one who stomped right through the boundaries you set. He's demonstrating a complete lack of respect and asking Melody to keep his secret was manipulative and cruel. You should keep them away from him.”

Bailey, unable to take her anger out on Glenn, felt it rise toward Keating. “All due respect, Keating, this isn't your family. Maybe you need to take your own advice and respect my boundaries.”

Keating shoved back his chair and stomped to the other side of the kitchen, but he didn't leave and he didn't argue.

“He's not wrong,” Grayson said. “Glenn crossed a line. A big one. He's not behaving like a guy who's accepted he made a mistake and wants to do better.”

He was right. Bailey knew they were both right. But if she hadn't seen her kids in three years, she'd do just about anything for a glimpse of them, for a chance to talk to them. “It's not out of the realm of possibility that Glenn came here to see me and, when he saw Melody on the porch, he couldn't resist talking to his daughter. He's made a lot of mistakes. A lot of unforgivable mistakes. But he's still their father.”

“According to the courts, he's not their father, Bay,” Grayson said. “He lost that privilege when he abandoned them and cleaned out their college funds. No one would blame you for keeping him out of their lives.”

Bailey dropped her face into her hands and rubbed her temples. “The courts said the same thing about our mother, Grayson. They took us from her because they deemed her unfit. She wasn't a great mother, but tell me what you'd give to see her again. To hear her voice one more time.”

Grayson was silent for several long moments and Keating dropped his elbows onto the kitchen island and his head into his hands.

“Fine,” Grayson said at last. “I get it, Bailey. You know I do. And I don’t think Glenn would intentionally hurt the girls, but I don’t like it.”

“I hear you, but the girls deserve this chance to see him. They deserve closure.”

“They don’t even know what closure is,” Keating growled. “They’re just babies.”

The obvious pain on Keating’s face cooled Bailey’s need to be defensive. He cared about her daughters, possibly more than Glenn did.

“They’re babies who miss their daddy,” she said. “I won’t leave them alone with him and we’ll meet somewhere public, but they should get to see him.”

“I should come back,” Grayson said. “Be there with you.”

“No,” Bailey said, though a part of her wanted him there so badly. “You do so much for everyone else, Grayson. This is time you need to take for you and Isla and your family.”

“About that,” Grayson said. “This might not be the time, but Isla is pregnant.”

Joy flooded in like it had been waiting for its chance to supersede the sick fear and anger that had been filling Bailey since Melody had said the word, ‘daddy.’ “Congratulations. I’m so happy for you. How far along is she?”

“Six weeks. We just found out yesterday.”

“Oh, Grayson. This is the best news. Stay. Soak up the sun. We’ll be fine.”

“Congratulations, Man,” Keating said.

“Thanks, Keats. Take care of Bailey and the girls, okay? I want you at that visitation with Glenn.”

Keating looked at Bailey, brows high. She nodded, but kept her smile on lock down. He didn’t need to know how glad she’d be to have him there. It was okay. It didn’t count as depending on him to be happy to have him there. Like a bodyguard for hire for a day.

“Couldn’t keep me away,” Keating said.

Grayson said goodbye and hung up, and Bailey stared at Keating. “Thank you.” She was such an asshole. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

He nodded, but didn’t move from his spot at the island. “You’re entitled to be snippy, Firecracker, after the day you’ve had, but I need you to know that I care about you and your girls. I never want to see any of you hurt, and I’ll go to whatever lengths necessary to keep you three safe.”

“I appreciate that. I really do. But it’s unnecessary. I—”

“Which is why you’re moving in with me.”

She straightened in her seat. “No.”

“Your house is right on a downtown street, Bailey. It would be way too easy for Glenn to show up there whenever he wants.”

“So we’ll move in here for a bit.”

“Where he can just drive right in and plop himself on your porch? My house has a gate across the drive that I can lock, security cameras, and an alarm.”

Grayson had talked about putting an alarm in the ranch house, but it was frequented by kids and families during the summer camp days - a meeting place for on-site therapy for foster families and for rainy day games. When Grayson and Isla were in residence during the summer, they lived in the back half of the house and, during the school year, they wanted to keep their doors open for their son and Bailey’s girls and all their friends. Not to mention that once Grayson got the place into shape to be a winter resort beyond the two or three bookings a week they had now, he’d have even more reasons to keep the main house open.

And Bailey really liked the idea of staying somewhere she and the kids could feel safe.

“Plus,” Keating said. “You can help me figure out what I need to do to get my barn and pastures ready for horses.”

“I don’t want to confuse the girls...”

“My house has two wings.” Keating’s cheeks pinked. “You and the girls can stay in the south wing. It’s got three bedrooms, a game room, and a small kitchenette. You won’t have to see me and Cherry at all if you don’t want to.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Bailey had to remind herself to breathe as she cruised down Keating's driveway. His house was ornate and sprawling. An adobe style home that had to take up almost half an acre of land. Though the five-car garage and what looked to be a workshop took up a good portion of that space.

This place was as lavish as the home of the alpaca ranchers they'd visited. It was a timely reminder that Keating was an honest-to-God billionaire and not a guy who enjoyed building zip lines for a living.

She'd been forgetting lately.

"I want to see the pool." Melody unbuckled her seatbelt and reached for the door handle.

"Does he have a pool?" Bailey asked.

"He said he did." Lily followed her sister's lead and climbed out of the back seat.

"Okay, well, let's grab our bags and head inside." As much as she enjoyed Keating and Cherry's company, she longed for her cozy house and her comfy couch. A quiet evening with reality television seemed like the perfect antidote to the day she'd had.

She might have one brother who was a billionaire and a second who was married to a billionaire, but she'd kept her life small. She didn't belong in the kind of luxury she was sure awaited them inside that house.

Cherry stepped out onto the porch and waved to them. The girls shouted their hellos.

"Go ahead, girls," Bailey said. "I'll grab our bags."

Bailey got out of the truck and walked around to the bed. "He's just doing us a favor," she said under her breath. "This is only temporary. It doesn't mean anything. It's just a place to stay. I'm still standing up to Glenn on my own."

“Talking to yourself?” Keating reached into the bed of the truck and grabbed her suitcase and the girls’ two small duffels in one hand.

“Um, hi. Thank you again. I really appreciate it.”

He leaned in close, his lips against the shell of her ear. “If I was just doing you a favor, I’d set you up in a hotel. You’re here because I want you here. Because I care about you and your girls. Because I want to see for myself that you’re all safe. I’ll keep saying it until you believe it.”

He spun and walked toward the house, carrying their bags like they weighed nothing.

Bailey followed, not at all sure how to feel about any of this.

The foyer was massive, somehow rising two stories in the single-story home to a windowed turret. Marble floors covered the circular space, and only a table sat in the center, a vase filled with flowers atop it.

The walls didn’t rise straight up to meet the ceiling, but undulated like waves, their entire expanse shaped to resemble rock walls and covered with hand and footholds for climbing. Five separate entryways to different parts of the house radiated from the center.

From somewhere deep in the house, one of her daughters shrieked.

“She’s okay,” Keating said quickly. “She’s playing in the... Well, it might be easier to show you.”

He led Bailey toward the center doorway and into an open plan area with a kitchen, dining room and living room, then through another doorway, past a theater room and a game room, with a pool table, foosball, ping-pong, and poker tables, and into a room nothing could have prepared her for.

It had to be at least thirty feet by thirty feet, with a giant foam block pit filling most of the floor space. Again, rock climbing handholds were all over the walls and ceiling, all of which were angled for challenging climbs. But there was also

a set of trapeze swings set into the ceiling and small trampolines all around the outside of the pit.

Lily was swinging from one of the trapeze bars, her little hands gripping tight while Cherry stood on the platform behind her and gave her a push. Lily swung out over the center of the pit filled with foam blocks and let go with a joyful shriek.

“My turn,” Melody yelled.

“Come on,” Keating said. “They’ll be busy here for a while. I’ll show you the rest of the house.”

He led her back the way they’d come and across the kitchen to another hallway. They passed a workout room and a guest bedroom that, based on the sweet scents wafting out, had to be Cherry’s. The next doorway led to the back patio and an Olympic size pool, then the space opened up to a wide set of stairs.

They climbed up them to a space she was pretty sure was above the five-car garage. Keating led her through a small, cozy den-like room, and into a moderately sized master bedroom. At least moderately sized compared to the rest of the house. It was still a big room, with a king-sized four-poster bed, with what looked like a homemade quilt in stunning shades of blue. Over the bed hung a painting of a horse.

“Was there a painting of an alpaca here last week?”

Keating’s smile lit the damn room. “Sure was. Cherry found this painting by a local artist.”

“It’s beautiful. Your home is gorgeous and not at all what I’d expected, which is stupid because it’s so you.”

“Thank you?” He stepped closer and put his hands on her hips.

“I have to wonder just how many kids you’re planning on having?”

He pressed his lips to hers. “I guess that depends on how many kids my wife wants, but I’m not getting any younger.



Maybe one or two of my own and then we'll adopt or foster however many more we need to fill up this house."

Bailey laughed. "You ever raised kids? Babysat?"

He kissed her again, lingered this time. "No."

She leaned into him, feeling light and happy. "That's what I thought. Maybe just start with one and see how that goes before you fill up the house."

He met her halfway and kissed her for real, his hands slipping down over her ass and pulling her against him.

"Hey, boss," Cherry called, her heels clicking on the marble floor. "Where are the tents? The girls want to have a sleepover with me and Bailey indoor camping style."

Keating pulled away, but kept an arm around Bailey's shoulders. "They're in a box in my shop. Am I invited to this sleepover?"

"You want to get a mani-pedi and watch kid movies?"

"Have you met me?"

"Cool," Cherry said. "I'll grab the tents if you help me set them up."

"I'll fix us some camping chow and get the chimenea going for s'mores."

"Great idea, boss." Cherry hurried back the way she'd come.

Bailey pulled away, but Keating tightened his hold on her. "I love having you and the girls here. Thank you."

"I should be thanking you."

"You already did," he said. "Come on. I need your help chopping veggies."

He led her back to the foyer and grabbed their bags. "First, I should probably let you see your room."

Her hand in his, her suitcase and the girls' bags in his other hand, he led her through another doorway and down another hall.

“What do you work on in your shop?”

“Nothing,” he said. “That’s where I keep my toys. Four-wheelers, dirt bikes, motorcycles, bicycles, hoverboards, all the fun stuff is in there.” He paused in the center of the hallway between two closed doors. “Do you think the girls will want to share a room or have their own?”

“They share at home. Since Glenn left, they like to be together, even though they fight all the time. Some mornings, I’ll find Melody in Lily’s bed.”

“That works. Do you think they’d like the storybook room or the outer space room?”

Bailey stared at Keating. He was so full of surprises. “Um, maybe I’d better see them myself.”

He opened the first door and flicked on a light. It wasn’t necessary, because the big window on the far side let in plenty of sun. There were two sets of built-in bunk beds with curtains in rainbow colors. The walls had been painted to look like the interior of a stone castle, and a climbing rope hung down next to one set of bunk beds. It led up to a tower window, like in Rapunzel, and a cubby.

Between the two sets of bunk beds netting that looked thick enough to climb on hung from the ceiling. And on the left side of the room, a slide led down from the top bunk.

There was also a unicorn that looked like it had once been at home on a carousel. There was no other furniture.

“I left space so my kids can decide what we should add to the room, but your girls should be comfortable here if they choose it.”

“They’ll never want to leave.” Bailey didn’t think she’d ever want to leave. “What’s the outer space room like?”

The outer space room had everything the storybook room had, except stars were painted on the walls, the climbing rope led to Saturn, and a state-of-the-art telescope was in place of the carousel unicorn.

“You have quite the imagination,” Bailey said.

“I’m the ideas man.” Keating tapped his head. “I had a lot of help making the ideas a reality.”

“Some kids are going to be very lucky to live here.”

“I hope so,” Keating said. “Come on, I’ll show you your room.”

He led her to a room with two double beds, two dressers, and two desks. “This is a room for older kids.”

The walls in this room were bare, presumably to be decorated by whichever children claimed it. “Thank you. This will be perfect for me.”

He put her suitcase on the nearest bed and spun her into his arms. “If you get lonely, feel free to come hang out in my room. There’s plenty of space for both of us.”

“I need to be near my girls now. But I appreciate the offer.” Bailey sighed. “I really appreciate what you’re doing for us, Keating, but I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. Just because we’re staying here for a few nights, I don’t want you to envision us here permanently.” Her words were as much to remind herself as him, because she could see them living there with this kind, generous man. She could picture waking up to him climbing the walls, the girls laughing as they tried to keep up. She could picture falling into bed with him at the end of the day and letting him remind her she was more than just a mom. She was also a woman who could love a man and be loved.

Keating let her go and stepped away. “Not even going to give me a chance?”

“I’m not going to make promises I can’t keep. I’m not looking to tie myself down to anyone.”

“And I’d never ask you to tie yourself down to me. In a good relationship, we’d give each other wings.” He walked out of the room. “You can stay here and relax for a bit or help me get dinner together. Up to you.”

She followed him out, because she wanted to check on the girls, not because she wanted to be near him for as long as possible.

He led her to the kitchen. “I’ve got pie irons that are great for making pizza pockets. I’ve got dough on hand as well as sauce and cheese. Do you think your girls will want anything else?”

“Why do I feel like you had this all planned long enough ago that you had time to shop for it?”

“I love pizza pockets cooked over a campfire. Speaking of which...” He tapped the counter. “I should get that fire started. Help yourself to my fridge and pull out whatever toppings you and the girls might like.”

She couldn’t help watching him walk out of the kitchen, his shorts molded to his firm ass, his muscles visible through his thin t-shirt. The man was a work of art and he made her feel... She shook her head. It didn’t matter what he made her feel. She wasn’t getting attached. There were only three people in the world she could truly count on and one of them was herself. She wouldn’t make the mistake of attempting to expand that circle again.

She opened his huge fridge to find it practically overflowing with food.

It all looked so delicious and the things she could make with all that food...

The girls would only want sauce and cheese in their pizza pockets, but she couldn’t resist the allure of that fridge. She pulled out mushrooms, red peppers, green peppers, olives, and pepperonis. The mushrooms had been packaged pre-sliced, but she rinsed off the peppers and plopped them onto a cutting board.

“What’s he feeding us?” Cherry strolled into the kitchen.

“Pizza pockets. I’m chopping some peppers for mine, you want some?”

“No thanks. I’m a strict cheese and pepperoni only girl, but Keating might like some. He’s all about ruining a good pizza by adding vegetables.”

“I’ll chop some extra for him. Where are the girls?”

“They’re getting into their pjs.” Cherry widened her eyes in concern. “I hope that’s okay? It makes it more like a slumber party that way.”

“That’s fine with me. Do they need some help finding their pajamas?”

“I helped them dig ‘em out. They’re sleeping in the storybook room tonight, but tomorrow they want to sleep in the outer space room.”

“They’ll probably sleep in a different bed every night. I’m going to have to wash all Keating’s sheets before I leave.”

“Keating has a service for that. Don’t worry about it.”

“Of course he does.” Keating lived in a different world, even from her billionaire brother. Grayson kept mostly to Vegas and had only recently started branching out to other states. Keating had traveled the world, had lived with luxury for at least a decade. He probably had no concept of her day-to-day struggles.

“Mom.” Melody ran into the kitchen in her bare feet. “I climbed Rapunzel’s hair.”

“So cool, baby.” Bailey grabbed Melody and hugged her.

Lily raced into the room seconds later. “I climbed the hair, too. I did it first.”

Bailey let go of Melody and hugged Lily. “Great job, honey. Do you think you’ll enjoy sleeping there?”

“We’re not sleeping there tonight. We’re having a slumber party and camping in the…” Melody looked at Cherry. “Where are we camping?”

“In the theater room of course,” Cherry said. “So we can watch movies all night.”

“Why can’t we camp outside?” Lily asked. “I want to see the real stars.”

“Sorry girls. I don’t camp outdoors. It’s one of my only rules in life.”

“Why not?” Melody scrunched her nose in confusion.

“I like air conditioning and carpet. And indoor plumbing. Plus, I don’t want to wake up with a snake on my pillow.”

Lily laughed. “Snakes can’t get into your tent. That’s why you zip it up.”

Cherry shuddered dramatically. “I’m not taking any chances. I bet you could convince Mr. Keating to camp outdoors with you, though.”

“No, way.” Melody jumped up and down for emphasis. “I want to have a slumber party with you.”

Bailey’s girls were utterly in love with Cherry. They liked Keating and thought he was fun, but they wanted to be Cherry when they grew up.

“Who’s ready for a campfire?” Keating appeared in the kitchen doorway.

The girls cheered and rushed over to him.

He looked over at Bailey, brows high. “Got the fixings?”

“All set.”

“Then let’s have some fun.” Keating raised his arms over his head.

The girls cheered and Bailey recalibrated her estimation of their opinion of Keating. Maybe her girls loved him, too. She definitely liked him far more than she should.

Had she brought another man into her girls’ lives who was just going to leave and break their hearts like Glenn had?

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“Your girls really wore him out,” Cherry said. “I thought he never ran out of energy.”

Keating was fast asleep in a theater chair in pajama pants and a t-shirt, the light of the movie credits illuminating his peaceful face. He looked a good ten years younger.

Inside the tent at the front of the room, Lily and Melody were tucked in their sleeping bags, also fast asleep.

Cherry had stayed in there with them until they'd passed out, then crawled out to find Bailey the only one still awake.

"The girls will sleep until morning," Bailey said. "You can go back to your own bed if you want."

"I was thinking we could make this party adults only and have a glass of wine or three in front of the chimenea." Cherry studied Bailey. "You don't look like you're going to fall asleep anytime soon."

"I can't stop worrying about tomorrow." Bailey had called Glenn from her house and arranged for him to meet with the girls the following afternoon. She'd informed him he couldn't just show up and speak to the girls without her around, and he'd agreed. He'd claimed his conversation with Melody hadn't been planned, but he'd seen her and couldn't resist talking to her.

He'd been way too agreeable for Bailey's comfort. The man she'd been married to had always preferred the upper hand and the last word, and he never apologized for anything. He hadn't been a bad or cruel husband, he just hadn't ever admitted to any fault.

"Let's get that wine then," Cherry said. "Keating's got a kick ass collection."

"It would be wasted on me. I like the cheap stuff with sugar in it."

Cherry laughed, stood, and offered Bailey a hand up. Cherry had put on over sized fleece pajamas that looked beyond comfy. She'd washed off her make-up and left her hair down and looked too young to be legal to drink wine. "Allow me to change your life."

Bailey let Cherry pull her out of her seat and they found wine, glasses, and got the chimenea going again in short order.

The evening had cooled off considerably and Bailey pulled her chair close to the fire to warm up. She'd put on pajamas, too, but hers were shorts and a tank. She wished she'd brought out a blanket.

Cherry poured wine into a glass and swirled it before handing it to Bailey. “Okay, try this.”

Bailey took the glass filled with a dark ruby wine and took a long sip. It was dry and a bit spicy. She swallowed. “Wow, um, is this supposed to be good?”

Cherry laughed, but stopped when she noticed Bailey’s crinkled nose and frown. “Seriously? You hate it?”

Bailey handed her the glass. “I seriously hate it. Does Keating have some boxed wine somewhere?”

Cherry took the glass and leaned in close to Bailey, as though she was looking at a bug under a microscope. “Wow. I thought you were a myth.”

“Single moms who love cheap wine?”

“Low maintenance women. I thought everyone had expensive taste and just pretended they didn’t because they couldn’t afford it.”

Bailey laughed. “It’s just one wine. Maybe I’d like a different, ridiculously expensive wine.”

“Right.” Cherry sounded relieved. “Let’s try a white.”

She opened another bottle, drank Bailey’s glass in two swallows, and refilled it with the white.

Bailey took a sip. This one had a sweeter, fruity taste, subtle, but enough to erase the sharp bite of alcohol. “Better. Would still prefer my cheap stuff.”

“Is it good enough for tonight? I can ask Keating to get you what you like on his next grocery run.”

“This is fine for tonight,” Bailey said. “Just don’t let me drink too much. I’m tempted to finish the entire bottle so I can stop being nervous, but I don’t want to be hungover when I see Glenn.”

“It’s interesting to see all this from another perspective. When I was a kid, my mom didn’t tell us how she felt about taking me and Genevieve to see our dad or if she was worried about what he’d say to us or how he might treat us.” Cherry



smirked, staring into the fire. “I mean, she’d coach us to ask him for money for dance lessons or piano lessons or whatever, but she didn’t talk about how she felt.”

“How old were you when your parents divorced?”

“Two. Gen kind of took over as my parent until she went to college, so I didn’t feel like I was missing out most of the time. And Dad spent less and less time with us as we got older, especially after Mom remarried.” Cherry shrugged. “Gen thinks Mom is this cold-hearted narcissist who only cares about money, but I remember her asking a million questions when we got home like maybe she was worried he’d badmouthed her or convinced us to like him better.”

“That must have been hard for you, too. Did you feel abandoned by your dad?”

Cherry patted Bailey’s hand. “You’re a wonderful mom, Bailey. The fact you asked me how I felt when I had moved the conversation to how you felt proves all you’re thinking about is the impact this meeting tomorrow is going to have on your kids. And you caring about them, paying attention to what they need and what scares them, is all you can control in this situation.” She waved a hand. “I mean, of course you can make sure he never sees the kids again, but you can’t control his choices or how those choices hurt your kids.”

“And what if they hate me for cutting him out of our lives?”

Cherry chuckled. “They’ll hate you for something at some point, no matter what you do. What matters is that you do what you think will keep them safe. You do that and someday they’ll understand.”

“Did you understand? Who did you blame for your dad showing less and less interest in your life?”

Cherry sighed, the light of the flames dancing on her face as she thought. “I didn’t blame anyone. My dad was this guy who showed up or who I visited once or twice a month and then less and less often. He never felt like a dad because he never acted like one. He was an old school guy who believed the man contributed to the family by providing financially. Our

visits were spent as much with his assistant as with him and, when he did spend time with us, it was to ask what we were doing to prepare for our futures and to teach us about the stock market. He didn't take an interest in me personally, so I wasn't all that interested in him. Your girls' relationship with their father will have a lot more to do with what he does than it will ever have with what you do or don't do."

"I hope you're right, but my girls remember their dad when he lived at home with us. They remember him reading to them and watching movies with them. They want him back. They want the life we had with him back."

"When I was a kid, I wanted a pet dragon more than anything else in the world and, when my mother told me dragons weren't real, I accused her of killing them all just so I couldn't have one." She leaned forward and patted Bailey's knee. "You're a good mom. Keep being a good mom and everything will be okay." She leaned back and sipped her wine. "There's nothing more you can realistically do anyway, so why worry about it?"

"Spoken like someone who's never been a parent."

"Ha!" Cherry pointed at her. "Good point. I've never been good at anything besides shopping and getting decent grades in school. I'm the last person in the world who should give parenting advice or try to design someone else's life, but that won't stop me. Fake it until you make it, Bailey. That's my philosophy."

*But you aren't responsible for raising two small humans.* Bailey managed not to say the words, mostly because Cherry wasn't entirely wrong. Bailey needed to let go of what she couldn't control, let go of worrying about what Glenn might do. Until she knew what he was really after, she couldn't make a final decision on what role she'd allow him to have in their kids' lives.

"What's your plan for the future?" Cherry asked. "After you deal with Glenn, what do you see for yourself?"

Bailey sipped her wine and pulled her feet up under her. Even with the fire, her bare legs were feeling the chill. "Are

you trying to life design me, Cherry Beckstone?”

“Free of charge. I see so much potential in you, Bailey Tiller. What do you see for yourself?”

Bailey let her head drop back against the chair. What did she see for her future beyond a great expanse of unanswered questions? It wasn't something she wanted to think about. “What about you? What's your ten-year plan?”

Cherry pulled her legs up to sit criss-cross in the chair. “Nope. No deflecting. I'm working on you, because the best way to handle Glenn is to believe, to your bones, that you have the best plan for your kids and for yourself. Men like Glenn don't know how to handle a confident woman. So tell me, Bailey, what's your plan?”

“I need to finish my accounting degree and find a good job to support me and the kids.”

Cherry stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry. “Boring. You are not an indoor woman, Bailey. I've seen you with those horses and I can't picture you sitting at a desk crunching numbers all day.”

Bailey sighed. “I can't either, honestly, but it's what I've been mostly educated to do, and I'm not terrible at it.”

“Okay. Tell me three things you love other than your kids. Go.”

“Horses...” Bailey stopped, unable to think of another thing she loved. Everything that popped into her mind had to do with her kids. “Um, I used to love reading, but I never have time for that anymore. And I love... Well, I loved working with families last summer, showing them how much fun horses can be.”

Cherry blew another raspberry. “I have got my work cut out with you, woman. First thing you need to do is figure out what you love. The next time I see you, I want you to give me a list of fifteen things you love. Not coffee or cheese or something lame like that, but things you love doing, things that light a spark in you, things that make life worth living.”

A throat cleared, and Bailey started, nearly dropping her wine.

“I can leave,” Keating said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your conversation.”

“It’s okay.” Cherry stretched her arms over her head and let out an obviously fake yawn. “I’m exhausted.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Keating took Cherry's seat with only a pinch of guilt. "I really didn't mean to interrupt."

Bailey smirked at him. "Sure you didn't."

He grinned. "Fine. I meant to interrupt. You weren't there when I woke up. I wanted to make sure you were okay." He didn't tell her the whole truth, that every time Glenn acted like an asshole, he felt her slip farther away from him. That his sense of urgency to make Bailey his came from more than Sloane's social media picture of his new girlfriend on which Clarion had commented 'true love.' He leaned in and took Bailey's hand. "Are you okay?"

She met his gaze, her face lit by the orange glow of the flames. "I'm scared he's going to take them away from me." Tears choked her voice, the admission bursting from her like something she hadn't meant to say.

"I won't let that happen."

"But you can't keep it from happening. If he takes them physically from me or just makes them hate me, I've lost."

"And that's what you think he wants?" Keating hadn't gotten that impression. "After your lunch with him, you said he barely even asked about the girls."

"How could he not want them?" She swiped at her eyes and stared into the fire. "He might not have mentioned them when we first talked, but when he saw Melody on the porch, he couldn't resist going to her. Once he sees them again, hugs them, sees how much he's missed, how could he not want to take them away from me?"

In Keating's opinion, the fact the man could walk away from his kids the first time meant he didn't have a heart. Keating had only known Bailey and her girls for a couple weeks and he hadn't felt entirely whole until they were all under the same roof with him.

“Come here.” He pulled on Bailey’s hand and she stood and crossed to him. He meant to pull her onto his lap in a comforting way, but she straddled him and wrapped her arms around him. Yeah, he liked that better.

“I’m not going anywhere, Bailey.” He was determined to comfort her, even if his cock insisted he move onto something more carnal. “Whatever happens with the kids and Glenn, I’ll be here. But those girls adore you and nothing your ex says can change that.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said, her gaze on his lips. “But I don’t want to talk about that right now. I want to talk about how it’s been four years since I had sex.”

Four years? Every time Keating thought they’d reached the bottom of what an idiotic asshole Glenn was, he discovered a new low. “Are you drunk?”

She shook her head. “I don’t really like your wine. I only had half a glass.”

“What kind of wine do you like?” he asked, his lips centimeters from hers, their breath mingling.

“Boxed wine. I’m not cut out for marriage to a billionaire.”

“I’ll buy you all the boxed wine you want. And you are absolutely cut out for marriage to a billionaire. You deserve everything life offers. You deserve to be pampered and treated like the amazing superhero you are.”

“I’m nobody’s hero, Keating. You’ve put me on a pedestal.”

“You’re my hero.” He kissed her cheekbone.

“And when I fall from that pedestal, you won’t be there to catch me.” She tilted her head back as he lowered his head and kissed her neck.

“I’ll always be here to catch you.” He kissed her collarbone.

“Don’t make a promise you can’t keep. Don’t fulfill my wishes if you’re going to walk out on me. I have two little girls who need me. I can’t break.”

“Never.” He pushed the spaghetti strap of her tank to the side and down her arm to reveal her bare breast. He suckled her nipple, so caught up in her taste and her scent and the smooth feel of her soft skin that he lost track of their conversation. It didn’t matter. He’d be there for her. He’d do everything in his power to be the man she needed.

She groaned and ground her center against his hardness. “Please, Keating. Take me to your bed.”

He wanted to woo this woman, take her out to dinner and a show, put her on his private plane and spend a weekend with her in Paris, invite her to move into his home and never leave. Taking her to bed seemed like a self-serving option.

She nipped his jaw bone and raised her lips to his ear. “I need you inside me, Keating. I need to feel something other than this worry.”

Her words thrummed through his body like she’d plucked a nerve, and it vibrated with pain.

She didn’t want him.

She wanted his cock.

She wanted to break her drought with a billionaire, wanted him to be a distraction from her real life, when all he wanted was to *be* her real life, to be the man she turned to when she needed a partner.

It wouldn’t be the first time a woman had sex with him just to say she’d nailed a billionaire, but it would be the first time he felt so utterly decimated by it.

Gently, he pulled Bailey’s shirt back up to cover her breast. “We should get some sleep. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks flamed, and she lowered her gaze. “Oh. Right. I’m sorry. I just assumed...”

She tried to get off his lap, but he gripped her hips and held her in place. “I want you more than anything. I want to take you to my bed and kiss every inch of your body. I want to drive so deep inside you I can’t feel my toes. I want to wake up with you in my arms, Bailey.”

“Then why?”

“Because you don’t want *me*. You just want a body to make you feel good, to make you forget everything for a few minutes. I want to be more than that to you.”

“You are.”

“You don’t trust me yet. You don’t even trust me when I say I would never leave you the way Glenn did.”

This time, when she climbed off his lap, he let her go. “I’m sorry, Keating. Trust is... Trust is hard for me. And I’ve told you, I don’t think I’m going to be ready for another relationship anytime soon, but I do want *you*. Believe it or not, you aren’t the only offer I’ve had in four years, but you’re the first I’ve seriously considered taking.”

“I want to be more than just an offer you’re considering. I want to be...” But maybe that was self-serving, too. Maybe he’d always be just a selfish asshole trying to win a bet.

Except he’d willingly lose that bet if she asked him to, because she was becoming more to him than just the perfect person to complete his retirement plan. She was becoming a woman who could easily be his everything. A woman with the power to destroy him.

“I wish I could be that for you. But I’m broken, Keating, and not even a billionaire has enough power and money to put me together again.”

She started to walk away from him, back into the house, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her back. “Just because I’m not going to make love to you doesn’t mean I’m going to let you sleep alone.”

“Keating, I—”

In one motion, he stood and swept her up into his arms. “I’m not letting go of you, Bailey, no matter how hard you try to push me away.”

“Keating, the chimenea.”

“Shit. Right. I’ll put you down, but only long enough to put out the fire.”



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“You want me to be your friend or your boyfriend?” Keating asked.

He and Bailey stood on the front porch of Grayson’s ranch house, watching Glenn’s rusty car kick up dust as he came down the driveway. The girls ran around in the front yard, playing tag, overjoyed at the prospect of seeing their dad again.

Bailey blinked at Keating, whose expression was unreadable as he watched Glenn’s car. Her brain was mush and her heart was worse after a night spent wide awake staring at the tent ceiling. Keating had shared that tent, holding her while he slept, the girls in the tent next to them. Before last night, it had never really occurred to her she could hurt Keating.

She hadn’t taken him seriously when he claimed love at first sight.

She’d been careful to make it clear she’d never be his future, but she hadn’t thought he truly cared for her. She’d figured she was his most recent challenge, a single mom in need of a self-esteem boost, before he got bored with ranching and went off to build another adventure park.

“Friend,” she said. “I don’t want to confuse the girls.”

She hadn’t realized just how familiar she’d gotten with Keating’s face until she noticed his eyebrow twitch and understood that wasn’t the answer he’d hoped for.

“Keating, I—”

“I get it.” He turned to face her, his expression far too serious for a man who seemed to be constructed of smiles and fun. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be for as long as you need me.”

He stepped off the porch and crossed the lawn to stand at the edge of the driveway, and Bailey didn’t try to stop him. It made her feel like she was using him, letting him be the buffer

between her family and Glenn, but she stood her ground. For her girls.

At least, that's what she told herself.

Glenn stepped out of his car and visibly faltered as he approached Keating, big and imposing, his arms crossed over his chest. Bailey almost smiled, but then her daughters caught sight of their father.

"Daddy!" Melody sprinted across the lawn and threw herself into Glenn's arms. He hugged her and spread his other arm for Lily to join the hug as she approached more slowly.

Lily stepped into his arms, and Glenn spoke to both girls in a low voice. Bailey hurried down the steps and joined them.

"Hello, Glenn," she said. "Thanks for stopping by on such short notice."

Glenn glanced at Keating before he spoke. "It's not a problem. Not like I've found a job or a place to live yet."

Bailey winced.

"You don't have a house?" Lily asked.

Glenn's smile made Bailey's stomach twist. "I don't, pumpkin. I've been sleeping in my car until I can find a place to live."

"We have a house," Melody said. "You can stay with us."

"We're staying at Mr. Keating's house now." Lily looked up at Keating, her big eyes pleading. "Can daddy stay at your house, too?"

Keating opened his mouth, his expression clearly torn between wanting to give Lily what she wanted and keeping Glenn away from his home.

"No," Bailey said. "Like we talked about before, girls, your daddy is back, but he's not going to live with us like he used to, remember?"

"But we want Daddy to live with us." Melody looked up at Bailey with tears in her eyes, her lower lip already jutting out. "Don't you want to live with us, Daddy?"

“Of course I do, pumpkin.” Glenn patted Melody’s back. “But Mommy’s making the rules now, okay? We can keep trying to get her to change her mind.”

Bailey bit her bottom lip hard to keep from telling Glenn exactly what she thought of him. Unfortunately, she couldn’t come up with a way to spin this conversation that wouldn’t make her look like the bad guy.

“Why don’t we go to the riding ring?” Keating asked. “You girls can show your dad what excellent riders you are.”

Bailey let out a sigh, beyond grateful to have Keating there as the cooler head.

“Yeah.” Melody grabbed Glenn’s hand and started dragging him toward the stables. “Come on, Daddy. I can trot all by myself.”

Lily took Bailey’s hand, shy around the father she hadn’t seen since she was five, and they all walked down to the stables together. Behind Glenn’s back, Keating threaded his fingers through Bailey’s free ones and squeezed.

She’d never been more grateful to have another person by her side, and she had to admit her gratitude was more specific. She loved having *Keating* by her side, loved his easy-going, peaceful ability to defuse a tense situation, loved the way he looked out for her and the girls, loved the way he was rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb.

Keating released her hand as soon as they got to the riding ring where Bailey already had the horses tacked and waiting. She helped the girls into their helmets and then helped them up into the saddles. The girls had begged all morning to show off their riding skills to their father, and Bailey had nothing better to do with her nervous energy than to get the horses ready.

It just took a few moments to get the girls situated and then Bailey was back with Glenn, standing next to him outside the ring while the girls rode around in circles.

“I’ll keep an eye on them.” Keating ducked between the fence slats and walked to the center of the ring.

Clearly, it was an excuse to give her and Glenn time alone. She'd rather Keating had stayed with them, even as she was grateful to him for always somehow knowing exactly what she needed.

"Aren't they doing great?" Bailey asked her ex, trying to keep the conversation light for the girls' sake.

"Sure. You must be doing pretty good if they have their own horses now."

"These aren't their horses." Bailey's heart sank. "These horses belong to Grayson's ranch and summer camp. I take care of them, and the girls can ride whenever they want."

"Your brother the one who put you up in this big house?"

"Again. We don't live here. I work for Grayson. He doesn't support us."

Glenn snorted. "Right. Like you could buy a house on what you make taking care of a bunch of horses."

"I rent. Why do you want to know? Worried I'm going to ask for child support?" She snapped her mouth closed. Damn it, she hadn't meant to go there.

"I don't have parental rights, I don't have to pay child support. I don't have any money, anyway. Can't even find a job and I've been looking, Bailey. It wouldn't kill you to help the father of your children."

She turned to face him. He'd never been the perfect husband, but he'd also never been as big an asshole as he was being at the moment. He wouldn't meet her gaze, glancing back at the house like he was looking for someone. "I don't have any money to give you, Glenn. I'm trying to keep our kids fed and in clothes and that's all I can do. You said you wanted to see the kids, so why don't you watch them ride?"

"Daddy." Lily waved as she trotted past.

"Great job, baby," Glenn said without even looking at her. "Quit fucking around with me, Bailey. Your brother is a billionaire. You telling me you can't get me money?"

Bailey sucked in a breath and tried not to let her past anger at this man cloud her judgment of the situation. He was in a tough place and... Nope. She couldn't fucking do it. "I'm telling you, Glenn, that I can't get the money. I haven't even started to save again for the girls' college fund. There is nothing for you. You're here to see the girls. Pay attention to your daughters."

"Oh, I'll pay attention alright." Glenn leaned in close, his sour breath hot on her cheek, his voice as sharp as a razor blade. "I'll focus *all* my attention on them. I'll fight for full custody. I'll make sure you never see those girls again."

Goosebumps rose on Bailey's skin. "You should leave."

"You used to be sweet and submissive, but you've changed. You're not fit to be mother to those girls anymore and I'll fucking prove it unless you get me the money I need."

Bailey took a step back, her whole body shaking. "You don't have parental rights. No judge in the world is going to hand you full custody."

"I don't need a judge, sweetheart. All I have to do is ask and those girls will go with me. I can make them disappear just the way I did three years ago."

Bailey was full on shuddering, her heart racing. "Get the fuck off this property, Glenn."

He stepped up to her, so close his words sprayed her face. "I'll leave now, but you better get me that money or I'm coming after the girls."

Bailey watched, stunned, as her ex-husband walked away. That was not the man she'd married. Or had she just been that wrong about him? Had she been married to a stranger for seven years?

"Daddy," Melody called. "Daddy, where are you going?"

Bailey took a moment. One moment to let dread and fear wash over her, before she pulled in a deep breath and pasted on a smile.

She turned and faced her babies, both of whom were riding up to the fence, both of whom had sadness creeping onto the edges of their expressions, threatening to overtake them. “Your daddy had to leave, girls. He didn’t want to go, but he didn’t have a choice.”

She didn’t look at Keating, though she could see him approaching out of the corner of her eye. If she looked at him, she wouldn’t be able to hold it together.

“When’s he coming back?” Lily asked in a tiny voice.

“I don’t know, baby.” Bailey was going to have to tell them the truth. She’d have to tell them to keep them safe, because Glenn had made it very clear their wellbeing had no place in his agenda and if he tried to take them... If he lured them into his car and took them from her until she gave him money... They needed to know never to go with him.

Panic bubbled up, and she pressed a hand to her chest to hold it down. What could she possibly say that would convince them their daddy was dangerous?

She never should have agreed to let him see them, she never —

The girls stared at her, eyes wide, so she lifted her lips back up into a smile. “You know what? The horses are all set for today. How about we go to Mr. Keating’s house and spend the afternoon in his pool?”

“Okay, Mommy.” Lily slid off her horse. She was agreeable like that, but her serious frown made it clear the pool wasn’t a big enough treat to make her forget her daddy had left her again.

“I want to go with Daddy,” Melody said. “He can’t just leave us.”

A sob hiccuped out of Bailey, and she pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Sometimes Daddies have to do grown-up things,” Keating said. “I’m sure if he could have taken you with him, he would. But we can have fun at the pool, right? I got all the fixings for sundaes and banana splits at the store yesterday.”

Bailey had never been more grateful to another person in her life, and she knew, as she watched him open the gate to the riding ring for Lily and Appleseed, as she watched the way his face softened as he looked down at her daughter, that he was a good man. She'd only seen what she wanted to see with Glenn, but Keating was a genuinely good person with an enormous heart.

She'd survive without him, but she wouldn't be nearly as happy. Watching the way Melody smiled up at him as she led her horse through and Keating joked with her, it was clear her girls liked him, too.

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Keating stared down at her, his jaw working, his eyes blazing with anger. "If I thought I could get away with it—"

"You can't," Bailey said. "I need you here with me and the girls, not in prison."

On the other side of the sliding glass doors, the girls shrieked and splashed, playing in the pool with Cherry.

Keating's jaw worked one more time, before his expression warmed and he pulled her into his arms, hugging her tight. "Thank you for letting me be here for you."

She hugged him back for only a moment. "Am I overreacting, or was Glenn threatening to kidnap our kids for ransom?"

Keating's expression morphed back into furious. He looked out at the girls, now climbing out of the pool and racing to a table where Cherry had laid out snacks. He turned to Bailey, determination fierce. "We should all go to Vegas until we figure this out. I've got a condo with enough space for all of us. Glenn won't be able to track us there."

Bailey wrapped her arms around herself. "We can't live there forever, Keating. How do we get Glenn to leave us alone?"

Keating put his hands on her shoulders and rubbed them. "We find out why he's desperate enough for this money to risk going to jail for kidnapping his own children, and we give him

whatever it takes to make him go away. And we need a restraining order against him.” He dropped his hands from her shoulders. “I’m going to grab a notepad and a pen. You’re going to call Grayson, and we’re going to make a plan.”

“Okay.”

He paused as he turned away from her, probably to go get that pen and paper. “Okay? You aren’t going to argue with me or insist you don’t need my help.”

Somehow, in this mess of a day, he’d made her smile. A genuine smile. “It’s not easy for me to ask for help, Keating, but you’re my future husband, right? Have to learn to depend on you at some point.” She’d meant it as a joke, to lighten his mood the way he’d lightened hers. As much as she was beginning to trust him, she didn’t take his plan to marry her seriously.

He didn’t smile. “Damn straight.” He smacked a kiss to her lips. “I’ll be right back.”

Bailey called Grayson and filled him in. She’d just finished the story, over speaker phone, when Keating came back with a notepad, laptop, pen, and tray of snacks.

“That asshole,” Grayson said. “I agree with Keating. You should get the hell out of there. I’ll find someone else to take care of the horses...” His voice drifted off like he was distracted. “I’d say you could stay with Logan and Gen, but they’ve just headed to Canada for some business meeting slash vacation they’ve been planning forever. Keating will keep you safe.”

“I will,” Keating said. “I’ll hire security, and Bailey and the girls won’t go anywhere alone.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary,” Bailey said. “Glenn’s not exactly a hardened criminal.”

“We don’t know what Glenn is anymore,” Grayson said. “The private investigator is still in Tahiti, tracking Glenn’s movements and connections. She’s found links between Glenn and some unsavory people.”



Bailey pressed a hand to her stomach, trying to quell its roiling. Keating grabbed her free hand and pulled her into his lap.

“What’s the endgame?” Bailey asked. “We can’t hide from Glenn forever.”

“Like hell we can’t.” Keating tightened his arms around her.

“There are avenues we can take to keep Glenn away from you and the girls, Bailey. We can get a restraining order and alert the local police to the situation, but neither of those things will stop Glenn if he’s determined. I like Keating’s plan to figure out what Glenn is really after and give it to him in exchange for him staying the hell away from you and the girls for the rest of your lives.”

“We can’t just give into him.”

“It’s just money,” Keating growled. “I’ve got more than enough of it, and I’d give it all up to keep you and your girls safe.”

“I knew I liked you,” Grayson said. “He’s a hell of a lot better than Glenn, Bailey. Hold on to him.”

“Can we focus on the plan?” she asked.

“All you need to do is let Keating whisk you off to Vegas. If it gets hot there, he can take you to Paris. Haven’t you always wanted to go there?”

She always had. Glenn had promised to take her for their tenth wedding anniversary. Obviously, that had never happened.

“I’m not going to just sit and look pretty,” Bailey said. “Keep me in the loop.”

“I will. Keating, keep me updated about where you are. And I’ll send you what our lawyers have. If you have anything to add, let me know. Let’s pool our resources here.”

“Already on it,” Keating said. “We’ll keep in touch.”

Bailey hung up and leaned against Keating. She was doing the right thing. She knew she was doing the right thing, but it

was still hard to rely on Keating, to accept his help knowing she could never pay him back.

“I hate this,” she said.

“I don’t. Love having you on my lap, in my arms.”

She smiled. Again. “You know that’s not what I mean. I hate having to let go of my hard earned independence and accept help from you and Grayson.”

“This isn’t on you. Even with all my money, if I had some desperate ex coming after the people I loved most in the world, I’d want help. I’d want you by my side. Locked up somewhere impenetrable, but with me, on my team.”

She liked the sound of that. Loved the idea of him being on her team.

Twisting, she straddled his lap and kissed him, running her fingers through his soft hair, and letting all her anxiety, fear, and gratitude, bucket-loads of gratitude, out in that kiss.

He kissed her back, but he kept his hands on her waist.

When he pulled his mouth away, he didn’t loosen his grip on her. “We need to get the girls dried off and packed. My private plane is leaving in an hour.”

She stared at him. “Private plane? Vegas is only a couple of hours away.”

“And I don’t want us to be on the road when there’s a crazy man after your girls. I’ve got a small airstrip on the property. We can be in Vegas before dinner.”

She stared at him. Every time she thought she’d gotten a grip on his wealth, he shocked her. “You have an airstrip? Where?”

“It’s all the way on the other side of my property,” he said, like it was no big deal. “It’s really just a runway and a couple hangars.”

She slid off his lap. “You are so far out of my league.”

He grabbed her waist and pulled her between his legs. “You’re the one out of my league. I’ve just made bundles of

money. You've raised two amazing little girls and come through some really hard times stronger than you were before."

Her cheeks heated, and she ducked her head. Sometimes Keating's compliments were over the top.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "You don't believe me yet, but you will."

She shook her head. "I guess I need to get the girls dried off and dressed."

"I'll pack a bag and meet you back here in half an hour."

"Don't you have to get a pilot all the way out here before we can leave?"

"Not when I'm the pilot, baby. We could have left sooner, except I had to log the flight plan and get clearance. Lucky for us, it's a slow day in the skies."

Bailey couldn't take her eyes off him as he left the room. Out of her league or not, he looked amazing from behind. And out of her league or not, she was getting far too attached to the man to let his ostentatious wealth put her off.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“I like your ranch house better,” Melody said as she walked into the living room of Keating’s condo and flopped onto the couch.

Keating pulled his feet off the coffee table and set his laptop, where he’d been emailing his lawyers, to the side. “This place isn’t so bad. Have you seen the view of the mountains?”

Melody rolled her head along the back of the couch and looked at him with all the disdain her small body could muster. “There aren’t any horses here, and you don’t even have a climbing wall inside the house.”

“And we’re far away from Daddy.” Lily walked into the room, shoulders slumped, eyes on the floor.

They’d arrived at Keating’s condo twenty minutes earlier and he’d shown Bailey and the girls their rooms. Well, he’d shown Bailey where she would sleep if he couldn’t entice her into his bed. Something had shifted between them, and he had a good feeling about it.

“Have a seat, Lily,” Bailey said, following her daughter into the room. “We need to have a serious conversation about your daddy.”

Bailey had asked for Keating’s advice on how she ought to handle the situation with the girls and he agreed one hundred percent that she needed to be honest with them. Their safety mattered above all else.

“Girls,” Bailey said. “I have something to tell you that’s going to be hard for you to hear. I need you to—”

“Is that a game on your computer?” Melody scooted onto Keating’s lap to look at his laptop, which was propped on the couch next to him.

“Nope,” he said. “I can show you some fun games if you listen to your mother quietly for a few minutes.”

“When are we going to see Daddy again?” Lily asked. “He said Mr. Keating wants to be our daddy.”

When the hell did that snake have time to tell the kids that? The man had no limit to his dipshittedness.

“He said you want to replace Daddy with Mr. Keating, but Daddy will always be our only daddy.” Melody crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Bailey.

Bailey, beautiful in leggings and an oversized t-shirt, her hair swept up neatly into a ponytail, didn't waver. Though a fire did light in her eyes and, if Glenn had been in that room, Keating doubted he'd still have balls.

As if by magic, Bailey transformed. Her expression softened, and she knelt on the floor in front of her daughters. “Your daddy will always be your daddy. No one will ever replace him. Even if I date someone else, even if I get married, your daddy will always and forever be yours. Okay?”

Melody nodded, tears welling in her eyes. Damn, this was hard. More than anything else in the world at that moment, he wanted to make this easier for those two little girls. If that required giving up Bailey, because Glenn had miraculously transformed into a decent human being and having their family back together was what they needed, he'd do it.

He'd be miserable for the rest of his life, but he'd do it.

“Why did Daddy leave again?” Lily said, her voice heartbreakingly sad. “Did we do something wrong?”

“No, baby.” Bailey looked up at Keating and he nodded, bracing himself for more sadness for the girls. “Your daddy wants something from me. I told him he couldn't have it and he got mad.”

“What does he want?” Melody asked. “I could give it to him.”

“He wants money, baby. A lot of it.”

“But we don't have a lot of money,” Lily said. “That's what you told me when I wanted that toy car with the real siren and the lights from the toy store.”

“That’s right,” Bailey said. “We don’t have a lot of money, but your daddy knows that Uncle Grayson does have a lot of money. He asked me to get Uncle Grayson to give him the money.”

“Will Uncle Grayson do it?” Melody asked.

“No, baby,” Bailey said. “Your daddy needs to find a job and work to make his money, just like other people do. He’ll understand that eventually, but right now he’s really angry and he…” She swallowed hard. “He said that if we don’t give him the money, he’ll find us and take you two away from me. Until I give him the money, he will keep you away from me.”

“I want to stay with you, Mommy,” Lily said. “I don’t want to go away with Daddy.”

“Daddy wouldn’t do that.” Melody’s face screwed up in anger and confusion. “Daddy wouldn’t take us away. He’d bring us back. Why can’t we just give him money?”

“We might give him money,” Bailey said. “Uncle Grayson is figuring out how much money he can give your daddy, but right now, we need to stay here and be very careful. If you see your daddy, you can’t go with him.”

“Okay, Mommy.” Lily wrapped her little arms tight around herself, fear writ large on her delicate features.

“Daddy wouldn’t hurt us,” Melody said. “It would be okay if we stayed with him for a little while.”

“Honey, your daddy doesn’t have any money or a house. He wouldn’t be able to take care of you.”

“But when will we see him again?” Melody asked, sorrow and confusion in her tone. “I want Daddy back.”

A tear slipped down Bailey’s cheek, but she didn’t brush it away. Her entire focus was on her daughters. “I know you do, baby. Your daddy loves you so much, but he’s going through a hard time right now and he needs to focus on getting his life in order. When he does, I hope he’ll visit you again.”

“We should help him,” Lily said. “If he’s having a hard time, he needs us.”

Bailey looked to Keating, appearing to be as lost for answers as he was. How did they explain this to little girls who still loved their dad even after everything he'd done?

"We'll do what we can," Keating said. "If there's help we can give, and he's willing to take it, we will." And he meant it. Glenn didn't deserve a damn thing from Bailey, but if there was anything Keating could do to allow the man to be a presence in his daughters' lives so that they didn't lose him entirely, he'd do it. Assuming, of course, that Glenn had threatened kidnapping only because he was in a bad place and desperate.

Cherry popped her head into the room like an angel of perfect timing. "Who's hungry? Dinner just arrived and there are extra fortune cookies."

The kids, apparently as relieved as he was for a break from the heavy conversation, hopped up and hurried out of the room after Cherry.

Bailey sat on the couch next to Keating and leaned into him when he wrapped his arm around her. It felt so damn good to hold her. He wanted this, even the hard stuff. He wanted this woman by his side, wanted her kids safely under his roof.

"I feel like no matter what I say or do, I'm going to get it wrong," Bailey said.

He kissed her temple. "I'm no parenting expert, but I'd say Glenn's the one fucking up his relationship with the girls. They can't understand that now, but they'll remember you were with them the whole time. They'll remember you loved them."

"I hope so. Thank you for helping with that conversation. It was more than I should have asked you to do. You're getting dragged into this and I'm not even... We're..."

Keating pushed her away just enough so he could look into her face. "You are the woman I want. And I love your kids. I'd love to call you my girlfriend, but I understand if you aren't ready for labels. I haven't exactly been able to wine and dine

you the way I'd like, and you are worth all the wooing in the world."

"I don't need fancy dinners and date nights to be wooed. You being here for me and the kids is pretty damn romantic. If you'd like to call me your girlfriend, I'd like to call you my boyfriend."

He grinned like the lovesick idiot he was. "I'll make it up to you. Once all this nonsense with Glenn settles down, I'll woo you properly."

He leaned in to kiss her, but she jumped up. "If you start that now, I won't want to stop and the kids are waiting with dinner."

When he stood, he laced his fingers through hers.

Girlfriend.

She was his, and he had no intention of letting her go.

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"The girls want you to come in and say goodnight." Bailey walked into Keating's office, where he was reading through emails with updates about the businesses he'd retired from. He might not actively work for them anymore, but he liked to keep up with how they were doing.

He blinked up at her. "Say goodnight? How does that work?" He didn't want to get it wrong. It made him feel warm and fuzzy that they'd asked for him, and he didn't want to let them down.

She laughed. "You just hug them and say goodnight. They'll let you know if they want more than that."

He closed his laptop and crossed the room to hug Bailey. "Will you be here when I get back?"

She popped onto her toes and kissed him. "I'll probably be on the couch in your living room trying to stay awake."

"I won't be long."

"Cherry's meeting her cousins on the strip and said not to wait up."



“She’ll probably crash with them tonight.”

Oddly nervous, Keating let her go and headed down the hall to the guest bedroom the girls were sharing. His condo was over two thousand square feet, but it only had two bedrooms. He’d never seen a reason for more.

The girls looked so small, snuggled up in the double bed, their heads on their pillows. They were talking animatedly, but shut up as soon as Keating knocked on the door frame. “I heard you need another goodnight hug?”

“Me, first.” Melody stretched her arms up.

Keating crossed the room and hugged her tight. She smelled like shampoo and sweet and sour sauce. She hadn’t gotten all the sauce off her face in the shower.

He walked around to the other side of the bed and hugged Lily, too. She, as always, was neat and clean, not a speck of dinner anywhere on her, and she hugged him just as tight as her sister had.

“We wouldn’t mind,” Lily said as Keating headed for the door.

He stopped and turned. “Mind what?”

“We wouldn’t mind if you wanted to be our daddy, too.” Lily looked down at the comforter that covered her. “It wouldn’t be bad to have two daddies, would it? At school, Maya has two daddies, and Remy has two daddies and two mommies, because her parents got divorced and married other people.”

“It wouldn’t be bad to have two daddies,” Keating said. “And I’d be honored to be your second daddy. I hope I’m always someone you can come to if you ever need help with anything.”

“You should ask her to marry you,” Melody said. “Maybe buy her lots of chocolate if she says yes. She loves chocolate.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Since we’ve gotten to know each other, you don’t have to call me Mr. Keating anymore. You can call me Keats. That’s what my family calls me.”

“Okay, Keats,” Melody said, a smirk in her tone and on her face, like she was getting away with something by talking to him like another adult would.

“Goodnight, Keats,” Lily said.

“Sleep well.” Keating left and closed the door.

Yep, he was sold. He wanted Bailey in his bed and his life, and he wanted her daughters to be his family. Conveniently, it fit his plan, but he was ready to throw the plan out. He’d do whatever was best for Bailey and the girls. All he wanted for his future was to be theirs.

“The girls looking sleepy?” Bailey asked from her seat on the couch in his living room. She looked good there, comfortable in pajama shorts and a baggy t-shirt, her hair loose and falling in waves around her face.

“Not even a little.”

“It’ll be a miracle if they get to sleep after all this excitement. We might be in for a long night.”

“We’ve got no plans tomorrow.” He settled onto the couch next to her. “We can all sleep in.”

She snuggled into his side, and he wrapped an arm around her. She yawned. “Thank you, Keating. For taking us in and being here for us.”

“I’m happy to do it. Your daughters offered me the chance to be their second daddy if I’m interested.”

She sat up and looked at him, eyes wide. “They did? I’m sorry. I had no idea they’d...” She pressed a hand to her chest. “Maybe I didn’t think this through. You and I just started dating. What if it doesn’t work out? I shouldn’t have let them get so close to you and I—”

Keating put a hand over hers. “Not to take away from your impact on the kids, but choosing me as their second dad has nothing to do with their relationship with you. They probably just want me for my house and the trapeze room, but it still counts.”

She pressed her lips together in a severe frown. “This isn’t funny, Keating. Their actual dad has already abandoned them. If things between you and me don’t work out, you’ll—”

“Always want to have a place in their lives. I know it’s quick, but I’ve fallen in love with those little ragamuffins. I told them I want to be someone they can come to if they ever need anything and they can call me Keats.”

“Keats?”

“It’s what my family calls me.” He patted her hand and tried to draw her back against his side. “Now, do you want to watch a movie, or something short since you’re tired? I’ve got Party in my Pants recorded.”

Her eyes lit. “Oh, I love that show.” She gave him a light slap on the shoulder. “Stop trying to distract me. This is serious.”

“Quit worrying. It’ll be okay. I will never abandon your kids as long as I have air in my—”

She pressed her lips to his and jumped onto his lap, straddling him. “Would you shut up? I’m trying to thank you.”

“I like the way you thank me.” He nipped her bottom lip.

She pulled away and narrowed her eyes. “Do you always have to have the last word?”

He kept his big mouth shut. He could learn, after all.

She smiled and kissed him, her tongue swirling with his, and he groaned into her mouth, his cock so hard he was worried about the tensile strength of his shorts.

Too soon, she climbed off his lap. Actually, she hopped off like he was on fire. “Get it together and act normal,” she whisper yelled.

He stared, confused, until the patter of small feet on marble reached him. He grabbed the nearest pillow and pulled it over his lap.

“Mommy.” Lily padded into the room, rubbing her red eyes. “Melody won’t stop rolling around and I’m tired. I want to

sleep. She said she's going to kick me out of the bed if I don't stop telling her to stop moving, but she won't stop moving."

"I've got an idea." Why hadn't he thought of it before? "Why don't you sleep in your Mommy's bed? Then you and Melody won't have to share."

Lily looked at him, her small mouth twisted like she might be about to cry. "Where will Mommy sleep? I don't like sleeping with Mommy because she steals the covers."

Bailey met Keating's questioning gaze and shrugged. "She's not wrong."

"Your mommy can sleep in my bed. It's gigantic and I have plenty of blankets to spare."

Lily crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a hard look. "Mommies and daddies sleep in the same bed when they're married. You and Mommy aren't married."

"Yet," he said under his breath, earning a sharp glare from Bailey.

"I'll sleep on the couch here," Bailey said. "That way, I'll be close if you have any bad dreams. This couch looks really comfy, doesn't it? Come on, I'll help you get settled in my bed."

"Okay, Mommy." Lily let Bailey lead her out. But she shot one last glare over her shoulder at Keating as she left the room.

Keating chuckled and settled back into the couch. Lily was such a rule follower.

Bailey returned five minutes later and sank onto the couch next to him. "I'm not ready for the kids to know we're sharing a bed."

"Does that mean you're going to share my bed tonight?"

"No. I want to be close in case they need me." She climbed back onto his lap and straddled him again. "But you're welcome to share my couch bed with me. They shouldn't be out of their rooms again anytime soon."

Keating wanted nothing more than to lose himself in this woman, but... “I don’t want to be walked in on by your girls.”

She hopped off his lap and offered her hand. “You make a good point. How about you show me your bed and I’ll come back here to sleep?”

He took her hand and stood. “I like the way you think. Won’t the girls be scared if they come looking for you and you aren’t here?”

“Believe me. If they can’t find me, we’ll hear them. They were halfway to sleep when I left them, so I doubt they’ll be looking for me for at least an hour.”

“I can work with an hour.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Whatever had made Bailey brave enough to proposition Keating fled when she stepped into his bedroom. It was not at all the sleek, industrial, manly room she'd expected in his city dwelling. His furniture was light wood, his comforter a sapphire blue, and the art on the wall was mountain views and nature scenes from his journeys around the world.

This was a man who'd seen more of the world in a year than she'd seen in her whole life. He was well-traveled, used to society functions and gourmet dinners. The man dated super models and pop stars, for God's sake. What the hell would he want with a single mother who hadn't had her hair cut in an actual salon in over three years?

Not to mention, she hadn't been naked with a man other than Glenn in... Well, in her whole life. Her abandonment issues and fear of trusting anyone hadn't exactly led her to jump into men's beds. And she'd been a virgin until Glenn.

She felt like a virgin now as Keating walked ahead of her into the room, pulling off his shirt to reveal a back lined with muscle. He tossed his shirt on the bed and turned to face her.

She wanted to believe he wanted her, but what did a woman do with a man like him?

She and Glenn had mostly had sex in the missionary position, except for Mother's Day, when Glenn went down on her and his birthday when she went down on him. Creativity in the bedroom was something she figured only happened in romance novels.

Glenn had never asked for more and the one time she'd tried... Well, let's just say Glenn had a bit of a jealous side. He'd wanted to know where she'd gotten such ideas and had insisted she stop reading romance novels when she'd told him.

He'd loved that she was a virgin when they got together. Loved that he could introduce her to sex. Her suggestion there might be more to the act than he'd led her to believe hadn't sat well with him.

She'd learned to hide her romance novels and to be better about pretending she didn't want more than she had. She got so good at pretending, she convinced herself most days.

She'd thought there wasn't a problem, but Glenn running off with a mistress would suggest otherwise.

"Hey." Keating's expression softened, and he crossed the room to her. His gym shorts hung low on his hips, revealing enough abs to make it clear he worked out regularly. The thin shorts also made it clear he was definitely attracted to her, even though she was being a mousy chicken in the doorway.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to do, Bailey. We can go back and snuggle on the couch, if that's what you want."

"No." She hated the way her voice shook. "I want to do this." She looked up and met his gaze. He was such a good man, and she wanted to trust him, but she just didn't see how she could ever be enough. If she hadn't been enough for a selfish prick like Glenn, how could she be enough for Keating? "I just... I've never... I don't know how..." She dropped her chin to her chest and let out a growl of frustration.

"Hey." Keating used two fingers to lift her chin until her gaze met his. "You know what I see when I look at you?"

"Not sure I want to know."

He chuckled. "I see a woman who makes my heart skip when she walks into a room. I see a woman with a luscious body and a wicked smile that makes me think she'll be wild in the bedroom."

"I've never been wild anywhere."

"Be wild with me, Bailey. Don't overthink this." He pressed a kiss to her lips, and she leaned into him, drawn to him like a moth to an electric bulb and just as likely to get fried. "You are sexy and strong as hell. You are beautiful and fierce. Never doubt yourself even for a second, because I never do. Not even for a milli-second."

She popped onto her toes, pressed her lips to his, and let go of all her self-doubt. Let go of the hurt she'd been holding

onto for years.

Glenn didn't get to make her feel bad about herself. Not anymore.

Keating grabbed her ass and lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her legs around him and nipped his bottom lip. He groaned, carried her to the bed, and dropped her onto the mattress.

It really was an enormous bed. A king-size. She wanted to find out if they could use every inch of it, if they could try all the positions she'd been missing out on for too long.

"I need you naked." Keating reached for the button on his jeans and looked at her expectantly.

She was done being agreeable. She wasn't going to start this thing with Keating that way. "You'll have to catch me first."

She scrambled off the bed. Or she tried, but the bed was enormous and by the time she'd made it to the other side, Keating had grabbed her ankle.

He pulled her back and flipped her, the look on his face so wicked her panties burst into flame. She was way, way out of her league.

Keeping one ankle pinned to the bed, Keating reached for the waistband of her shorts with his free hand. "I said, strip."

Bailey bit back a smile as she tried to writhe away from him, enjoying teasing him way too much to give it up now. Who knew sex could be so much fun?

"Not sure I like bossy Keating," she said.

He froze and let go of her ankle. "Really? Was it too much? I thought we were playing, but--"

She pulled her shirt over her head and he stopped talking. She wasn't wearing a bra and the way his heated gaze zeroed in on her breasts made her feel like a supermodel. She scooped back up the bed. "Oh, I'm definitely having fun, Keating. How about if I'm not having fun, I'll say misery to let you know I'm serious?"



His eyes lit and he smiled. “Not sure you know this about me, but I could play games all night long.”

This time, when she scrambled across the bed, she made it off before he caught her. She raced to the master closet. He grabbed her waist and pulled her back against his front in view of a floor to ceiling mirror at the edge of his closet.

“Like to see you in my space,” he said. “Like it even better to see you naked in my space. Now, take off your shorts before I take them off for you.”

She struggled against him, wanting to play the game some more, loving the way he held on so tight even when she was trying to get away. He grabbed her breast and flicked the nipple

“Look at us together,” he said. “It’s like I was made for you.”

She stopped fighting him, stopped playing the game and looked. She saw things in that mirror she didn’t like. Parts of herself that had aged and changed with motherhood. Her hair was a mess from playing with him, but her lips were puffy from kissing him, her eyes heated, her cheeks rosy.

She wasn’t air-brushed perfection, but she liked what she saw. She was sexy and the way Keating looked at her, like he was starving and she was the only meal he’d ever want, made her throb with desire.

He was right. Her soft curves fit against his hard edges like they belonged there.

They looked damn good together and, for the first time, she saw a future with him. She believed she might fit into his world. Or he into hers.

Then she lowered her gaze and noticed his bare hip. His hard length poking into her back wasn’t covered by anything.

She tried to twist, because she wanted a glimpse of him naked, but he held her firmly in place. “I want to look at you,” he said. “And I’m not done.”

“When did you get naked? How did I not notice that?”

His grin was positively devilish. “You ran when you should have been paying attention to me.”

She laughed, absolutely delighting in the moment. He was so alive, so willing to delve into every moment and whatever it brought.

With one arm wrapped around her collarbones to hold her in place, he put his other hand on her hip and yanked down her panties. She helped him, no longer interested in fighting.

“Tell me something,” he said, his voice a sexy rasp in her ear. “Have you ever thought about me like this? Have you ever laid in bed and thought of what we might be like together?”

“So many times it was hard to look at you sometimes. I was sure you’d see it all over my face.”

For the first time, his smug grin didn’t annoy her. She liked that she’d put it there. “Have you thought of me?”

“Haven’t thought about much else since we met.” He ran his fingers over her ribs and down to her hip. “Did you ever touch yourself when you thought of me?”

She nodded, mouth dry, body shaking with need.

“Show me.”

She swallowed hard. Being naked in front of him was one thing, touching herself and losing control while he watched... It seemed way too vulnerable. “I want you inside me, Keating. I need you.”

He pinched her hip. “I want that, too. More than you know. But I want to watch you first. Want to see you touch yourself.”

She hesitated, and he leaned in, pressing a kiss behind her ear. “Watching you walk across a room drives me out of my mind. Do you have any idea what seeing you get yourself off will do to me?”

She met his gaze in the mirror and saw nothing but desire and need. He wouldn’t be watching and judging her body or her technique anymore than she had judged him when she’d watched him pleasure himself.

That thought made her heady with desire, and she slid a hand down over her stomach to her clit and gave it a slight touch that would have brought her to her knees if he hadn't been holding her up.

"So turned on," he said. "Are you wet?"

She pushed her fingers lower, through her folds, to her wetness. She was beyond wet and ready for him. "So wet."

"Show me."

She reached for his hand on her hip, but he grabbed her wrist, directed her wet fingers to his mouth, and sucked them. His tongue on her fingers felt so good she groaned aloud.

"Just as good as I remember." He pulled her fingers free of his mouth and lowered her hand back to her center. "Continue."

She did as he asked, moving her fingers over her clit in a circular motion, but she kept her gaze on him, watching him watch her. It turned her on as much as touching herself. When she got close, she closed her eyes, breathing hard as she fell over into intense pleasure.

Keating held her up, kissing her neck. "That was so good, Firecracker. You are the sexiest woman and what you just did... It'll be on replay in my brain at least five times a day for the rest of my life."

Before she'd caught her breath, he lifted her under her knees and carried her back to the bed. He lay her down and loomed over her, blocking out the light, his face all she wanted to see.

Until she remembered he was naked.

"Wait," she said.

"Oh, shit. I forgot."

He leapt off her and hurried, naked, to the bathroom. She had no clue what he was doing, and she didn't really care, because it gave her a chance to admire his smooth, muscular backside, and, when he came back, to appreciate his rippling abs and his very erect, lovely penis.

She'd never thought of those words together, lovely and penis, but she couldn't think of a better word to describe it. So firm and proportional, it even seemed to match his personality, fearless and cheerful.

Damn, that was some amazing orgasm to have her describing a freaking penis as fearless and cheerful.

"Got it." Keating held up a condom. "I'm glad you reminded me."

She laughed, curling around herself. Yep, she was definitely high on orgasm.

"What's funny?" Keating sounded incredibly put out, and it made her laugh harder.

When he touched her hip and rubbed a hand over her ass, she sobered, her body going on high alert. The things the man could do to her with just a touch.

He bent and pressed a kiss to her ass, and she stretched out like a cat in the sun, inviting his touch everywhere.

"What's funny?" He crawled up onto the bed and stretched out over her, his still hard cock rubbing her thigh.

"I forgot about the condom, too. I asked you to wait because I wanted to see you fully naked before you were inside me."

"Really?" He grinned and rolled over onto his back, hands behind his head, biceps popping. "Look your fill."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It took everything Keating had to keep his hands behind his head. Bailey was in his bed, naked, and she looked damned good there. Her willingness to play games and her joy in the moment surprised him.

He'd never been more turned on his life.

Bailey stared at him, her eyes taking in every inch of his naked body. Her hair fell over her face, a mess of waves, and he regretted his choice to allow her to do with him as she wished. He wanted to see more of her, to spread her out for his perusal. Watching her get herself off had been the hottest thing he'd ever seen in his life, and he wanted more.

More of her.

More of the feel of her skin under his hands.

More of her laughter and—

She lowered her head and licked his belly. He jerked at the touch and groaned. This woman could probably get him off without ever touching his cock if she wanted to.

He didn't tell her, because he had a feeling she might try and he wanted to be inside her when he came.

Gripping his hair tight, he watched as she moved over him, tasting him, tracing his skin with her fingers. Her ass rose in the air, her smooth back undulating with her movement as she made her way over his body and down. Her skin was so soft, so fucking perfect.

He gave in and dropped one hand to her back.

She sat up immediately and narrowed her eyes. "Nope. Hands under your head. This is my turn."

Damn, but he liked her bossy. He put his hand back under his head, and she returned to her ministrations.

She tongued his belly button, then moved lower, licking his hipbones. He flexed his feet and gritted his teeth to keep from begging.

Then, with no warning, she put her mouth on his cock and took him all the way in, cupping his balls as she deep throated him.

“Fuuuck,” he said. “Baby. Firecracker. Holy—”

She popped off him, grinning and breathless. “Wow. I wasn’t sure I could do that. You are big.” She widened her eyes and used her hands to demonstrate. “I mean big. But I’d read about it and I wanted to try.”

Before he could say a word, she’d dropped her mouth back onto him. This time she took him deep, but didn’t stay there. She moved up and down on his cock, her head bobbing while she kneaded his balls.

His eyes rolled back in his head, his ass squeezed, and he resisted the urge to pump into her mouth by sheer fucking force of will.

“Baby.” He grabbed her head in both hands, but she kept moving and he couldn’t decide if he wanted to help her out or pull her off.

Pussy. Fuck. He wanted to be in her pussy.

“Bailey, you have to stop.” She didn’t stop. Fuck. What was the fucking word? Damn, her mouth was utter heaven. “Misery! Bailey. Fucking misery.”

She stopped instantly and looked at him, her expression clouded with doubt. “Was it bad? I couldn’t take you as deep every time, but I—”

He grabbed her by the armpits and hauled her up to him. He kissed her. “Firecracker, what you did to me... It was amazing. The best I’ve ever had.”

She smiled, pride filling every line of her face. “The best you’ve ever had. Are you saying I give better head than super models?”

He laughed. “I’m afraid the tabloids may have exaggerated my sexual exploits, but yes, you give the very best head I’ve ever received.”

“Why’d you stop me, then?”

“Because I want to be inside you, baby. Isn’t that what you want?”

She threw one leg over his and rubbed herself against his thigh. He felt her wetness against his skin, loved the wild look in her eyes. Like his words had been enough to get her there.

“Yep,” she said. “That’s what I want.”

He handed her the condom. “Put this on and have your way with me.”

She took the condom. “Um, I’ve never... I mean, Glenn...” Her eyes widened. “I shouldn’t have mentioned him—”

He put his hand over hers. “I’ll show you.”

She ripped open the package. “I’m sure it’s very straightforward. I should be able to do it. I’ve just never... and it’s the sort of thing I don’t want to get wrong.”

He took the condom and removed it from the package. “This side up and just roll it on.”

She nodded and took it. He watched her delicate fingers moving over his cock and he had to close his eyes or risk ruining both their nights.

“Climb on and ride.”

When she didn’t move, he opened his eyes. Again, she looked doubtful.

“Never played cowgirl, either?”

She shook her head.

“Your ex is a real piece of work.” And then he shut the hell up, because she was right. Her ex didn’t deserve a place in Keating’s bedroom. He didn’t deserve to be with them in this moment. “Just straddle me, baby, and do what feels good.”

She climbed up and over him. He gripped her hip in one hand and his cock in the other and guided her down onto it.

This time, he didn’t close his eyes. He drank in every moment as his cock slid into her, watched her face as she took him all the way in and her pleasure registered.

“Do what feels good for you,” he said. “Because it all feels fucking amazing for me.”

She leaned forward over him, lifting and lowering herself. “This feels good.” Her voice was breathy and so fucking sexy.

“Feels so good.”

“But I can’t...” She shook her head.

“What? What can’t you?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I don’t usually orgasm during intercourse.”

He grabbed her hips and stopped her motion, holding her in place. “Fine is not okay with me. You not orgasming during intercourse is not okay with me.” He paused. “I mean, unless that’s what you want. I understand for some people it’s more about the journey than the destination.”

“It’s not what I want.” She couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to, but I’d like to try if you want to try.”

“Fuck yeah, I want to try. We’ve got all night to get it right.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t—”

He cupped her face in his hands. “This is perfect. You are perfect. Everything you do turns me on. Every fucking thing. Okay?”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I just... I wanted to be good at this for you.”

“Being good at sex is two people figuring out how to be good at it together. We figure out what makes each other feel good and we experiment until we get it right. That’s not a problem, that’s the fun of it.”

She smiled. “Is everything an adventure to you?”

He brushed a tear off her cheek. “Everything. And you are my best adventure by far. So forget all the noise, quit worrying about me, and focus on what makes you feel good.”



She nodded. "It's just. Your stomach is so flat and I can't get good friction for..." Her cheeks flamed red.

"You need more friction on your clit?"

She nodded.

"Okay. That's a problem I can definitely fix."

He urged her to sit upright, and then he used his thumb against her clit to give her what she needed. "Tell me if it stops feeling good."

"Feels so good."

He watched her face as she rode him, watched again as her orgasm swept over her from her face to her squeezing pussy. He fought hard against his own rising orgasm as she pushed his hand away.

"So intense," she said.

But she didn't slow or stop. She kept her eyes on his as she stayed upright and rode him, lifting and lowering her hips over him, driving him nearly out of his mind.

He was close to losing it when she screamed out another climax.

"Oh, my god," she said. "That's never happened before."

And he came up with a new game. One where he gave her as many orgasms as he could in one night.

They made it to six before he reached his own orgasm, hitting that peak of pleasure while he watched her beautiful body move over his, a pleasure cascade that was almost too much.

Bailey collapsed on top of him, and he was happier and more at peace than he'd been in as long as he could remember.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Something slammed, and Bailey woke with a start. She tried to sit up, but there was a heavy arm over her waist.

Thankfully, she was dressed and on the couch, but Keating was with her, snuggled up against her back. When she'd fallen asleep, he'd been in his bed and she'd been alone on the couch.

He looked at her though his one open eye. "Morning, Firecracker."

"Why are you here?"

"Missed you."

"Brother," a male voice yelled through the condo. "I know you're in here. Licking your wounds after losing our bet?"

"Bet?" Bailey had so many questions, but that seemed the most pressing, or at least the most amusing.

Keating sat up, eyes wide, panic clear on his face.

"Sloane, shut the hell up."

"Shut up?" the male voice continued. "That's no way to greet your brother." A man appeared in the doorway to the den, his arm around the waist of a tall, curvy woman with thick, gorgeous purple hair. The man looked like a leaner, slightly shorter version of Keating, though Sloane's eyes were green and his hair had a reddish tint. "Of course, you always were a sore loser."

"You're married?" Keating asked.

"Well, hello." Sloane crossed the room and offered his free hand to Bailey. "I'm Keating's younger and infinitely better-looking brother, Sloane. This is Clarion Bell."

Bailey shook his hand, but she couldn't take her eyes off Clarion. The woman was even more gorgeous in person. "Bailey Tiller." She offered a hand to Clarion. "I love your music."

“Thank you,” Clarion said as she shook Bailey’s hand. “I’m sorry about barging in like this. I would say Sloane has better manners when he’s not visiting family, but that would be a lie.”

Keating stood and hugged Clarion. “Hey, Clare. It’s been too long.”

Clarion hugged him back and Bailey wasn’t even intimidated to be dating a guy who hung out with famous people. Her boyfriend hanging out with famous people seemed like a damn good perk of the relationship.

Keating stepped out of the hug. “Please tell me you haven’t married this asshole.”

Clarion smiled sweetly. “Not yet. Though he’s walked me past every chapel in the city. I figured something was up by the third one and tortured him until he told me what the hell is going on.”

Sloane pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Just because Keating and I have a bet, it doesn’t mean I don’t also want to marry you.”

Clarion rolled her eyes. “You’re lucky you’re good in bed, Sloane. I’d have kicked you to the curb by now otherwise.”

“Wow,” Keating said. “So you two really are dating. You aren’t just helping my brother to mess with my head?”

Clarion shrugged and sat on the couch. “What can I say? I was in a low place when he asked me out.” That’s what she said, but when she looked up at Sloane, it was clear she adored the guy.

“I didn’t even realize you two had kept in touch.”

“We hadn’t,” Sloane said. “Clarion moved back to town, and I ran into her at the hardware store, of all places.”

Keating sat between Bailey and Clarion and turned to Bailey. “Sloane and Clarion have known each other since they were six. They were enemies, then best friends, then enemies again.”

“And you had a bet about how long it would take him to marry her?”

“Not exactly.” Keating glared at his brother like he was trying to send a message with his eyes.

“Keating here told the family he was planning to find a wife and settle down as a rancher in his old age retirement. My family makes everything into a challenge, so we set up a race between me, Keating, our brother Deacon, and our other brother Cash to see who could get wedded first.”

Keating turned to her, his expression laced with worry. “I should have told you, but I swear the bet has nothing to do with how I feel about you, Bailey. I care about you.”

She stared back at him, feeling a bit like a bomb had just gone off and she had to pretend she hadn't been torn in two.

Of course, it was a bet. It made so much sense. Billionaires didn't fall desperately in love with single moms covered in manure in real life. He'd been blinded by his competitive spirit.

A bet made so much sense. But it still hurt like hell.

“I know you do.” And she did know that Keating cared. She'd experienced more consideration in the weeks she'd been with Keating than she'd felt with Glenn over the entire course of their marriage.

She rubbed her chest to try to relieve the ache there even as she forced a smile and acted nonchalant.

Of course, he hadn't loved her at first sight. Of course, they weren't fated cosmically to be together. He'd seen in her what he'd wanted to see so he could win a bet.

She swallowed down the lump in her throat and ignored the burning in her eyes. “What do you get if you win?”

“It doesn't matter.” Keating stared at her intently, as though he was trying to figure her out, or make sure she was okay. “You're the only prize I want.”

“Seriously, man?” Sloane said. “We've got to work on your game.”

“That was romantic,” Clarion said wistfully. “Maybe your game’s the one that needs work, Sloane.”

Sloane took a seat next to Clarion, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You’re amazing, Bell, but I want to win this bet.”

“Must be a good prize.” Bailey took Keating’s hand and laced her fingers through his to reassure him. She didn’t want him to know how much this new knowledge had hurt her.

She didn’t want him to feel bad and try to make it up to her. She didn’t want to force him to face reality while she and the girls were still dependent on him for a place to stay.

Or maybe she just wanted to pretend for a little longer.

“The prize is my grandmother’s jelly jam pie recipe,” Sloane said. “Mom has it now, and she needed a way to decide who to leave it to in her will. Only one person on earth can have the recipe at one time.”

Clarion threw back her head and laughed. “You want to win a bet so you can get a recipe so you can win a contest at a county fair?”

Sloane gave her a blank look. “It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

Clarion flicked his nose. “Maybe I don’t. I’d assumed you were trying to win the bet for the sake of winning the bet.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Keating said.

“Come on,” Sloane said. “I’m not going to get married and commit myself to another person for the rest of my life without some sort of reward involved.”

“What about the rest of your siblings?” Bailey asked, doing her best to push down her own feelings because she wasn’t going to let any of these people know how she really felt. It was too embarrassing for words. “Don’t they want a chance to get the recipe?”

“They don’t want it,” Keating said. “Finn already has Granddaddy’s moonshine recipe, and Ryland hates to bake.”

“Because he can’t bake to save his life,” Sloane said. “He’s lost the family bake off every year since he was three.”

“Forcing him to enter the family bake off at three might be why he hates baking,” Clarion said. “Just a thought.”

Bailey leaned across Keating to look at Clarion. “I’m getting the feeling they’re an extremely competitive family.”

“Frighteningly competitive. I still have flashbacks to the great acorn battle of ninety-seven.”

“Acorn battle?” Bailey asked.

Keating shuddered. “You don’t want to know.”

She really did, but she figured she’d ask later, because she heard the patter of little feet heading their way.

The girls raced into the room, but pulled up short when they saw the strangers.

Bailey smiled at her girls. “Melody, Lily, this is Mr. Keating’s brother, Sloane, and Sloane’s girlfriend, Clarion Bell.”

Lily’s hair was still mussed from sleep, and neither girl was totally awake. They stared at Clarion like she might be a dream.

“You were on Sing Along High,” Melody said in a hushed voice.

Clarion laughed and swept over to kneel in front of the girls. “I didn’t think anyone watched that anymore. I was on that show a long time ago.”

“You have a really pretty voice,” Lily said. “I like your song Fire it Up.”

“Thank you. Do you like to sing?”

“She sings all the time.” Melody made a face. “It hurts my ears.”

“Girls.” Bailey stood before her daughters started arguing in front of a superstar. “How about we make some pancakes for Clarion and Sloane?”

“Do you like pancakes?” Lily asked the singer.

“I love pancakes. Do you want some help? I think the big boys need some alone time.”

Melody offered her hand. “I can show you where the kitchen is.”

“That would be great.” Clarion took Melody’s hand and let her lead her out of the living room.

Bailey followed a moment later and tried not to worry about the calculating look on Sloane’s face.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Have I told you how beautiful you look?” Keating leaned close in the back seat of the chauffeured car. Across from them, Sloane and Clarion were talking in low voices, heads together.

“No,” Bailey said. “But it’s good to hear.” He hadn’t needed to say it. She’d seen it in the way his eyes lit when she walked out of his bedroom in her fancy dress.

They hadn’t talked about the marriage bet. Keating had tried to bring it up a few times, but Sloane and Clarion had been around and Bailey wasn’t going to discuss it with an audience. There was nothing to discuss, anyway. She’d decided she was going to enjoy this interlude from her life while Keating kept them safe from Glenn. She’d just remember not to get attached.

At least, not to get *more* attached.

Bailey had been hesitant to leave the girls to attend the charity event Clarion had invited Bailey and Keating to at the very last minute, but Keating had hired two guards to keep them safe at his condo and Cherry would be with them. Bailey couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a night out, the last time she’d had a reason to dress up.

She’d certainly never worn anything like the sleek, silver designer dress Keating’s personal shopper had chosen. The dress and the heels, not to mention the make-up and hair done by Cherry, made Bailey feel like a princess. A princess about to attend a boring society function, but wasn’t that what real-life princesses did regularly?

“Should we check on the kids?”

“If you want,” Keating said. “Cherry will text me if there’s any trouble.”

Bailey picked up the small purse that matched her dress, but her phone wasn’t in it. “Darn it. I let the girls borrow my phone to take selfies earlier, and I didn’t get it back.”



“We’ll use mine.” Keating placed his hand on her thigh and squeezed. “Is a text okay? Or do you want to talk to the girls?”

The car pulled up in front of an enormous, fancy building, but Keating didn’t look away or rush her. He waited patiently for her to tell him what she needed. Keating saw her in a way no one ever had before, and he seemed to want to know more. He made her feel beautiful even when she wasn’t wearing a fancy dress, even when she was exhausted and feeling like a horrible mom.

She could love this man.

She stuffed that thought down deep and reminded herself that she and Keating were temporary. “A text would be fine.”

Keating sent the text and reached for the door handle.

“Wait,” Sloane said. “Let’s go over the rules for the challenge one more time and make sure our phones are synced up.”

Keating rolled his eyes. “We know the rules. First one to leave loses. My tracking device is on. I’ve got way more experience than you’ve got with these boring charity events, so worry about yourself, brother.”

Sloane sighed and looked at Bailey. “You see what I have to put up with? He acts like it’s all covered to hide the fact he’s trying to cheat. Keating once climbed out of a bathroom window to avoid small talk.”

“I was seventeen, and I was meeting a girl.”

Sloane put his hand out and wiggled his fingers. “Phone.”

Keating sighed. “Where’s the trust, Sloane?”

“No trust in a bet.”

Keating passed over his phone.

“What’s the winner get again?” Clarion asked.

Sloane raised his eyes from Keating’s phone, confusion wrinkling his brow. “What did we say the winner gets?”

“Don’t remember,” Keating said. “Money?”

“No.” Sloane lowered his head to Keating’s phone and scrolled. “You have too much money to make that any fun.”

“You didn’t name a prize.” Bailey met Clarion’s eyes and bit back a laugh. The other woman had told Bailey they wouldn’t remember to name a prize, and she’d been right. According to Clarion, the guys bet so frequently they’d stopped trying to win anything. It was more about bragging rights.

“Really?” Keating frowned, his brow creasing. “How about the loser has to wear an outfit of the winner’s choosing for a full day?”

“Sounds good.” Sloane didn’t look up from the phone. “Ah-ha. I knew there was a trick. You changed the time on your phone by fifteen minutes.”

“I do that so I’m never late for anything.”

Sloane handed the phone back. “Well, I fixed it.” He held out his phone to Keating. “Want to check mine?”

“Don’t need to,” Keating said. “Clarion will keep you honest.”

Sloane huffed. “Maybe that’s changed now that we’re dating.”

“It hasn’t changed,” Clarion said. “I’m still all about fairness and justice.”

“You’re just bitter about that time you lost the ping-pong challenge.” Sloane knocked his shoulder against hers with a fond smile.

“Five days. I carried that ping-pong ball around for five days without dropping it. I was on course to be the grand champion and then you just ‘accidentally’ bumped me and knocked it out of my hand?”

Sloane grinned and looked at Bailey. “See, still bitter.”

Clarion straightened her shoulders and smoothed the skirt of her lovely, blush pink dress. “Not bitter. I just don’t believe in helping cheaters.”

“Can we go in now?” Keating asked. “I want to check out the silent auction before they close the bidding.”

Sloane grinned giddily and Bailey couldn't help but laugh. The brothers took their challenges way too seriously, but at least they had fun with them.

Keating pulled the door handle and pushed, and the driver opened the door the rest of the way. Keating got out first and offered his hand to Bailey and Clarion in turn. Sloane got out on his own.

Keating grabbed Bailey's hand and laced his fingers through hers. “Don't worry,” he said in a low voice. “Sloane hates these things as much as I do. We'll be out of here and in my bed in less than an hour.”

She shivered at the thought of getting naked with him again. “Are you sure you don't want to keep me in this pretty dress longer?”

He looked her up and down, his gaze heating and making her core ache. “The dress? Definitely take it off. But you can keep the heels on as long as you want.”

Feeling like a princess was great, but the only important person had already seen her all dolled up. “Is this challenge really worth winning? I'm happy to stay just long enough for you to donate to this worthy cause and hurry back home.”

Keating grimaced. “Sloane is insufferable when he wins. He won't last long. It'll be fine.”

Together, they walked into the large stone building. She'd expected a big ballroom, but three steps inside and the doorway was covered with netting.

“What is this?” Keating asked. “A charity to raise money for mosquito netting?”

“Not exactly,” Sloane said.

“It's for the—” Clarion started.

Sloane grabbed her hand and dragged her through the netting. “Let them find out for themselves, darling.”

Keating and Bailey followed Sloane and Clarion through the netting and into a small antechamber with more netting all around them. Inside stood four people, all in black with small, cotton disks they were giving to each of the guests.

“What’s this for?” Keating asked as he accepted his disk.

“Sugar water pad,” the attendant said. “There are more inside. We also have brightly colored accessories to attract the butterflies if you’d like.”

“Butter... Butterflies?” Keating’s palm went clammy in Bailey’s.

Bailey had been to a butterfly farm with her girls when they were younger and understood how it all worked, but she didn’t understand why Keating had gone so pale. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” He cleared his throat. “I’m great. We should move to let other people through.”

But he didn’t move. He stood stock still in the antechamber.

“Do you want to get something colorful? Your gray suit won’t attract many butterflies.”

“No!” He cleared his throat again.

The attendant nearest them took a step back, eyes wide.

“Let’s just go in and keep a low profile.” Keating handed his sugar pad back to the attendant and tried to yank Bailey’s sugar pad out of her hand.

“What are you doing? I want this.”

He let go, shaking his head. “Your funeral.”

He straightened his shoulders and walked through the netting. Bailey thanked the attendants and was just stepping out into the ballroom when a blood-curdling scream broke through the tinkling notes of classical music.

Bailey curled in on herself and looked around, expecting a man with a gun or a bloody mess somewhere. Instead, she saw Keating standing a few feet from her, staring down at a butterfly on his suit jacket while Sloane laughed so hard he looked in danger of falling over.

Clarion appeared to be torn between scolding Sloane and laughing along with him. Everyone else in the enormous ballroom had turned to stare at Keating.

Bailey fought the urge to laugh. She used her small sugar-watered disk of cotton and urged the lovely Monarch butterfly off Keating's suit.

He sighed and relaxed a touch, but he didn't take his eyes off the butterfly Bailey held.

"Don't like butterflies?" she asked.

"You mean evil worms with wings? No." Keating smoothed his suit jacket, then ducked and let out a small shriek when a butterfly fluttered past and landed on Bailey's dress.

"You know they don't bite, right?"

"Logically? Yes. Emotionally? They're tiny monsters waiting to surround me and suck me dry."

"A caterpillar bit him when he was a kid," Sloane said. "He had an allergic reaction and his arm swelled to twice its normal size."

"Looked just like that flying worm." Keating pointed at the butterfly on Bailey's dress. He grimaced and went a bit green. "You might want to chase it away. It's crawling toward your face."

"Sounds traumatic," Bailey said. "Want to leave?"

"What's the charity for?" Keating glared at his brother.

"It's for kids living with food insecurity," Clarion said. "The butterflies are for dramatic effect."

"Of course they are." Keating ground his teeth. "We're staying. I'm not going to let butterflies stop me from helping kids or winning this challenge." He pointed at Sloane. "This whole thing was a set-up, so you automatically forfeit any prize."

"You didn't ask a single question about this event," Sloane said. "As soon as Cherry and Bailey started talking dresses,

and you saw how excited Bailey was, you lost any edge you might have had. You're going soft, old man."

Keating turned his pointer finger on Clarion, but yanked it back when a butterfly flew too near. "Your call, ref. Does Sloane forfeit or not?"

Clarion sighed. "According to the Sullivan family bylaws, it's not the fault of the challenge setter if the challenge accepter fails to ask enough questions and is put at a disadvantage by unforeseen issues with said challenge."

Sloane wrapped an arm around Clarion's shoulders and kissed her cheek. "You are perfect, baby."

"How the hell do you know the Sullivan family bylaws?" Keating asked.

"Your dad emailed them to me when he found out Sloane and I were dating. He also informed me about the marriage bet."

"You said you figured that out because of the chapels." Sloane pulled away and glared at her.

Clarion shrugged. "I would have figured it out. That was poorly done on your part, Sloane."

Sloane's eyes lit like she'd just told him she was buying him a new... Well, Bailey didn't know what Sloane liked, but whatever it was, he looked at Clarion like she'd just promised it to him. "I love you."

Her eyes widened, and she opened her mouth to speak, but he kissed her hard before she could.

"Do you want to go?" Bailey leaned toward Keating. "You could send a donation to the charity."

He stepped away from her, eyes on the butterflies on her hand and dress. "Nope. I'll never hear the end of it if I leave this thing too early. It's past time I came to grips with my phobia."

"That's very brave of you, but I'm not sure immersion therapy when surrounded by over a hundred people in designer duds is truly the best option."

“I can handle it,” he said. “Just get more of those disks of death and keep the flies off me.”

She urged her current butterfly off the cotton disk and onto a nearby flower arrangement and grabbed another sugar water disk from a table for her free hand.

For the next hour, she followed Keating around the party, making tense small talk with strangers and luring away any butterflies who landed on him. By the time the speeches started, Keating was a pale, sweaty, shaking mess.

“We’ve stayed long enough,” Bailey said. “Let’s just go.”

“No.” Keating pointed across the room to where Sloane stood next to Clarion, who was talking animatedly with a small group of people. Sloane’s eyes were halfway to closed, and he was tilting to the side. “He won’t last much longer. He falls asleep when he’s bored.”

“The bet isn’t that he falls asleep. It’s that he leaves.”

“Clarion will drag him out once he falls asleep on her. She won’t let him embarrass her.”

Clarion reached back for the teetering Sloane and did something that made his eyes pop wide and his back straighten. “She doesn’t seem like the type who’s easily embarrassed.”

“Trust me,” Keating said. “I give it twenty minutes.”

Three hours later, one antique vase won by Keating in the silent auction, and four quadrillion butterfly removals, security asked them to leave because the function had ended.

Clarion and Bailey had discussed leaving the men to their foolishness an hour and a half ago, but had decided instead to snack on the gourmet food, drink the free champagne, and get to know each other, leaving the men to fend off butterfly attacks and sleepiness on their own. It hadn’t worked. Both men had stuck it out.

Keating looked exhausted and traumatized. Sloane looked bored beyond belief, but they all left together.

“What happens if there’s a tie?” Bailey asked as they settled into the car and the driver started the engine. She was tipsy from the champagne and in a pretty good mood, because she’d had a lot of fun with Clarion. The singer was surprisingly down to earth and when they’d run out of things to talk about, since they had so little in common, they’d played a fun game of guess the life story of the ritzy people around them.

Clarion actually knew the life stories of more than a few of the folks, and that had been even more fun than Bailey’s guesses.

Keating wrapped an arm around Bailey and dropped his head onto her shoulder. “The butterflies sapped my life blood.”

Sloane appeared to be fast asleep.

Clarion chuckled. “According to the Sullivan family bylaws, in the event of a tie, the family tiebreaker clause must go into effect.”

“What’s the tie breaker clause?”

“Duel at dawn,” Sloane said without opening his eyes. “Weapon of Keating’s choice.”

“Horseshoes.”

“God dang it, Keats. Where are we even going to find a place for horseshoes at six in the morning in Las Vegas?”

“Got a set on the roof.”

“Of course you do.” Sloane didn’t even lift his head. “Fucking horseshoes.”

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“You are the woman of my dreams,” Keating said.

Bailey stood before him, wearing only the heels from their night out, her hair still in the fancy updo. She’d never felt more beautiful or more powerful.

She’d also never felt more desperate.

She wanted Keating’s hands on her, but he seemed content to sit on the edge of his bed, still fully dressed, and stare at her.



When they'd gotten back to his condo, Cherry had been asleep on the couch and had no interest in getting up and going back to her own place. Since there wasn't room on the couch for Bailey, too, she'd had no choice but to sleep in Keating's room.

She wasn't mad about it.

Bending her knees, she took a step forward, but Keating held up a finger. "Not done yet."

For a man who'd spent four hours face to face with his biggest fear, he was surprisingly happy. Probably that post-terror adrenaline rush from having survived something scary.

"I've been standing in these heels for hours, Keating." She gave him a sexy smile and swung one hip out. "I'm more than willing to get on my knees for you."

"I saw you sitting in the corner with Clarion for at least an hour after you abandoned me to be attacked by the evil flying worms."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Have you forgotten about the two hours I spent rescuing you from the evil flying worms?"

"No. Arms down."

She huffed, but dropped her arms, because she was starting to like being bossed around by him in the bedroom. Especially when he licked his lips like that.

"You're my hero." His gaze locked on her hands as she moved them over her body. "Which is why I've arranged a spa day for you, Cherry, and Clarion tomorrow. You three will have the place to yourselves. I rented the whole spa."

Bailey stared, shocked. The last time she'd had a spa day was... Well, never. She wasn't even sure she'd like a spa day, but she was excited to find out. "What about the girls?"

"Sloane and I will take care of them. They'll love the aquarium at Mirabilis." He held up a hand when Bailey opened her mouth to argue. "We'll take a guard from Stone Security with us, but Grayson's private investigator has been

tracking Glenn's phone, and he's still in Rawlton. It's unlikely he has any idea where to find us."

Bailey chewed on her bottom lip. They'd only been in Keating's condo for a few days, but the girls were already getting stir crazy not being able to run or jump around the way they could at home where there was no one living below them. "They'd love that, Keating. Thank you."

He got to his feet. *"Thank you, Bailey. I thought I had everything I could ever want, but these past few weeks with you..."* He crossed to her and set his hands on her ass, pulling her against his clothed body. *"I hadn't realized what I was missing until I met you."*

"I know what you mean. I'd been missing fun before I met you." She kissed his lips. "I'd been missing feeling sexy."

"You should never not feel sexy." He ran his hands up over her ribs and palmed her breasts. "You are sexy every moment of every day."

She tapped his forehead. "Did you hit your head today?"

His smile twisted something in her chest and settled it back again, firmer and stronger. "Nope."

Keating kissed her, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her off her feet. He carried her to the bed and explored her with his lips and tongue, making her feel not just loved, but cherished, every inch of her.

Then he moved over the center of her and put his mouth to her clit, taking his time, driving her out of her mind with fingers and tongue, all while he was still fully dressed.

She arched up into him as her orgasm washed over her, filling her with such an intense pleasure that her vision went spotty. But Keating didn't stop. He waited for her to recover and then he used his mouth to bring her to orgasm again and again. Until she was begging him to stop, because it was just too damn much.

She didn't say 'misery,' because it felt too good.

She covered her mouth with both hands to quiet her screams, because she didn't want to scare Cherry or the kids. Keating kept pleasure rolling through her until she was totally limp. Then he stood and stripped out of his clothes while she watched.

“So hot,” she said. “If I had the energy, I'd lick every one of your abs.”

He grinned down at her. “Save that thought for another day.”

Naked, he loomed over her, kissing her long and hard, before he drove into her with one long thrust.

“Condom?” she asked.

“Put it on already.” He chuckled. “You must be really out of it not to have noticed.”

She started to say something but forgot what it was, because he moved his hips differently and it felt way better than it should have for a body that had been sucked dry of orgasms. “Oh, my God. How do you do this to me?”

“You like that?” His eyes flared. “Want to try something else?”

“Anything. I'll try anything with you.”

He pulled out of her and flipped her over onto her knees. He gripped her hips. “Tell me if anything hurts.”

“Okay.”

He moved into her slowly, taking his time.

“Ungh,” she managed.

“Hurt?”

“Feels so good.”

He picked up his pace and the spot he was hitting... she hadn't known it existed until that moment. Impossibly, another orgasm crashed through her, forcing her to cover her mouth. This time, he came with her and the sound of his pleasure, the

feel of him inside her as he lost it, felt like magic. It felt like life on another plane, one where she had a future with him.

“I want to do this every day,” she said.

“I’m willing to do everything I can to make that happen. But we’re going to have to soundproof our bedroom.”

She liked the sound of that ‘our.’ And then she remembered, like a slap to the face, that they’d never share a bedroom for longer than a night. She was a bet to be won.

Keating went to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. She pulled on her pajamas with slow movements, not because she wanted to get dressed, but because she didn’t want the kids to walk in on her naked in Keating’s bed.

She got back into the bed and pulled the comforter up around her, yawning.

“Like having you in my bed.” Keating climbed in behind her. He wrapped himself around her. “Now tell me why you stiffened up before I got up to get rid of the condom.”

“It’s nothing,” Bailey lied because she was sleepy and warm and happier than she could remember being in a long, long time and she just wanted to bask in the afterglow.

Keating rubbed her bare arm, his callouses rough against her skin. “It’s the bet, isn’t it? I knew your reaction yesterday wasn’t real. I should have told you about it.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “It’s good I know where I stand.” She knew the words would start an argument, but she could only lie so much.

Keating raised himself on one elbow and looked down at her. “What does that mean?”

She sighed. “Can we just go to sleep? I’m exhausted.”

He stroked a finger over her cheek. “The bet was made long before I met you, Bailey. It has no effect on how I feel about you or how seriously I take what we have together.”

She stared up into his face, his expression so very tender and fond, and tears welled in her eyes. She wished so badly

that this could be real, that he could have truly loved her from the first moment he saw her. “Or. You were attracted to me when we met and you subconsciously built it into a ‘love at first sight’ moment because it fit with your plan and your bet.”

He frowned, his eyes darkening. “Is that really what you think?”

She bit her lip to hold back the tears. She would not cry in front of this man. He would never know how deeply he’d wounded her. “You’re a good man, Keating, with a huge heart. You have so much love to give. Don’t let your competitive spirit push you to create a romance where there is none.”

He studied her for a long moment, his eyes roaming her face like he could take in every detail. “I’m not so competitive that I don’t know my own mind, Bailey. You’re scared right now. And you have good reason to be, so I’m not going to get mad or let you push me away. I’m going to hold on so tight and woo you so hard that you’ll never doubt my feelings for you again. Not even for a second.”

When she said nothing in response, he went on, “I know it seems fast to you, and it’d be easy to blame the bet for the intensity of my feelings. But I’ve always known what I’ve wanted in life and I want you, Bailey, in my life. I don’t need six weeks or six months to be sure. I was sure the first time I saw you smile.”

Her throat went tight and her eyes burned. She wanted so badly to believe him, but she just couldn’t go there. If she opened herself up to him and gave him her heart along with everything else, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to pick up the pieces when he left. “Let’s just take this one day at a time, Keating. Let’s enjoy tonight and worry about the rest later.”

He nodded. “I can do that. Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere unless you tell me to leave. I’ll spend every day for the rest of my life proving that to you if that’s what you need.”

“Keating, I—”

“Shhh.” He pressed a finger to her lips. “We’re both tired. We’re going to go sleep now.”

He clicked off the lamp on the bedside table and settled in, his arms tight around her. She lay in the dark, trying to figure out what was real and what was too good to be true, but she was too tired and Keating was too warm and she fell asleep before she’d figured anything out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Keating peered through the aquarium glass, trying to make out the fish swimming in the far back of the tank.

“How will we know if we find all the puffer fish?” Lily asked, her small hand tight in Keating’s.

He looked down at her, her dark bob neat, her expression so trusting. How could anyone leave this child? How could anyone even think of hurting her?

“We’ll ask one of the staff,” he said. “They’ll know how many puffer fish there are.”

“Found another one,” Sloane shouted from the other side of the room.

Amazing how he made himself heard over the crowd of tourists around them. He was on a mission to win after losing to Keating in horseshoes that morning.

And he was dressed in rainbow princess footie pajamas with a fedora covering his thick hair. Keating glanced over at his brother just to enjoy the sight. He’d been a genius to invest in those adult-size pjs for just such an opportunity.

“Great job, Mr. Sloane,” Melody shouted, oddly loud and staccato. “Let’s go team!”

Lily slipped her hand free of his. “Look, Keats,” she said in her small voice, her syllables still holding the soft edges of baby talk. “I think I see another one over there.”

He followed where she pointed. It was a small alcove with a round viewing window. He walked up to it and peered through the glass. “Lily, I don’t—”

Someone shouted, and there was a commotion behind him. Keating spun to grab Lily, but she wasn’t next to him.

His heart pounded in fear as he scanned the crowd, looking for Lily or Glenn.

“Melody!” Sloane raced toward the entrance to the room and Keating saw Lily’s black bob disappear through the

doorway, Melody right behind her.

Time seemed to speed up and he felt way too slow. Unable to make his voice or his legs work, frozen in fear.

It was probably only a few seconds, but it felt like hours before Keating could make his voice work.

“Milton,” he called to the guard who was supposed to be keeping the kids safe. He was just standing near the entrance to the room, rubbing at his eyes like he’d been crying. “Get the girls, Milton.”

Milton looked over at Keating, his eyes red and watering, and Keating pointed toward the doorway the girls had just run through. What the hell were they doing?

Sloane hit the doorway the same time Milton did and, as though they’d orchestrated it, the two men’s feet flew up in the air and they hit the floor.

“What the fuck?”

Keating ran toward the doorway to see the two men on their backs and groaning, small toy cars littered around them. He leapt over the toys and raced through the maze of the aquarium.

He was too slow. Too damn slow.

And there were so many people. Idiots smiling and chatting with no clue that two little girls were alone and lost. Or, worse, taken by their father.

He scanned the place for the girls, his gaze flipping through each face and discarding them, but his brain felt like mush. He ought to just feel them, shouldn’t he? They would stand out from the crowd because he loved them more than his own life, wouldn’t they?

Had they dropped the toy cars on purpose? Or had they accidentally dropped them when their father lured them out of the aquarium?

Outside the aquarium, Keating dodged people and scanned the crowd for the two little girls.



He felt sick, his stomach twisting and his imagination throwing up images of those girls hurt or scared, taken by a father who didn't seem to give a fuck about them.

He spotted a security guard near the slot machines. It felt as though it took hours to get to her and, in that time, Glenn had taken the girls out of the country. He'd locked them in a dark room. He'd made sure Keating would never see them again.

"Okay, buddy?" the woman asked, hand on her hip.

"Two little girls," he panted out. "I can't find them. Their father has threatened to kidnap them and we need to find them. Now."

She straightened, expression going deadly serious. "Can you give me descriptions of the girls?"

"Keating." Sloane nearly slid right into him as he halted his sprint. "Milton's checking the front exits. I'm heading to the back of the casino to look for them."

Keating slapped his brother on the back and squeezed. "You have to find them."

Sloane's sober expression was one Keating rarely saw. "I'm going to do everything I can."

Sloane took off and Keating described the little girls as the security guard relayed the information through her two-way radio. He choked up when he described the gap between Melody's teeth and Lily's big green eyes.

"We'll find them," the guard said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Is there anyone you should call?"

Shit. Bailey.

"Their mother is in the casino across the street at the spa. I'll call her."

He raced toward the other side of the building and the souvenir shop the girls had oohed over on the way in, because they had to have just run off on their own to explore. Because the alternative was too horrible to accept.

As he scoured the crowd for two little girls being dragged away by an asshole, he pulled out his cell phone and called Bailey.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Bailey rested her head against the seat back and let out a long sigh. She'd been massaged, steamed, had a facial, and had never been more relaxed in her life. Her muscles were so loose, she was drifting off even as a kind woman worked at her feet with a callus remover.

"I owe Keating for this," Clarion said as she settled into the seat next to Bailey's and put her feet up on the stool. "I never do this for myself and I love it so much."

"Self care is the first thing to go when a person gets busy." Cherry took her seat on the other side of Bailey. She tapped Bailey's arm. "How was your first spa day?"

Clarion gasped. "You're a spa virgin? How did I not know this was your first time?"

Bailey smiled at the other woman, who looked perfect even with a towel on her head and no make-up on her face. "I never wanted to spend the money when I had it and I haven't had the money to waste the last few years."

"This calls for a celebration." Clarion shook her shoulders. "Daria, would it be possible for us to have a round of champagne? You can add it to Mr. Sullivan's tab."

"Of course," Daria, the attendant who'd been directing their day, said. "I'll bring it right out."

"I'm sorry about my feet," Bailey said to the woman working on them. "I've never had a pedicure before and I—"

"Ms. Tiller?" Daria returned, her expression concerned, her hands empty of champagne, a small handheld phone gripped in her right hand. "There's a call for you from Mr. Sullivan."

Bailey's heart sank, her mind immediately going to the worst-case scenario.

No.

It would be fine. Keating probably just wanted to know if he could buy toys for the girls.

Hand shaking, Bailey reached out and took the phone from Daria. “Hello?”

“Bailey?” Keating said, his voice choked. “I can’t find them. They—”

She dropped the phone and was out of the chair so fast she wouldn’t have been able to explain how she’d gotten up if someone had asked. In a bathrobe and bare feet, she raced out of the spa, through the casino, not getting lost only because her brother owned the casino and she’d been there many times to see him, and onto the street.

The foot traffic was dense and she couldn’t get across the busy street to Mirabilis, where the girls might still be, without risking death by motor vehicle. She should have taken the pedestrian bridge that connected Mirabilis to Monstrosity, but at this point that would take longer than waiting for the light.

She raced for the corner and the crosswalk, the pavement rough on her soft, newly de-calloused feet. She pressed the button for the crosswalk and waited, barely breathing.

“Mommy!”

Bailey spun, looking for the source of the voice. Was it just some kid on the street or was it...?

There.

A man was dragging two kids through the crowd around the corner of Monstrosity casino. A familiar dark bob and rat’s nest of hair bobbed along behind the man.

Her babies.

She ran as fast as she could through the crowd, going against traffic, and around the corner.

“Glenn! Stop!”

Glenn didn’t stop, but Melody picked up her feet and wrapped them around Glenn’s arm like she was a little human barnacle. A moment later, Lily did the same and Glenn pitched backward, pulled down by their combined weight.

The surrounding crowd parted, leaping away from the pile of little girls and man. Bailey raced over to them, pushing people out of the way. She got to Glenn just as Cherry raced up next to her and grabbed Lily out of the tangle of limbs like a sports ball player recovering the ball. She bundled Lily up in her arms as Bailey grabbed for Melody.

Before she could free her daughter, Glenn rolled with Melody in his arms and somehow got to his feet. Melody cried out, her cheek red and scraped.

“Mommy!”

“Glenn. Put her down. The cops are on their way.”

Glenn snorted and backed away, but he was limping.

“I’ve got the cops on the line,” Clarion said, phone to her ear.

“Just give me the money,” Glenn said. “I wouldn’t have had to do any of this if you’d just give me the fucking money.”

“Glenn.” Bailey stepped forward. Melody was struggling in his arms, and he was having a hard time holding onto her. If he dropped her, Bailey would be there to catch her. “If you put her down and walk away, you might not go to jail for kidnapping.”

“It’s not kidnapping.” He sneered. “She’s my fucking daughter.”

“Sir.” A security guard stepped up next to Bailey. “Put the child down.”

“She’s my daughter.” Glenn took another step back, just as the sound of sirens filled the air. He turned like he might make a run for it, only to find two more security guards blocking his path. Bailey thought casino guards only concerned themselves with what went on inside the casino, but the guards looked ready to do whatever it took to get Melody back.

Glenn dropped Melody and raised his hands. “I just wanted to have a conversation with my wife. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

The guards secured Glenn, and Bailey rushed over and scooped up Melody. She couldn't lift her daughter anymore, but she could kneel on the ground and hug her little girl hard.

Melody cried on her shoulder with huge, gasping sobs.

"Are you okay, baby?" she asked. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No," Melody choked out between sobs.

"Bailey. Melody." Keating was suddenly next to Bailey, kneeling on the pavement. "Thank God. Where's Lily?"

"She's with Cherry." Bailey heard the ice in her tone, but didn't care. All she had the energy for was pulling her daughters close and making sure they were okay.

"Mommy." Lily rushed Bailey and hugged her and Melody so hard she almost knocked them over.

"Are you okay?" Bailey asked.

"I'm okay, Mommy."

The sirens got closer and Bailey stood and pulled her children back from the street and the sight of their father getting arrested.

Keating followed. "Is there anything I can do? Do you want me to call Grayson? The lawyers."

"No. You've done enough."

"Bailey, I'm sorry. They were there one second and gone the next."

Bailey looked at the man who'd let her down just like the smart part of her had known he would, and she spewed all her fear and anger all over him. "You promised you'd keep them safe. You. Promised. Me. And you had them for what? Two hours before Glenn showed up and took them? What were you doing when you were supposed to be watching my kids?"

"We were looking at fish, playing a game."

"A game or a competition, Keating? How closely could you have been watching my kids if you didn't see a grown man

walk in and drag them out?”

“That’s not what happened, Bailey.”

At her side, Melody was crying again, wailing, while Lily held on tight to her hand, silent tears streaming down her face as she shook.

“You should go. I’m sure the police will want to talk to you, but just...” Bailey looked up at him and saw pure agony on his face. She couldn’t feel anything for him. She was already feeling too much. Her fear and pain, as well as the sorrow and pain of her girls. “Please, Keating. Just give us space. We need to handle this as a family.”

Keating bowed his head as though her words had weighed him down. “If you think of anything you need. Anything at all. Just ask. I’ll do whatever is in my power to help.”

She nodded and turned away from him to focus on her girls.

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Bailey set the warm, delicious-smelling pizza, which the guard at the door had inspected before handing over, on the kitchen counter and took a moment to just breathe.

Logan and Genevieve’s house was comfortable and homey. She loved the retro vibe that touched every bit of the decor. But she was already wondering if she’d made a mistake not going back to Keating’s place.

She’d been so angry with him, had felt so let down. When the cops told her she and her distraught daughters could go home and be interviewed the next day, she’d taken the opportunity and run. Keating, Sloane, and Milton had stayed to talk to the police and Bailey had two crying, exhausted kids as an excuse not to talk to any of them.

All she’d wanted to do was hold on to her girls and never let them go again.

Before she’d flagged down a taxi or called a car service, Grayson had called and let her know he already had a car and security waiting for her at the entrance to Monstrosity.

The Stone Security guard driving that car had offered to take her anywhere, and she'd chosen to go somewhere she could be alone with her family. She knew the code to Logan's door, and it just made sense to take a break from relying on anyone who wasn't family.

Now, though, with her kids curled up in the guest room watching a mindless cartoon, her anger had cooled and it was dawning on her she might have overreacted.

She didn't think she was wrong. Keating had been playing a game instead of watching her babies. Every sign indicated he wasn't ready to be a grown-up and focus on a family. How else could he have missed Glenn grabbing her girls when they'd obviously done everything they could to fight him off?

Her phone rang. She swiped to answer and put it to her ear. "Hey, Logan."

"Grayson told me what happened. How are you doing?"

She'd talked to Grayson again after they'd gotten to Logan's house, but that had been about lawyers and restraining orders and guards. That had been the news that Glenn was being held in jail, at least until a bail hearing and had no money for bail.

Hearing Logan's voice, the man who'd raised her from the age of ten, hit her in all her emotions. She swallowed back the tears and tried to keep them out of her voice. "We'll be okay. The girls are shaken."

"They're resilient. And they have you. They'll be okay."

She chewed on her lower lip to keep a sob from rising, but she couldn't stop the tears rolling down her cheeks. "Thanks, Logan. I'm staying at your house. Hope that's okay."

"Of course, Bay. Stay as long as you need. Gen and I will be back in a few days and we'd love to see you and the girls." He paused. "Unless you need us to come back sooner. Grayson said you told him not to come back, but we can—"

"No." Bailey sniffled. "We'll be okay. Thank you for offering, though."



“Of course. You aren’t staying with Keating. Everything okay there?”

“He had to stay and talk to the police, but I wanted to get the girls somewhere they could lie down.”

“Makes sense. So you and Keating are good, then?”

She laughed. “Is your focus really on my love life right now?”

“He’s been good for you. Every time I’ve talked to you in the last two weeks, you’ve sounded lighter. Not to mention, Grayson said he sent you to a spa yesterday. It’s good he made you finally take some me time. And the girls love him.”

“He sent me to a spa day and took the girls out in public. Keating wasn’t even paying enough attention to notice Glenn had grabbed them. He’s a fun guy, but he’s not a grownup. I need a grownup.”

“Okay,” Logan said. “I hear you. I don’t know the guy, so I’m going to have to go with your judgment. It’s too bad he’s not going to work out, but you and the girls will get through this and I’m here for you. No matter what you need.”

A knock at the door almost made Bailey drop the phone. “Thank you, Logan. Someone’s here. I’ll call you tomorrow and you can talk to the girls, too.”

“I’d love that.”

Bailey hung up and hurried to the door, her heart pounding and her hands shaking. The guards wouldn’t let just anyone knock on her door, so it was the guards with bad news or it was... It couldn’t be Keating.

She opened the door to see Cherry, in sweats and a t-shirt, no make-up, shiny hair clips in her thick hair and flip-flops on her feet.

Cherry stepped into Logan’s house, grabbed Bailey, and hugged her tight. “How are you?”

Bailey burst into tears.

Cherry led Bailey to the couch and sat with her, holding on while Bailey cried on her shoulder. She didn't offer any false platitudes or urge Bailey to calm down. She just let Bailey cry herself out.

When Bailey pulled away, Cherry looked her in the eyes and studied her. After a few minutes, she nodded. "Better?"

Bailey scanned herself and nodded slowly. "Oddly, yes. Thank you."

"No need to thank me. That's what friends are for. Clarion is with Sloane, but she can be here at a moment's notice if you need her."

"I'm okay. I just want to be with my girls right now."

Cherry pursed her lips, looking almost comical being so serious with sparkly clips in her hair. "Isn't that what you did when Glenn left? You pulled inward and shut people out?"

"I wouldn't say—"

"People need people, Bailey. We all need community. And the sooner the girls see you getting back to normal and happy, the sooner they'll understand it's okay for them to do the same."

"You realize you aren't actually a therapist, right?"

Cherry smiled gently, possibly condescendingly, definitely annoyingly. "Am I wrong?"

Bailey huffed, unable to come up with a reasonable argument.

"Where are the girls? Sleeping?"

"I was just about to see if they want some pizza."

Cherry popped to her feet. "Great. I'll ask them."

Bailey stood. "I really don't think..."

But Cherry was already disappearing around the corner on her way to the girls' room. Bailey sat back down because she was exhausted and the girls loved Cherry. They'd be glad to see her.

She laid her head on the couch and closed her eyes, just to rest them for a moment. But all she saw behind her lids was Glenn dragging her girls down a sidewalk and away from her. All she could feel was the bone-deep terror when Keating said they'd been taken and she thought she might never see them again.

“No, no, no,” Melody shrieked.

In an instant, Bailey was on her feet and racing through the house.

Had Glenn gotten out of jail?

Was he inside the house?

She skidded to a stop in the doorway of the guest bedroom to see Melody violently shaking her head while Lily chewed on the blanket covering her and Cherry spoke to them in a low voice.

“What the hell’s going on?” Bailey asked. “What are you saying to them?”

Cherry looked over at Bailey and smiled as though she’d done nothing wrong. “The girls and I were just having a conversation. There’s something they need to tell you.”

“Noooo,” Melody wailed. “We can’t tell her.”

“Please don’t make us,” Lily said in a quiet voice.

“Cherry, I don’t know what’s going on, but the girls have been through enough today. I think you should leave.”

Cherry’s smile turned hard, a fierce determination in her eyes. “Right now, your daughters think if you find out what they did, you’ll yell at them the way you yelled at Keating. They think you’ll leave them like their daddy left them.”

“Stop it,” Melody yelled. “Shut up.”

Lily stared at her sister, eyes wide, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Bailey had no idea what was going on, but if Cherry was right... Bailey sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Melody into her lap. She rubbed her back until Melody quieted down.

“I will always love you girls,” Bailey said. “No matter what you did, I will never leave you. You could become lord of the vampires in Supernat city and lock all the humans underground and I’d still love you and stay by your side.”

Lily didn’t quite smile, but some of the tension left her little body. “You wouldn’t even yell at us?”

“I might yell a little. But vampires can’t help their nature, and I’d love you even while I yelled.”

“We called Daddy,” Lily said.

“Lily! No!”

Bailey rubbed Melody’s back, even as her stomach dropped. “It’s okay. I’m not mad that you called your daddy. I wish you would have told me, but I understand why you’d want to talk to him.”

“We found his name on your phone,” Melody said, looking up at Bailey. “You have a really bad word next to his name.”

“I was really mad at him when I created his contact. Why did you call him?” Though Bailey had a sick feeling, she already knew the answer to that question.

“We told him where he could find us,” Lily said. “So we could give him money. We took all our birthday and Christmas money so we could give it to him and you wouldn’t be mad at him anymore.”

Bailey sighed. “And you told him you’d be at the aquarium today.”

“We’re sorry, Mommy,” Melody said. “We didn’t know he’d try to take us. The money was supposed to fix everything.”

“You tried to do a good thing,” Bailey said. “The problem is your daddy did a very bad thing by trying to take you away from me.”

“We didn’t want to go with him,” Lily said. “He said some really mean words and he wouldn’t listen when we told him to stop.”

“That must have been really scary.”

Melody snuggled against Bailey and Lily climbed over and leaned against Bailey's side. Bailey wrapped an arm around her and pulled her in tight.

"Tell her the rest," Cherry said. "Secrets have a way of festering."

"It wasn't my idea," Melody said.

Lily sighed like she carried the weight of the world on her bony shoulders. "We knew Keats and Mr. Sloane wouldn't let us give daddy the money, because they're mad at him, too. So we tricked Keats and Mr. Sloane to look for puffer fish and then Melody filled up her mouth with apple juice and she went over to Mr. Milton and she—"

"I got Mr. Milton to bend down and then I spit the apple juice at him the way I spit the water at the pool."

"Through the gap in your teeth?"

Melody nodded. "We ran and dropped a bunch of little cars so that Keats and Mr. Sloane and Mr. Milton would fall down when they tried to chase us."

"Mr. Sloane hurt his back when he fell," Cherry said gently. "And Mr. Milton has a concussion."

Lily gasped, her whole body trembling. "We didn't mean to hurt them."

"Is Keats okay?" Melody asked, her voice wobbly.

"Keats is okay," Cherry said. "Mr. Milton is going to be okay. Mr. Sloane just has some bruises, and a pulled muscle. But it could have been much worse, girls. Someone could have been really hurt."

Bailey was torn between agreeing, telling Cherry to lay off because the girls were traumatized enough, and reminding Cherry who the parent was. She took a deep breath and went with her better angel. "Miss Cherry's right, girls. I know you wanted to help your father and your hearts were in the right place, but not only did you endanger yourselves, you hurt our friends. I should have explained better what was going on with your father, but you girls should have come to me and told me

what was going on instead of sneaking around behind everyone's backs."

"We're sorry." Lily's lower lip jutted out. She clearly meant her words, but she also seemed relieved by her confession.

"Really sorry," Melody said.

"I think you've learned your lesson," Bailey said. "I'm sorry you had to learn it this way."

"Will Daddy try to take us away again?" Lily asked.

"Your daddy is in jail and your Uncle Grayson and I are going to do everything we can to make sure your father never tries anything like this again. You're safe here. You have nothing to worry about."

Cherry clapped. "Now the hard stuff's done. Who wants pizza?"

The girls nodded and climbed off the bed. Bailey watched them follow Cherry out of the room and remembered how to breathe. The girls would be okay. She'd be okay.

They might all need therapy, but they'd be okay.

At least, they would be as long as she kept her focus on her girls. If she hadn't been distracted by her romance with Keating, she'd have noticed they were up to something.

She'd had a bad feeling about the spa day and she'd been one hundred percent right. What had she been thinking leaving the girls when she knew Glenn might try to take them?

She hadn't been thinking about her girls, that's for sure. She'd been selfish, and she'd very nearly lost them.

It wouldn't happen again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Someone was banging on the inside of Keating's skull. He was going to kill them if he could just lift his head off the couch.

"Door, asshole." Sloane shoved Keating's shoulder. "Get off the couch and act like a human being."

"You answer." Keating pressed his face into a cushion and tried to burrow deep enough that the pounding would stop.

"Not my house. So I'm willing to bet whoever's at the door isn't here to see me."

"They'll go away. Ignore them." Keating didn't want to see anyone. Didn't want to talk to anyone. At some point, he'd have to figure out how the hell to put his life back together without Bailey and Melody and Lily, but it didn't have to be now.

Last night, he'd drunk whiskey until he forgot how it felt to turn around and not be able to find those girls, until he forgot the way it felt like the bottom had fallen out and nothing would ever be okay again.

He'd climbed mountains and tested zip lines that were sketchy as fuck, he'd paraglided and jumped out of airplanes, but nothing had ever scared him like not being able to find those two little girls. He hadn't liked it. Not one bit.

"Keating?"

He groaned at the sound of her voice, the one that had been telling him off over and over in his brain. He couldn't shake the words she'd said or how right she'd been.

A gentle touch on his cheek had him jerking up to a sitting position. "Sloane, what the fuck?"

Sloane never touched him gently unless he was about to sucker punch him or pull his hair or some shit.

Except when Keating blinked his eyes open, it wasn't Sloane standing in front of him. It was her. His love.

She looked tired, but beautiful. Her hair fell in loose waves around her face and she had make-up on like she was ready for a date, but her smile was wary.

He looked around, but the girls weren't with her. Probably didn't want them to hear what she had to say. Hell, he didn't want to hear it.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Bailey."

She sat on the coffee table and reached for his hands, but he kept them out of reach. If she touched him, he might beg, and she didn't deserve that.

"It's not your fault, Keating. The girls called Glenn and told him where they'd be. They hit Milton in the eyes with apple juice and laid out those toy cars. They wanted to give Glenn money, to—"

"I know." The story had come together in the police interviews and later when he reunited with Sloane back at his place. "Still my fault. I should have seen what they were up to. If I'd been paying attention..."

"Even I didn't see what they were up to." She gave him a gentle smile he sure as fuck didn't deserve. "They're quick and sneaky. I don't blame you for what happened."

"Well, I do." He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "I should have paid closer attention. I shouldn't have gotten distracted by a stupid competition with my idiot brother. You're right about me, Bailey. I'm a man-child who's never had to be a grown-up and the one time I'm supposed to act like an adult, I fuck it up."

"It's not your fault, Keating," she said, her voice tight. "You were just having fun. I'm their mother. I should have been there with them. It was my job to protect them and I let them down because I allowed myself to get distracted."

He shook his head. His sudden bout of nausea had nothing to do with his hangover. "It was *my* job to protect them, Bailey. You didn't do anything wrong. It's okay to rely on someone else to take care of your girls every once in a while."



“There you go,” she said, her cheer sounding forced. “Trying to make me feel better, even when I don’t deserve it.”

“You do deserve it. You deserve a day off. You deserve to have a partner you can rely on. I screwed up this time, but it won’t happen again.” He leaned toward her, his heart trying to thump its way out of his chest. Damn, he wished he wasn’t doing this hungover. “I want to be your partner, Bailey. I want you and the girls to come home.”

Tears sprang to her eyes, even as she shook her head. “You’re a good man, Keating, but I’m not the woman for you. I’m never going to be able to relax and have fun because my girls are always going to have to come first. I’m sorry you’ll lose your bet.”

He stared at her, trying to compute her words. “You think I care about that stupid bet? I’m in love with you, Bailey. I love you and your girls so much it hurts.” He pressed a hand to his chest to soothe the ache there, but it didn’t work. And he could tell his words weren’t having any effect on Bailey. She was shaking her head and getting to her feet. “Bailey, you can’t just walk away. Can’t you see how good we can be together?”

“I’m sorry, Keating.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I care about you and what we had was fun, but it’s time for me to be a grownup and get back to my real life.”

Fuck, this hurt. His eyes burned, and he didn’t even bother to fight the tears. “You’re saying you aren’t falling for me? Not even a little?” He’d been so sure she was. So sure he wasn’t the only one who felt this way.

She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and, for just a moment, her face was suffused with anguish. Immediately, she blinked and her expression went ice cold. She dropped her hand and pushed back her shoulders. “You’re a good man, Keating, but you aren’t the man for me. I don’t have space in my life or my heart to love anyone but my girls.”

He rubbed at his chest. Was he having a heart attack? “Tell the girls goodbye for me. I’ll always be their Keats.” He swiped at his damp cheeks and swallowed hard. “If they need

me, I'll do anything for them. Anything I have is theirs if they want it. Anything I have is yours, Bailey."

She backed toward the door. "I'll tell them, but I think it's better if you don't see them for a while."

Never in his life had he wanted something as bad as he wanted to welcome Bailey and her kids back into his home. They were his home, and he already felt lost, untethered and unmoored, knowing he'd never see them again.

Bailey looked confident and put together and so fucking sexy in her jean shorts and blouse. Tears slipped down her cheeks, but she didn't look as broken as he felt. She'd be okay. She and the girls would be okay without him.

But he'd never be okay again without them.

"Can you find your way out, or should I yell for Sloane?"

She pressed her lips together hard and shook her head. "I can handle it. Goodbye, Keating."

And then she was gone. He closed his eyes and listened to her footsteps echoing down the hall and away from him, listened to the sound of the front door opening and closing. That final click a period on what had been the happiest time in his life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“So, you’re really doing this?” Cherry let herself into Keating’s bedroom without knocking like she was another sibling. He had enough brothers.

He threw another pair of socks into his suitcase. “Getting back to my real life? Yes. I appreciate all your advice, but it’s clear I was never cut out to be a rancher.”

She plopped onto the edge of the bed and crossed her legs. She was wearing a hot pink jumper and had a scrunchy in her crimped hair. “I agree. You aren’t cut out to be a rancher, but you’d make an amazing dad.”

“Is it eighties day, and no one told me?”

She grinned. “I’m trying the vintage look like my big sister.”

He tossed a few pairs of boxers into his suitcase. “Since when are the eighties considered vintage?”

“Since the eighties happened forty years ago, old man.”

He shuddered. “Did you just come here to ruin my day, or does this visit have a purpose?”

“I’m here as your life designer.”

“I sent you a final payment and terminated our contract. I no longer need your services.”

“As your life designer, I have to advise against that course of action.” Cherry pulled a lollipop out of some hidden pocket and popped it into her mouth. “You need me.”

He stopped packing and faced her. “Look, I appreciate what you do, Cherry. You’ve helped me figure out that I’m not cut out for retirement. I’ve got a job in Honolulu advising on an outdoor ropes course under construction. I don’t need a life designer to help me do my real job.”

“You know what I see for you?”

Keating rolled his neck. Why did Sloane keep letting people into his place without asking? Sloane and Clarion had pretty much moved into Keating's condo and had been waltzing around all happy and in love and driving him crazy for a week. Just one more reason to get the hell out of Vegas.

"I see you being a dad, Keating. Living on that ranch, taking in a petting zoo worth of animals, and devoting yourself to raising your kids. Relaxing on the back porch while they run around and play in your backyard. You built that house full of bunk beds and playrooms for a reason..." She held up a hand when he opened his mouth. "And not because you're a big kid, but because you're a caretaker who's never had anyone to care for. You are the perfect match for Bailey because she desperately needs someone to look out for her. Not because she needs a protector or a helper, but because she needs someone to remind her to take time for herself and have fun. To remind her it's okay to have a full life apart from her daughters. She's ready to try on a career, to break out of the mold she's lived in since she had to drop out of college. You can give her that by being the person who stays home with the kids while she figures out her dream."

Keating froze halfway to the bathroom where he'd intended to grab his toiletries.

He could see it.

He could see himself spending his days with Lily and Melody and whatever other kids they might have, taking care of them and the ranch, and his nights with Bailey in his bed. The image was so vivid and real that it took his breath away. Obviously, he'd considered his future with her before, but the image Cherry painted... it felt right.

So right it made him ache.

It was a dream too fucking beautiful to ever possibly be real.

"Did you miss the part where Bailey told me to get the fuck out of her life?" He walked into the bathroom, hoping Cherry would get the hint and leave.

She followed him. “Bailey is just scared. Give her a few days and then fight for her. You were never meant to be alone. You were meant to love fiercely and have a family as tight knit as the one you grew up with.”

“Did Sloane tell you how often we fought?”

Cherry continued to follow him as he carried his toiletries to his bedroom and dumped them in the suitcase. “He told me. Do you know often I wished I had siblings to fight with when I was a kid? Gen was so much older. She was more like a mother to me than a sister. I missed her when she went to college. Having people to fight with, family who love you even at your worst, isn’t something you should throw away.”

He dropped to sit on the bed, not because her words had an impact that made him weak, but because her yapping was annoying him. Bailey hadn’t loved him at his worst. After he’d lost her girls, she’d thrown him away.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” he said. “But you should be yapping in Bailey’s ear, not mine. She’s the one who ended what we had like it didn’t mean a damn thing to her.”

He hated the sympathy on her face, hated that he stepped forward into her outstretched arms because he really fucking needed a hug.

She patted his back and hugged him for about thirty seconds before she pulled away. “When you change your mind, call me. I’ll help you win her back.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Keating stepped into his hotel room and shut the door with a heavy sigh. Another day, another hotel, another city. He'd left Honolulu two days before and flown straight to New Zealand for the consulting job of a lifetime.

Thank God he no longer owned Sullivan Adventures, because he would have been tempted to buy out the owners of the gorgeous stretch of land where they were planning to build a ropes and adventure course to rival the best in the world. And they wanted his advice, saw his parks as a template to build on. It was fucking exciting.

And he was bored as hell.

Okay, not bored, just numb to everything. He couldn't get out of his own head, couldn't shake the feeling he was in the wrong place, or the wish that Bailey and the girls were with him, because they'd fucking love this place.

It'd been two weeks since he left them and he still thought of Bailey every moment of every fucking day. Still ached for her with a soul-deep ache nothing could quench.

Setting his bag on the floor, he kicked off his shoes, and went straight to the phone by the bed to place an order for room service. He could have gone out to eat with the planning committee, could have gone out for drinks after. He could have scheduled a sunset tour of the area or an evening sail boat ride along the coast.

Hell, he could have rented out the entire Auckland zoo and had a private tour.

He should have been out enjoying life and trying to move forward, but an idea had started percolating and he couldn't let it go. He needed to get it down on paper, and then he'd be able to move forward. This was the last loose end to tie up before he got back to living his life.

His room service arrived, and he worked while he ate. He worked until his vision went blurry and he had to get up and

walk around before his blood pooled in his ankles.

He was pacing the room and doing walking lunges when his cell rang. He considered ignoring it, but Sloane was arriving for a visit tomorrow and might have logistics questions.

When he picked up his phone and saw Bailey's name flash across the screen, his heart leapt into his throat. He swiped to answer and put it to his ear. "Bailey?"

"Keats?" a small voice said. "This is Lily Tiller."

"Hi, Lily. Everything okay?"

"We need you," Melody said. "You said to call if we needed you, and we do."

"What happened?" Keating grabbed his suitcase and flipped it open. "Is your mom okay?"

"Mommy's sleeping," Lily said. "But she's sad. We want you to come back. It's our fault she got mad at you."

"It's not your fault." Keating closed his suitcase and sank onto the bed. "I should have been watching you more closely. Your father never should have been able to get close to you."

"We're sneaky," Melody said. "We got Mom's cell phone from her room and she didn't even wake up."

"We're really sorry," Lily said. "It's all our fault. Mommy shouldn't have made you go away."

His heart twisted, and he gripped the edge of the bed. He would never lie to the girls, but in this case, they should be on their mother's side, not his. "It's not your Mom's fault, girls. Don't blame her."

"Then why'd you leave? We promise we won't be sneaky anymore. We can be really good all the time."

"We won't even fight," Melody said.

His throat tightened and his eyes went blurry. From tears this time. "You are the best kids in the world. I didn't leave because of anything you or your mother did. I just had some work to do."

“So you’re coming back when your work is done?” Lily asked.

“When? Soon?” Melody asked with excitement and the certainty that she already had a reason to celebrate.

He hated to crush their dreams. “I don’t know when I’ll be back, girls. I miss you and I wish I could see you, but I’m very busy with work.”

“That means you aren’t coming back.” Lily’s sad voice brought more tears to his eyes. “Whenever Mommy says she doesn’t know when, she means never.”

“Like when she told us she didn’t know when we’d be able to get a puppy.”

“As an adult, I have responsibilities,” Keating said. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be with you. I’d give anything to see you right now. You’d love it where I am.”

“Where are you?” Lily asked.

For the next half hour, he told Lily and Melody about New Zealand and the plans for the ropes course. He kept it at their level, of course, smiling every time he said something that made them laugh or seemed to impress them.

Lily yawned and then Melody yawned and then Keating yawned. “You girls better get to sleep.”

“Okay,” Lily said. “We’ll call you again tomorrow.”

“What? I don’t think—” But the sound on the other end changed, and he pulled the phone away from his ear to see they’d already hung up.



## CHAPTER THIRTY

Keating stood next to his brother and stared up at the sheer rock wall in front of them. It was a beautiful day. The sky was a brilliant azure blue, no clouds in sight, and the air was cool. Springtime in the Southern hemisphere was one of his favorite times of year anywhere in the world.

At least it used to be. At the moment, he couldn't find even a hint of the excitement he'd usually feel before a new climb. No adrenaline rushed through his veins, and his lips were heavy, incapable of turning up.

He just kept hearing Lily and Melody's sad, worried voices over and over again. He'd let them down. In every way he possibly could, he'd let those kids down and they'd still called him. They still wanted him back.

Unfortunately, their mother didn't feel the same.

"Wow." Sloane pulled on his helmet and belted it under his chin. "I'm so glad I sat on a plane for sixteen hours to hang out with you."

Keating looked over at him, dazed and... shit, had he forgotten Sloane was there? "I haven't woken up yet."

Sloane snorted. "Sure, bro. Because that's your problem."

Keating ran a hand through his hair and his throat tightened before he'd even gotten the words out. "They called me last night."

Sloane's expression melted like wax on a hot day. "All of them?"

Keating scrubbed a hand over his face. He would not cry in front of his brother. "Just the girls. They asked me to come back." He barely got the last words out and two fat tears escaped and rolled down his cheeks.

"Since you're still here and not on a plane right now, I'm guessing you told them no." Sloane shook his head and turned away to step into his climbing harness.

“Bailey doesn’t want me in their lives.”

Sloane slapped him on the back. “Get your gear on, old man. This face ain’t gonna climb itself.”

Keating stared at his brother. “You don’t have any brotherly words of wisdom for me?”

Sloane, his face so like their mother’s, but with sharper, broader angles, and their father’s brown eyes, looked at Keating with obvious sympathy in every line of his expression. “You aren’t going to like what I have to say.”

“Just say it.”

“You need to tell those little girls to stop calling you. I’ve never seen you give up on anything or anyone so easily and the fact that you walked away from Bailey and those girls like they don’t matter to you means they probably don’t. I know you miss them, but actions speak, man.”

White hot anger lit Keating up in a way that almost felt good. He’d been numb since that phone call and it was a relief to finally feel something again. “I promised those girls I’d be there for them and I let them down. I love them with everything I am, but I’m not the man they need. You have no idea what it’s like to have two innocent kids depending on you. You have no idea how it destroyed me to walk away from them.”

Sloane shrugged, completely unfazed by Keating’s anger. “You’re right. I don’t. I have no idea what you’re going through or how you really feel about Baily or those kids, because you’ve barely talked to me about any of it.”

Keating stomped around the clearing at the base of the climb and slammed his helmet on his head before stepping into the harness and buckling it up. That’s all it took for his anger to fade and numbness to take over again. “Let’s just climb this thing.”

“Fine. That’s what I came here for.”

“I’ll take the lead since I’ve climbed before.”

Sloane nodded and connected their harnesses so he could belay from the ground while Keating got the wedges placed in the cracks and set the path up for Sloane to follow.

“What’s the story with you and Clarion?” Keating asked as his muscles woke to the task and he climbed his first few meters up the wall. “Seen a lot of talk about you two and rings.”

“Focus on the climb, man. You’re depressed enough without me telling you how happy Clarion makes me and how soon I’m going to win our bet.”

Keating huffed and did as Sloane said because he really was pathetic enough not to want to hear how fucking happy and in love his brother was. Eventually, he’d be happy for them, but at the moment...

Keating stepped out far to the right to catch a toehold, but his foot slipped. He scrabbled for balance, and a piece of the wall, a narrow, sharp piece of rock, came free and fell. He dodged the rock, not wanting it to hit an eye, and leaned back too far when he was already off balance.

The only anchor he’d placed was below him. His body tilted the wrong way and he couldn’t get a hold on the smooth rock face.

As he fell backwards, only air below him, adrenaline surged through him, pumping his heart and waking up his brain. Unfortunately, there was nothing for him to do but fall.

His body swung back toward the rock face and he hit hard enough to make his bones vibrate. His last thought before his world went dark, his body weightless and falling, was of Bailey. His last regret was that he’d never see her again.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Melody and Lily climbed the steps into the school bus, and Bailey waved to them as the bus pulled away. Neither girl had a window seat, so she didn't even know if they saw her, but she waved anyway.

She then waved to the two security guys in a black SUV who followed the bus at a discreet distance.

She clenched and unclenched her hands, trying to shake off the anxiety. The girls would be fine at school. They had protection and Glenn would have to be a moron on a level that defied belief to go after the girls again.

Unfortunately, logic never fared well in a contest against anxiety.

With a sigh, she went inside to get ready for her day. There were three families currently staying at Grayson's ranch, and she'd be taking them on a trail ride later that morning. In the afternoon, two kids and three adults wanted riding lessons.

She should be happy, she should look forward to a day with horses and people, her favorite kind of day on the ranch, but her body felt heavy and, if it weren't for her girls, she wasn't sure she'd have managed to get out of bed that morning.

She was just so damn tired and sad and sick of worrying every second of every day. She missed Keating with an ache that went bone deep and worse, she felt certain she'd made a mistake pushing him away. Well, when she let herself be weak and listened to her heart, she was sure she made a mistake.

Her logical brain reassured her she'd done the right thing. Her kids needed stability and her full attention.

Not that it mattered what she wanted since, according to Cherry, Keating was on the other side of the world and had given up his ranch-life dream. Guess it wasn't too hard for Keating to walk away.

"You sent him away, Bailey," she said to herself in a low, disgusted voice.

She stomped to the kitchen and started cleaning up the dirty dishes from breakfast. “I didn’t expect him to go to another hemisphere to get away from me,” she muttered.

Dishwasher loaded, she dried her hands and tightened her ponytail. “How crazy does it make me that I’m arguing with myself?”

“Certifiable,” Lainey Albright, personal security expert and world class smart ass, said as she walked into the kitchen and set a laptop on the table.

“Thanks, Lainey. You always know just how to make me feel better.”

Lainey grinned, her brown eyes flashing, her smile as beautiful as her biceps. “There’s something on this computer here that ought to cheer you up.”

Bailey leaned over the table to peer at the computer, but Lainey pulled it away. “You’re going to want to sit down for this.”

Lainey had never steered Bailey wrong once in the weeks she’d been guarding her, so Bailey took a seat and waited while Lainey woke up the computer and hit a button. The screen flickered to life and Grayson’s face filled it.

“Hey, Bailey,” he said with a grin. “Got a present for you.”

He stepped to the side to reveal a room with cinderblock walls and a single chair in the center of the floor. Tied to the chair, his mouth gagged, his eyes wide, was Glenn.

Her ex-husband had been arrested for attempting to kidnap Melody and Lily, but he’d been released after only spending a week in jail. He had an old friend who was an excellent lawyer and a judge who bought Glenn’s story when he explained he was just taking his kids out to lunch and Bailey freaked out after telling him it was okay.

Which was why Glenn was out of prison and the girls and Bailey had security following them around.

“What have you done?” Bailey breathed, hand to her mouth.

Logan appeared in the screen's view, his smile wide, his eyes hard. Both Grayson and Logan were successful and well-respected men, but they'd grown up on the streets and were tough down to their bones. Bailey didn't think they'd murder Glenn, but she wasn't certain.

"Don't worry, Bay," Logan said. "We haven't laid a finger on him." He glanced back at Glenn and smirked. "At least not more than necessary to get him here and into that chair."

"Logan," Bailey said, her hand now covering a smile, because she couldn't deny she enjoyed seeing Glenn in this position. "What are you doing?"

Logan winked. "We're just getting a little payback for what he did to the girls, Bay, and to you. Before we started, we figured we'd give you a say in how far we should take this since you're the wronged party and all. What do you say, Bay? Should we murder the bastard or just rough him up a bit?"

Behind Logan came muffled grunts and screams from Glenn, and Bailey bit her lip not to laugh out loud. That wink from Logan had told her everything she needed to know, and she was going to have some fun with this.

For all the ways Glenn had hurt her, he deserved to feel a little pain. "Won't someone come looking for him if we murder him?"

Logan shrugged, his smile expanding. "Turns out, there's already someone looking for Glenn. He embezzled from his former company and they want him in jail. There's also a loan shark in Vegas who is very interested in Glenn's whereabouts. If you want the fucker dead, we can just hand him over to the loan shark. We won't even have to get our hands dirty."

Grayson's face appeared in front of the screen again. "Please let us give him to the loan shark, Bailey."

Glenn grunted and attempted to shout words, but it was impossible to understand him.

Bailey hummed as though considering her options. "Before we do anything final, we should probably give Glenn the opportunity to beg for his life."

“Great idea, sis.” Logan grinned and gave her a thumbs up.

Gray and Logan rolled the screen closer to Glenn. Close enough for Bailey to see the wet spot in the crotch of his wrinkled chinos. She slapped her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. Not that she was worried about hurting Glenn’s feelings by laughing at him, but because she wanted to be scary.

Which would be hard to pull off when she was practically giddy at the news that Glenn would be heading back to prison for embezzlement.

Logan ripped off the gag, and Glenn opened his big mouth and started yelling. “You people are insane. I’m going to call my lawyer and I’m going to sue you for everything—”

Gray slapped Glenn on the back of the head hard enough that Logan had to grab the back of the chair before it toppled over and Glenn hit the floor.

“Be polite or the gag goes back on,” Grayson said, getting in Glenn’s face. “Logan and I would just as soon find out what you ate for breakfast than hand you over to the cops, so you better hope Bailey’s in a forgiving mood.”

“If all you want is to know what I had for breakfast, I can tell you,” Glenn said, his voice shaky.

Bailey met Logan’s confused gaze across the miles that separated them and the screen that connected them. She shook her head, equally bewildered.

“I think he means we’ll find out when we punch you until you barf,” Logan said.

Grayson didn’t move, bent over and face-to-face with Glenn. “I mean, because we’ll slice you open and see the contents of your stomach ourselves.”

“Eww,” Bailey said with a squeak.

Glenn went positively white and Logan turned away, his shoulders shaking.

Grayson backed away from Glenn and pointed at Bailey. “Talk and make it good, asshole.”

“Bailey,” Glenn said. “Your brothers are insane. Tell them to back off.”

Sadness washed over Bailey that her once stable marriage had come to this. “I’m not telling them anything until you answer a few questions for me, Glenn. And you better not lie or I’ll know.”

Glenn sneered. “You can’t tell when I lie, or you’d have known I was cheating on you from the start.”

Logan punched Glenn in the stomach, and he doubled over. He popped back up quick though, his face red.

“Maybe we should hold him until we can get a lie detector,” Grayson said.

“Nah.” Logan pressed two fingers against the pulse in Glenn’s neck. “His pulse will change when he lies. Every time it does, I’ll tell you and you can punch him until he remembers how to tell the truth.”

Grayson cracked his knuckles and grinned. “Works for me.”

“I’m sorry, Bailey,” Glenn said. “Taking the kids was a mistake, but I missed them and I missed you. I wanted—”

“That’s a lie,” Logan said.

Grayson punched Glenn in the crotch and Glenn doubled over, choking and whining. Over his head, Grayson looked at Logan and rolled his eyes, clearly unimpressed with Glenn’s ability to take a hit. If Bailey had to guess, she’d say her brothers were pulling their punches, so they didn’t leave too many bruises or do any actual damage. They might want to hurt Glenn, but they weren’t dumb enough to leave the kind of evidence that could get them arrested or sued.

At least, she hoped that’s what they were doing.

When Glenn sat up again, his face even redder than before, he looked defeated, his head hanging low. “Fine. You want the truth?” He lifted his head and stared at Bailey, his expression furious and cruel. “I came back for money. Gayle’s pregnant and we need cash to pay for the birth and all the baby stuff we’re going to need.”



Bailey pressed a hand to her chest, because the truth hurt more than she'd expected. She'd hoped there was a part of Glenn that still cared for his daughters enough to actually want a relationship with them. She'd thought he would at least wish Bailey well, that he'd at least not be willing to destroy her life.

But it was the fact that her girls would have a half-sibling somewhere out there that made tears rise to her eyes. Not only had Glenn moved on from Bailey, he was creating a new family his girls never would have known about if their father hadn't run out of money.

"If you'd just told me that, Glenn, I might have gone to Gray and tried to get money for you. I'd want to help the girls' half-sibling."

He sneered. "Right. You're such a giving person. Well, it's too fucking late now. When I didn't get back to Gayle on our agreed upon date, she called her parents. She's gone home to them and won't even take my calls."

"Wow." Bailey leaned back in her seat. "How's it feel to be left?"

She should have known better than to expect Glenn to have a moment of self-realization or empathy for her, but it still shocked her when he said, "If you hadn't divorced me without telling me, you never would have even seen me, Bailey. The plan was to get in, clean out our accounts, and get back to Gayle."

Bailey bit back a gasp. "You were just going to steal from your daughters?" Again, not sure why she was surprised when it wasn't the first time he'd done it, but the first time, he could have reasonably argued it was his money because his name had been on the paychecks.

"It's not like you don't have a billionaire brother who'd just fill up the accounts as soon as you asked. Never saw a dime of that money when we were married and I kissed that bastard's ass—"

Logan stuffed the gag back into Glenn's mouth and held it there with his hand. "Heard enough?"

Bailey nodded. "I'm done with the questions, but I do have a few things to say to him."

Logan tied the gag in place and pointed at her. "Shoot."

She pulled in a deep breath. "Glenn, I wasn't always the best wife I could have been. I married you because you were well-employed and stable, not because I ever truly loved you. That's on me. And I'm sorry for that. But cheating on me, stealing from me and the kids, and being an all-around pathetic excuse for a human being is on you. I will never allow you near me or the girls again. As far as they're concerned, you're dead and if I ever see your face again, even just in passing because you made the mistake of living in the same city as me, I'll use all my brother's money and power to hunt you down, destroy your life, and make you wish you never met me."

Logan and Gray clapped and hooted like the goofballs they were. Bailey rolled her eyes, but the truth was it made her feel pretty damn good to have them on her side and to have said everything to Glenn she'd needed to say.

"What do you want us to do with him?" Logan asked.

"Give him to the loan shark."

Glenn fought against the ropes and screamed bloody murder behind the gag, but Bailey's brothers ignored him.

They smiled at Bailey like they were proud of her. "We're on it, Sis."

Two hours later, Grayson texted that Glenn had been taken into police custody again for the crime of embezzlement. This time, an entire herd of star lawyers wouldn't be able to prevent him from doing serious jail time.

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"Momma." Melody skipped into the kitchen, where Bailey was at the table writing checks for the fall school pictures. "Are you coming up to say goodnight to me and Lily?"

Bailey looked up at Melody and forced a smile. Her little girl seemed to have sprouted up a full inch in the past few weeks and she was looking less and less like a little girl and

more like a tween every day. But no matter what she looked like, she was still a girl who would probably always miss her daddy.

Bailey had been going back and forth on how to handle the whole situation and, as much as she'd like to ignore it and hope her daughters never asked about their father again, she didn't believe in keeping big secrets from her girls.

Helpful social workers and kindly neighbors had tried to feed her happy lies about her mother when she was a kid and she'd always known they were lies, because she'd felt the tension and the worry in those adults. She'd just assumed, as a child who believed the world revolved around her, that they were lying because there was something wrong with her, that she'd been bad and her mother didn't want her anymore.

She would never allow her girls to doubt themselves that way if she could help it.

“Is Lily in bed already?”

Melody nodded. “She’s reading, but I’m tired and I want to go to sleep and she won’t turn off the light.”

Bailey pushed to her feet and followed her daughter toward the back of the house. “She can sit in the living room and read for a bit so she doesn’t disturb you. How about that?”

“You’re going to let her hang out with you while I’m sleeping? Shouldn’t you make her go to sleep?”

“She won’t be hanging out with me, Melody. She’s going to be reading her book. I might not even be in the living room.”

Melody huffed. “Fine. I’ll just stay up all night so she can read her stupid—”

“Enough.” Bailey knelt in front of her daughter and looked into her tired, irritated eyes. “If Lily’s reading keeps you up at night, we’ll need to come up with a solution, but we aren’t going to do it right now. We’re all too tired to make good choices tonight, and I need to talk to you both about something important.”

Melody's eyes widened. "What happened? Is it something bad? Am I in trouble?"

Bailey got to her feet. Maybe she should have saved this conversation for the morning, but there was never enough time in the morning and, if she kept putting this off, she'd never do it. "I'm not talking about this until we're in the room with Lily."

Melody raced into her bedroom. "Lily, Mom says you have to stop reading. She wants to talk to you."

Bailey rolled her eyes and tightened her ponytail like she was about to walk into battle.

"That's not fair," Lily yelled. "I don't have to go to sleep—"

Bailey stepped into the room. "You can read after I talk to you and Melody. This is about your dad, and I need you both to listen carefully."

The girls went silent, eyes wide and filled with a mixture of fear and hope. It made Bailey's heart ache that she'd felt the same about her mother more times than she could count.

Lily and Melody had something Bailey had never had, though. They had her. And she'd do everything in her power to make up for all of Glenn's shortcomings in the father department. She'd be both parents, no matter what she had to give up.

Bailey sat on the bed and pulled in a deep breath. "Girls, your father is back in jail."

"Because he stole us?" Lily asked, her hands fisted in her blanket.

"No baby. Your father stole from the company he worked for before he moved out of the country. He stole a lot of money and he can't pay it back, so he's going to stay in jail for a long time."

"Why doesn't Uncle Gray pay the money?" Melody asked.

"That's not how it works, baby. Your daddy broke the law, and he has to pay for that by going to jail."

“So he can’t come back and steal us again,” Lily said, relaxing.

“No, baby. He can’t ever come here and take you away from me again.”

“Will we ever see him again?” Melody’s lower lip trembled, but she held back the tears. “Can’t we visit him at the jail?”

“I don’t want to visit him,” Lily said.

This was the part Bailey had dreaded. There were so, so many ways she could get this wrong and make this moment one that scarred her daughters forever. “You know how when I put you in time out because you did something wrong, you get really mad at me and tell me you hate me?”

Her daughters nodded.

“That’s the attitude your daddy has right now. He’s mad that he’s been caught and put in prison and he’s being... Well, he’s not being...” Bailey wanted to drop her head in her hands.

“He’s being all kinds of sassy and not ready for polite company?” Lily asked, mimicking the words Bailey had said to her and Melody when they’d been in one of those kind of moods.

“Exactly,” Bailey said with relief. “And I’m afraid that if I were to take you girls to see him right now, he might say something mean that would hurt your feelings and he’d feel terrible about it later. He needs some time to change his attitude, and then maybe we can visit him.”

Bailey looked to Melody, expecting her to argue because she remembered Glenn better than Lily and had always been a daddy’s girl, but Melody just nodded. “I don’t want to see him if he’s just going to be mean.”

“That’s a good choice, baby.” Bailey knew it wouldn’t be that simple forever. Time was different for kids, and it wouldn’t be long before Melody started asking when they could see Glenn.

“Will you be happy now?” Lily asked. “Now that you don’t have to worry about Daddy stealing us again?”

Bailey hadn't expected that question. "I'll be less worried, but I'm happy, Lily. What makes you think I'm not?"

"You're sad all the time since Keats left," Melody said.

"I've been a little sad, but that's just because I miss him."

"I miss him too," Lily said in a small voice.

"No," Melody said, her stubborn frown fierce. "You're sad all the time and you yell at us more, but it's not our fault Keats left. So you shouldn't be mad at us."

Bailey's heart spasmed. "I'm not mad at you." She looked at Lily. "Either of you. It's been a tough few weeks, but it's going to get better."

"Keats was fun," Lily said in her quiet way. "We don't have fun anymore."

Wow, things must be really bad if even Lily was complaining. "We've had to be careful while your dad was free, but we can have fun. We can go to the playground this weekend."

"I want to zip line and play with Sugar Lips," Melody said, even as a yawn overtook her.

"I'll think of something fun for us to do," Bailey said, though even the thought made her tired. She was just stressed. Now that Glenn was in jail, she'd find her energy and her joy again. "Why don't you get into bed, Melody, and I'll tuck you in?"

Melody climbed under her covers without argument. She must have been exhausted, which was unusual for Melody. What could be disrupting her sleep?

Melody lay right down and closed her eyes. She allowed a hug and a kiss on the cheek, but she didn't complain when Lily left the room with Bailey.

After getting Lily settled on the couch, Bailey went back to the kitchen to finish writing checks and found Lainey sitting at the kitchen table. "Good work, Mama," Lainey said with a bright smile.

“You heard that?” Bailey was suddenly nervous about her parenting being judged.

“Hard not to in a house this size.”

“And you think what I told them was okay?”

Lainey nodded, her brown eyes warm and her smile sympathetic. “I’m not a mom or anything, but it sounded good to me. There anything to what they were saying about you being sad?”

Bailey slumped into a seat at the table with a heavy sigh. Over the past three weeks of Lainey being assigned to protect her, Bailey had grown to consider the woman a friend. They hadn’t had any deep, personal conversations, but Bailey needed the perspective of an outside observer. “I miss the man I was dating. It’s selfish and I’m working on getting past it. I never meant for the girls to see that I’m sad.”

“It’s okay for the girls to see you’re sad. My mother used to say mothers teach their children how to be just by being. Every lecture in the world doesn’t mean anything if you aren’t setting a good example.”

Bailey’s overwhelm multiplied. “What does that even mean? What is considered a good example? I’ve made my girls my whole world. I’ve given up everything that might distract me from them or endanger them, but when I’m sad, apparently I’m still failing to be a good mother.”

Lainey studied Bailey for several long moments. “I think setting a good example just means trying to be the kind of woman you hope they’ll be someday. Is the way you’re living now the life you hope your girls have when they’re grown?”

*No.* The answer, even if she didn’t speak it, hit her so hard tears welled in her eyes.

“Whoa,” Lainey said, backing away. “There’s no need for tears. I’m just trying to say you don’t have to be perfect. It’s good they see you sad, because they learn it’s okay to be sad. And, when you figure out how to stop being sad, they learn that sad isn’t forever. Sad is a problem they can solve, just like their mother did.”

“Wow. I never thought of it that way before.”

Lainey grinned. “I hope it helps because that’s the full extent of my parenting advice.” She slapped a hand on the table and pressed up to a stand. “It’s been good working with you, Bailey, but the boss says you don’t need me anymore.”

Another layer of worry receded. “I guess we don’t.” She stood and hugged Lainey. “Thank you for taking care of us.”

Lainey stepped out of the hug, looking thoroughly uncomfortable with the physical affection. She cleared her throat. “Call me when you’re in Vegas and we can meet up for drinks or dinner.”

“Sounds good.”

Bailey walked Lainey out and waved goodbye to her and the rest of the security team before she walked back into her quiet house, now empty of other adults. It was just her and the girls. The way it should be.

So why did she feel like crying?

Bailey sat at the table for a long time after Lainey left, thinking about what she’d said. If Lainey was right, Bailey was living her life the exact opposite way she wanted her daughters to live theirs.

She wanted them to find love and a partner who would be with them through all the bad and the good.

She dialed Keating’s number without agonizing over the decision. She just wanted to hear his voice.

But it wasn’t Keating who answered the phone.

“Hey Bailey. This is Sloane. Keating is indisposed at the moment.”

“Right.” Bailey’s heart sank. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m sure he’s already seeing someone or busy with his—”

“No. Nope. Not what I meant at all.” Sloane blew out a breath. “Don’t freak out, okay?”



Her heart raced so fast she got dizzy and gripped the seat of the chair so she didn't fall out of it. "What happened?"

"First, just know that Keating is okay. He's going to be just fine."

"Oh, my God. Sloane, what happened?"

"He fell when we were rock climbing and got bruised up pretty good. He also gave himself a concussion. Right now, he's with the doctor getting checked out, but he's going to be fine."

Bailey was already on her feet, heading to the junk drawer where she kept her truck keys. "How do you know he's okay if he's just getting checked out now? Where are you?"

"I know he's okay, because he's awake and alert and talking. It's not the first concussion I've dealt with. And there's nothing you can do to help, because we're in New Zealand."

"New Zealand?" Bailey dropped the keys back into the junk drawer and sank down to sit on the floor, her back against the cabinets. Grayson would buy her a ticket to New Zealand in a heartbeat, but Lily had been invited to a birthday party in two days, and Melody had her first soccer game in three days. Bailey couldn't just leave. "Should I come there?"

"No," Sloane said decisively. "By the time you make it here, Keating will be fine and, if you're just coming to check on him and leave again, you'd do more harm than good."

"Harm?" Bailey's chest felt like it might cave in. "I don't want to hurt him."

"I know. But you did, and he's not in the best place to handle you walking out of his life a second time."

Tears rose in Bailey's eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "I didn't think... It was about the marriage bet and he... He didn't really understand what he'd be getting into taking us on. I figured by now he'd..."

"He hasn't. And if you thought he wasn't serious about you because of some stupid bet, you're either lying to yourself or

you don't know my brother at all.”

Bailey bit her lip not to sob into the phone. Sloane was right. She'd been lying to herself, because she'd been scared and it had been easier to believe Keating was just a playboy pretending to play house for a little while. Keating was so, so much more than that and she'd pushed him away.

“Bailey, if you want Keating back, he'll be there in a heartbeat, but be sure before you try to contact him again. I've never seen my brother like this, and I don't want to see it again.”

“Okay,” Bailey whispered. The phone went silent the way it does when the other person has hung up. Bailey put her head in her hands and she cried.

She cried like she hadn't let herself cry before, over every beautiful thing she'd had with Keating and everything she'd lost.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Bailey stared at her cell phone. Put it down. Picked it back up.

It had been two weeks since she'd talked to Sloane and she'd picked up her phone to call Keating at least three times a day since. Sloane had texted to let her know Keating was doing great, but he hadn't given her anymore than that.

What did doing great even mean?

Was Sloane taking care of Keating? Or had he just left him to fend for himself?

Bailey had looked it up, concussions could take a long, long time to truly heal. What if Keating got a sudden dizzy spell, fell, and hit his head again? If he was alone, he could die.

Without allowing herself to think about it for another moment, Bailey hit Keating's contact number and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello, you've reached Keating Sullivan. Leave a message after the tone and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

All the air in her body left her at the sound of his voice.

It had been so long since she'd heard his voice. His lovely, deep voice.

The phone beeped. She'd missed her chance to leave a message.

What if he hadn't answered his phone because he was hurt?

She dialed again, but this time she was ready. "Keating, this is Bailey. I know I'm probably the last person in the world you want to hear from, but could you just call me or shoot me a text to let me know you're okay? Sloane said you had a concussion and now you're not answering your phone, so—"

The beep cut her off, and she ended the call, dropping the phone onto the table with a thunk. She grabbed it back up again and sent a quick text to Sloane asking him to check in on

Keating just in case Keating, with very good reason, didn't call her back.

Sloane didn't respond, so she turned back to her computer.

After one last scan of the document, she hit send on the application to an online university where she could finally finish her accounting degree. It was too late to apply for the fall semester, but fingers crossed she could start classes in January.

She checked the time and winced. How had it gotten so late? "Girls? You ready to go?"

"Almost," Melody yelled from her bedroom.

"I'm ready," Lily said from her spot on the couch where she'd been reading a book. Her hair was in a neat ponytail - she'd finally let it grow long enough for ponytails — and she had on a pretty sundress and white sandals.

Today, she was turning eight, and she didn't look like a baby anymore. She and Melody were both getting older so fast.

"I got another RSVP just now," Bailey told her daughter. "So that's everyone in your class coming to the party, as well as your cousins. You ready for this?"

Lily grinned wide. "I can't wait. Is Miss Cherry really coming to help decorate?"

"She should already be there. She came in with Uncle Logan and Aunt Gen last night." It had been a month and a half since any of them had seen Cherry. She'd been busy with her new business and college classes, but she'd made time to keep in touch with Bailey and the girls by text, email, and video calls.

"Hurry up, Melody!" Lily jumped off the couch and headed back toward the bedrooms.

Bailey got to her feet, hoping to intercept a fight, but Melody strolled out of the girls' shared bedroom in a pair of jean shorts, a tank top, and cowboy boots. She'd brushed her hair at least and pulled it up into an off-center ponytail.

“I thought you were going to wear a dress?” Bailey said.

“I hate dresses.” Melody patted Lily’s shoulder. “Sorry. I tried, but the dress was just way too uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay.” Lily leaned in and wrapped her small arms around her sister’s waist. Bailey watched and soaked in the moment of sisterly love.

She led the girls out to the truck and they all loaded up. Bailey already had presents and snacks and decorations packed into the truck bed.

“Everyone strapped in?” she asked as she started the engine.

“Yes,” Lily and Melody chorused, their excitement palpable.

She was excited herself. Mostly nervous, but also excited. She hadn’t met many of the parents of Lily’s classmates and she wasn’t sure at all what to expect. She’d rented a bouncy house and had planned the party for the late afternoon when the sun would ease off and the temperatures would go down. There’d be horse rides, too, of course.

Hopefully, it would be enough fun for an entire class of fourth graders.

She was halfway down Grayson’s drive when her phone rang.

“Hey, Bailey,” Grayson said. “The caretaker from Keating’s place called. An alpaca got loose, and she thinks it ran over to my ranch. We’re all out on the property looking for it. If you and the girls can take the area around the stables and down to the bonfire site, it would be a huge help.”

“Gray, I’ve got a truck full of birthday supplies and twenty-five kids arriving in an hour.”

He sighed. “I know, Bay. Just spend fifteen minutes helping us look. If we don’t find the damn alpaca, we’ll all come up to the house and help you decorate.”

She wanted to argue, but she hated the idea of the alpaca straying even farther from home and possibly getting into some trouble. “Okay. Your fifteen minutes start now.”

“Thanks, Bay.”

Bailey sighed and parked next to Gray’s ranch house. “Alright girls, Sugar lips has escaped again and we have to find him.”

“Keats!” Lily’s eyes got wide, her face expanding toward a smile.

“No.” Melody glared daggers at her sister. “Keats isn’t coming to your party. *Remember?*”

Lily didn’t stop smiling. “I know, Melody. Geez.”

“No fighting.” Bailey’s heart ached. She still missed Keating every minute of every day, but she’d thought for sure, or maybe just hoped, that her daughters had stopped missing him. “Let’s go find this alpaca so we can get ready for the party.”

The girls hopped out of the truck, and Bailey followed. “We only need to check around the stables and down to the campfire.”

“Okay,” the girls shouted as they rushed toward the stables and past them.

Bailey followed at a walk, content to let her girls run ahead and be the first to find Sugar Lips if he was out there. As she walked past the stables, she stuck her head in to say hello to the horses she’d put in there that morning so they’d be ready to be saddled and ridden at the party.

The stables were silent.

There was no familiar snuff of horses, no sound of chewing hay, no whinnies, and no stomping or tails swatting. She stepped farther into the stables, getting really scared, but froze in place when she saw the outline of a man, fully in shadow, standing at the far entrance to the barn.

Her breath caught in her throat, but then she registered the broad shoulders, the narrow hips, and the silhouette became achingly familiar.

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“Keating?” Her voice was barely a breath.

He took two steps forward, just far enough inside the barn that she could make out his features. He looked good. Scruffy, but alert and smiling his usual cocky smile. The one he wore when he was unsure of his reception, but unwilling to show weakness.

“I didn’t realize you were in town,” she said.

“I wanted to be the one to tell you. I wanted to tell you yesterday, but I just got back this morning.”

Of course. Of course, he’d want to tell her in person that he was back in town. He wasn’t there because he wanted her back.

She tapped her chest like it would quiet her racing, hopeful heart. He looked healthy, not at all like a man who’d recently bashed his head. “How long are you in town for?”

“That’s up to you.”

“It’s not up to me, Keating. You have a home here. You’re free to come and go as you please.” She turned toward the nearest stall. “Do you know where my horses are?”

“They’re at my house,” he said casually, like he was commenting on the weather.

She stared. “Did Grayson sell you...?” But that made no sense. “Why in the world are my horses at your house?”

“Can I explain that part later? There are some things I need to say.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and stomped her foot. This man was a wrecking ball. Every time he showed up in her life, he just smashed all her plans and her routines to smithereens.

Still, she’d never been happier to see anyone in her entire life, no matter how much it hurt to know he would never be hers. “No, Keating. I’d really rather know where my horses are than discuss how we can best avoid each other while you’re in town.”

He took two more steps toward her, his smile becoming slightly less cocky and slightly more real. “What if I don’t want to avoid you?”

Her heart lurched and started racing again, and she just couldn’t deal with this right now. All she wanted to do was beg his forgiveness and ask him to give her another chance, but that conversation would have to wait.

If he said the words, if he told her he never wanted to be with her again, she’d fall apart and she could not fall apart right now. “As much as I’d love to work out the logistics of our new relationship, there are going to be twenty-five kids here in less than forty-five minutes and they’re all going to be expecting to ride my horses. I need to know why they’re at your house so we can get them back here in time for the party.”

“What if I want to be a part of your life?”

And her heart dropped dead in despair. He was going to suggest they be friends. She just knew it. “Read the room. This isn’t the time for this conversation. If you’re holding my horses hostage until you get your alpaca back, I’m going to have to insist you cease and desist.”

“This is the only time for this conversation, Bailey. The horses are fine and the twenty-five kids will be fine. We need to clear the air.”

“Oh, my God.” She stamped her foot again. “What is wrong with you?”

“I’ve been alone for so long that sometimes I forget how to be with other people. And you aren’t just people, you terrify me. You’re like a giant butterfly, so beautiful, but with a venom that could bring me to my fucking knees.”

“Have you been out in the sun too long? How bad was that concussion?” She walked over to him and pressed her hand to his forehead.

He laughed. “I’m getting this all wrong. Shit.” He pulled her hand from his forehead and held on to it. “I messed up, Bailey. I walked away when I should have stayed and fought for you.”



“I was horrible to you,” she said, her eyes burning. “You must have been as upset as I was about almost losing the girls, and I pushed you away when I should have been thanking you for looking out for them. For protecting all of us.”

“Is that why you called me?”

She swallowed hard, suddenly more nervous than she could ever remember being in her life. “I called to make sure you were okay. Sloane told me about your fall.”

He stepped closer. “That’s why you called the second time. Why’d you call the first?”

“I wanted to tell you...” She looked away, the lump in her throat making it hard to breathe.

Keating pushed her hair behind her ear. “Tell me what, Firecracker?”

She met his warm, fond gaze. “Why are you looking at me like that? You should hate me.”

“Never. But I might get kind of annoyed if you don’t tell me what you wanted to tell me over the phone.”

She licked her lips and his focus shifted down to them, his gaze heating. She smoothed her hands over her dress. “I wanted to say that I’m sorry, Keating. I got scared and I did the dumbest thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

“What’s that?”

“I sent away the man I’m head over heels in love with.”

His eyes widened, and he rocked back on his heels, as though the shock had been physical. In the few seconds it took for his frown to shift, she cycled through despair, nausea, and agony, before his lips turned up into a wide grin.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, lifted her off her feet, and spun her until she was laughing and shrieking for him to put her down before she got too dizzy.

He set her back on her feet, but he didn’t let her go. And for the first time in weeks, she had hope that maybe she hadn’t ruined everything permanently when she’d dumped him.

“I’m so sorry I pushed you away,” Bailey said. “I don’t know how to prove I’ll never do it again, but I swear to you with everything I am that I have no intention of ever letting go of you again if you come back to us to stay.”

“I don’t have to believe it, because I’m never going to walk away again before we’ve hashed everything out and had phenomenal make-up sex. When you came to see me that day, I should have held you and told you that you didn’t do anything wrong by having a day for yourself. I should have insisted on making you wait to dump me until you’d had some time to get over the shock and fear of Glenn kidnapping your children.”

“I wouldn’t have listened to you,” Bailey said, swiping at the tears rolling down her cheeks. “I was set on blaming myself and depriving myself of you as a sort of penance.” A sob hiccuped out of her, but she pulled in a deep breath. “I’m so sorry I hurt you, Keating. You deserve so much better.”

He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her so tight the tears flowed freely with no hope of her stoppering them. “I’ll be a lucky bastard the day I truly deserve you, Bailey. Give yourself grace. You’re human and you were scared and you did a dumb thing.”

She laughed through her tears. “The dumbest thing ever.”

“But now that I know you love me, I’m never going to let you push me away again.”

“I’m not going to let myself push you away. I want the girls to see me happy and in love, because that’s the future I want for them.”

“I’ve missed you all so much. I love you, Bailey, and I want to be here for you and the girls every day.”

“I’d like that, too.” She leaned in and he met her halfway, kissing her long and hard.

It felt so good to have him back in her arms, back in her life. Almost too good.

She pulled away to look up at him. “I need you to be sure, Keating.”

“I know that marriage bet threw you more than you let on,” he said. “I don’t know how to prove to you I’m all in and happier than I can ever say to be with you, but I’ll spend every day for the rest of my life proving it to you.”

She wanted to just fall into the moment with him and tell him she believed him, but she’d trusted too many times before and lost. He hadn’t been there on the days when both girls fought all day long and the house was a mess and Bailey forgot to shower because she was so busy. His life had been so exciting and a part of her still doubted he’d be happy with her and the girls for the long haul. “You’re a good man, Keating, but maybe you should spend some more time with all of us before you promise away the rest of your life.”

He listened and nodded, like he was really considering her words. “Don’t need time, but if that’s what will make you feel better, I’ll do it. I’ve got plans I want to show you that will keep me right next door until you’re ready to trust me.”

She was halfway out of the barn with him when reality sunk in. “Wait. You still haven’t told me why my horses are at your house and I still have twenty-five kids coming here in...” She looked at her watch. “Half an hour.”

“Actually, they’re coming to my house.”

Bailey spun on him, confused. “What?”

“The girls really wanted to have a pool party, so I said we could have the party at my house. They didn’t tell you, because I wanted to tell you first and I couldn’t get here until this morning.”

She stared, confused. “You’ve been talking to my girls?”

He nodded, searching her face. “They’ve been calling me every night for the past few weeks. I told them they should tell you, but they were afraid you’d make them stop calling.” He frowned. “You’re mad. That’s why I wanted to talk to you alone first. If you aren’t ready for the girls to know we’re dating again, I completely understand. We don’t have to tell them anything until you’re ready. They can use the house for

the party and we won't even tell them I'm back in town if you don't want to."

Bailey pressed a hand to her head, utterly overwhelmed. "Slow down. One thing at a time. Start with them calling you."

"They called me a few weeks ago to apologize for sneaking away to talk to Glenn and getting me into trouble with you. After I made it clear I wasn't mad, they kept calling. They called every night after you'd gone to sleep." He paused and looked skyward, as though calculating. "Or maybe early, early morning, your time."

"No wonder they've been so tired and cranky. Melody's teacher called me last week, concerned because Melody fell asleep in class. I've been worried they were coming down with something."

"Nope," he said. "Just calling me every night. I should have told you, but I didn't want you to tell me to stop talking to them. They were the best part of my day."

"I wish they'd told me. I don't like them keeping secrets from me, but I'm glad they felt they could talk to you." She pressed a hand to her belly. "I just... I don't know what to say, Keating. I—"

"They invited me to Lily's birthday party. I wasn't going to come, but I offered up my house so they could use the pool and—" He waved a hand. "Lily should get to have everything she wants on her birthday. I was planning to come back here for a while, anyway, to build that ropes course for the camp Grayson's been asking for. I had no intention of seeing you or the girls, but then I got that call from you and I got my hopes up. Grayson helped me get you alone so I could run it all by you first."

Bailey stared at him. This sweet, amazing man who'd wanted to do something nice for Lily even if he couldn't be there, even if he never got credit, and she burst into tears.

Keating's arms wrapped tight around her. "Shit, Bailey. This is too much. I had a feeling I should wait until after the party, but I've never been patient."

She swallowed down her tears and pushed out of his arms. “I pushed you away, Keating. I don’t deserve you.”

“Bailey, you deserve—”

She stomped away from his arms. “You are such an amazing man, and I pushed you away. Don’t take me back so easily. You should make me grovel and beg.”

He stepped in front of her, smiling like she’d just promised to buy him another goat. “Do you want to grovel and beg? How would that go exactly?”

She stopped. Um, how did one grovel and beg? There should have been some grand gesture, but planning this birthday party had sapped her creativity and ability to plan. “How would you like me to grovel and beg? I could bake...” She shook her head. “I’m no good at baking. Do you need accounting help or—”

Keating laughed and grabbed her. “I don’t want you to grovel or beg. You didn’t do anything wrong, Bailey. You got scared, and you sent me away because you thought you were doing what was best for your girls. Do you still think keeping me out of your life is what’s best for you and the girls?”

It couldn’t be this easy. It shouldn’t be. “Of course not. But I was horrible to you, Keating. I should—”

He kissed her hard, and she forgot what she was going to say.

When he pulled away, he looked down at her with a love and warmth that made her head spin. “I love you, Bailey. The only thing I need from you is to know that you love me, too, and will never push me away again.”

“Never,” she said. “I don’t think I’d survive it.” And she wasn’t sure she could survive it if he left because he figured out family life wasn’t for him.

She could waste the rest of her life worrying about what-ifs.

Or she could choose to love and trust this amazing man and risk the pain of losing him, or she could spend the rest of her life worrying when he’d leave her.

She decided then and there to choose love and trust. She'd probably never be free of her doubts entirely, but she'd fight every day for the love she felt for this man. The love she saw reflected on his face.

"You'd survive it," he said, gently, as he cupped her face in his large palm. "But I hope you never have to." He pressed a fast kiss to her lips. "Now that's settled, let's go to my place."

"What about the girls? They'll want to see you."

"Cherry took them to my house to decorate. She'll keep them outside until—" He stopped, his eyes widening. "Wait, are you saying you're okay with them knowing we're dating?"

"Yes," she said, never more certain of anything in her life. "I want them to know I love you."

He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans and lowered his chin to look her in the eyes. "So, until you agree to make me Mr. Bailey Tiller, we can tell them we're dating."

Bailey grimaced. "Ugh, no."

Keating's shoulders sank. "Too far?"

Bailey laughed, feeling lighter than she had in weeks. "No. That's not what... Tiller is Glenn's last name. If we get married, I'll be taking your name if that's okay with you?"

His smile could have lit a stadium at midnight. "It's more than okay with me."

"Okay. So the girls are with Cherry, getting ready for a party at your house and they have no idea you're here?"

He looked away, hands shoved in his pockets. "I haven't outright told them I'd be here, but I'm pretty sure they suspect."

Bailey grinned, feeling lighter than she had in weeks. "You are going to be the best birthday present Lily has ever gotten."

He swiped at his eyes as he looked away. "We should stop inside my house first. I want to show you something." He held out a hand to her, and she took it, because how could she be so close to him and not touch him?

He led her to his truck, which was parked behind the stables, and helped her up into the passenger seat.

Once behind the wheel, he started down the long driveway. “How have you been? The girls told me you’ve been sad.”

Bailey laughed. “I was a mess for a week or two after you left, but I thought I’d gotten pretty good at hiding how much I missed you.” She shook her head. “The girls are so perceptive. Far too perceptive for kids their ages. I’m afraid it’s because of Glenn leaving that they had to grow up so fast.”

“They love you and they pay attention. That’s not a bad thing.”

“I guess not.” She let out a sigh. “Things have been pretty good otherwise. I’ve been applying to online university programs to complete my degree and—”

“Bailey.” He looked over at her, pride suffusing his face. “That’s wonderful.”

“I think so. It’s been a long time coming, anyway. I think I might like to handle the accounting for Gray’s ranch as well as the horses. It will give me a good variety of jobs every day and keep my accounting skills sharp. It will mean a lot more hours of work, though, and I’m not sure I can do that and be home with the girls as much as I need to be.”

“You should do it.” Keating parked in the garage of his house and turned to her. “Even if you and I don’t get back together, I can help you, Bailey. I can be your manny and take care of things around the house for you.”

“That’s really sweet, but you have your own dreams about being a rancher. You don’t want to be my full-time manny and assistant.”

The crinkles around his eyes when he grinned made her want to lean into him and kiss his sweet lips. “I don’t think being a rancher was ever really my calling.”

Bailey hopped out of the Range Rover before he could walk around and help her down.

The garage door led right into the kitchen, which looked exactly the same as the last time she'd been there, except there were now drawings on the fridge. Bailey stepped closer. They looked like they'd been drawn by her kids.

"Melody and Lily made those pictures with Cherry before we left for Vegas," he said.

She pressed a hand to her chest, and warmth filled her. "It was sweet of you to keep them."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "No matter what happened with you and me, I never stopped thinking of your girls as family. And family art deserves a spot on the fridge."

He led her through the house and into an office with an antique-looking wooden desk with unique carvings and bookshelves only half-filled with books.

Keating let her go and walked over to the desk, where he pointed down at papers spread there. "This is what I wanted to show you. While I'm here building a ropes course for Grayson, I thought I could create a trail for horse-back riding that would cut between our two properties."

But the large framed picture on the wall behind the desk had caught Bailey's attention. It was a blown-up photo of her and the kids, all three of them laughing and caught mid-run in the setting sun. "When did you take this picture?"

Keating looked up and smiled, the love in his eyes shining bright. "Cherry took it. It's a great shot, isn't it?"

"And you put it up in your office?" She asked. "When did you have time to do that?"

And why would he have done it after she'd dumped him so cruelly?

"We'll talk about that in a minute. Come look at this first."

Bailey wanted to argue, but curiosity got the better of her.

She walked over and looked down at the paper. It was a map, but there wasn't just a trail marked out, it looked like



there were buildings and obstacles. “All we need for the horses is a dirt path that’s smooth and obstacle-free. What is all this?”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Keating watched Bailey take in the blueprint, awed by her beauty and her presence. How the hell had he ever allowed her to push him away?

She looked gorgeous in a pale yellow sundress, her hair escaping from a French braid, but it was her face he watched, waiting for a sign of how she felt about his plans.

“Is that a water trough?” she asked, pointing to the map.

“It is. I figured it would be good to have troughs set up in a few places along the trail. Someone would have to fill them, but—”

“It would be amazing if we had the horses out for a long ride or wanted to camp out overnight,” she said, nodding.

“Exactly,” he said. “And if you do camp out overnight, I thought it might be cool to have a platform for the tents with a hitch for the horses and a campfire pit. Nothing too fancy, just a few touches to make it more comfortable.”

She hummed in agreement and leaned in close to the map. “What does the trail meet up with here?” She tapped her finger on the edge of the map.

“That’s one of the starting points for the ropes course. In case you wanted to ride out for a day of fun.” He leaned over next to her and tapped the map farther south. “I thought it might be cool to have another riding ring here with wooden calves and cows for lassoing lessons, and barrels for racing. For the more advanced kids. Maybe you could even put on a small-time rodeo as part of the camp experience.”

She straightened and smiled at him. “This is amazing, Keating. The kids will love it.”

He stepped in close and set his hands on her hips. “Good. I’m kind of hoping you love it too.”

Her smile widened as she narrowed her eyes. “Are you fishing for compliments?”

“One hundred percent.”

“I love it too. So much.” She pressed a quick kiss to his lips and stepped away. “Now tell me about that picture and how I can get one for my house.”

“Not much to tell. Cherry thought I’d like it and she put it up.” He was suddenly nervous about telling her the whole story.

She sat on the edge of the desk and pinned her gaze on him. “She put it up after you took off with no plans to return?”

He could put her off by saying he’d always planned to return eventually, but that would just be delaying admitting the truth. “She put it up after I told her I was planning to move back here to convince you to take me back.”

She studied him like she was analyzing his soul. “Decorating for the job you want?”

He nodded and sat next to her on the edge of the desk. He spread his fingers over her jeans-clad thigh and squeezed, but he couldn’t look at her. “I want to be a stay at home dad. Not tomorrow or even next month, but eventually, that’s where I’d like us to end up. I want to marry you, Bailey, and adopt your kids. Whether by birth, adoption, or fostering, I want us to have kids of our own. I want to fill this house and this ranch up with kids and all the unusual pets and wandering stray animals we can fit here. I want a home filled with love and chaos and joy.”

“And what would be my role in this dream world of yours?”

He couldn’t get a read on her reaction from her tone, so he turned and looked at her. She was frowning up at him, her expression wary and confused. “Whatever you want. Work for Grayson and take care of his horses and accounting, or collect a stable-full of horses here and offer lessons. You can go back to school for a different degree if you decide you want to do something else entirely. You can do whatever you want and I’ll support you by taking care of the kids and our home.” He brushed a tear from her cheek. “I’ll support you by loving you.”

“This is really what you want?”

“Cherry put the idea in my head. And then I met a stay-at-home dad in Hawaii and he destroyed any doubts I had. I’ve had my career and I’ve traveled around the world. I’m ready for the next adventure.”

“You say that now, but what if you get bored in a month or two and want to travel again or want a job that’s a challenge?”

“Then we’ll take a family vacation. The ropes course for Grayson and the trail for your horses will keep me busy for at least a few months. But none of that has to interfere with my primary job of taking care of you and our family.”

“What if—?”

He grabbed her hands and squeezed. “I can’t foresee the future, Bailey, or prove to you I won’t change my mind. Just hear what I’ve said and think about it. Give me time to prove myself and in a few weeks, when I propose, hopefully you’ll say yes.”

She stared at him, eyes wide, mouth twitching like she wasn’t sure how to react. “A few weeks?”

“You don’t have to say yes. I’m just letting you know that I’m ready to get married whenever you are, but I’ll give you all the time you need.”

She laughed, her eyes sparkling, and it took every ounce of his strength not to kiss her beautiful lips.

“You always know exactly what you want, don’t you?” she said.

“I do. Also, Sloane and Clarion are already looking at wedding venues. They could be fucking with me, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

She stared at him for several beats of his heart, clearly taking in everything he’d told her. “Six weeks.”

“What?”

“Ask me in six weeks. I might be ready by then.”

“Really?” He whooped, picked her up, and spun her around.

She laughed, but her laughter died in her throat when he stopped spinning and let her slide down his body until her feet hit the floor. God, he'd missed her.

He met her gaze. "I love you, Bailey. So damn much."

"I love you, too."

She lifted onto her toes to press her lips to his, but he stepped out of reach.

"Come on. I have something else to show you."

"Hopefully it's something hard and thick."

He crossed the room to the only wall without windows and pulled a handle that was recessed along the side of the shelf.

The bookcase became a door and swung inward to reveal a small room with more bookshelves and a chaise longue.

"This room is soundproofed," he said. "If you need to make a professional call or need silence to study or just want to get away from everyone for a while, this could be a great place for you to be alone."

She looked around the room for a moment, then waggled her eyebrows. "Soundproofed you say?"

He smiled, joy making him light. "No one outside this room can hear a thing that goes on in here."

She leapt on him and wrapped her legs around his waist. "You're amazing and I want reunion sex that is leisurely and romantic, but I've also really, really missed you."

Keating let out his breath on a sigh, but then she nibbled his ear and his breath got stuck again. Her arms and legs wrapped around him left his hands free to grip her face and kiss the hell out of her.

He lowered her down onto the chaise longue, ready to test out the new piece of furniture.

"Wait," she gasped out. "The kids will be here any minute."

"Cherry and your brothers and your sisters-in-law have everything under control." He hoped like hell he wasn't

wrong.

“I can’t be late to my daughter’s birthday party.”

He glanced at his watch. “We’ve got twenty minutes. Enough time for you?”

“It’s been four weeks. It should be, but I don’t always come quickly, especially not when I’m stressing about taking too long.”

He lowered himself down her body and slid her sun dress up around her hips. “I’ll just have to focus on you, then.”

In a matter of seconds, he had her panties off and his mouth on her. He used his tongue and fingers, loving the sounds she made, devouring the taste of her. He’d never get enough of her.

She shouted her orgasm in that sound proofed room, testing the quality of the workmanship. When he’d built the room he’d meant to use it for himself, a hideaway from what life might throw at him in retirement, but there was nothing he wanted to hide from. He wanted to experience every single second of life with Bailey.

He would have been happy to spend the full twenty minutes tasting her and trying to get her to scream again, but she grabbed his head and pulled. “Up,” she said. “We’ve got six minutes. I want you inside me.”

“Six minutes isn’t near enough time.” But he was already reaching for his wallet and pulling out the condom. He rolled it on and slid inside her with his shirt still on and his shorts and boxers around his knees.

“You feel better than I remember.”

“Mmmm,” Bailey said. “My fantasies didn’t do you justice.”

He paused over her. “You fantasized about me? Did you touch yourself?”

She gave him a wicked smile. “Let’s save that conversation for later. You’ve got four minutes.”

He made the most of every one of those four minutes. Then they straightened their clothes and hair and headed out back to the party.

“Keats!” Melody and Lily dropped the balloons they’d been blowing up and rushed over to him, throwing themselves in his arms.

He knelt and hugged them. “I missed you girls. So much.”

“Are you back for real?” Lily asked.

“Back for real,” he said. “I’m home.”

The girls cheered. He looked up to see Bailey smiling down at him, and he knew he’d made the right choice. The only choice. There was nowhere else in the world he belonged.

# EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Keating adjusted his tux as he stared up into the sky, trying to catch sight of his bride.

“Can’t believe you talked Bailey into this,” Grayson said from his spot next to Keating.

“Didn’t have to. It was Melody and Lily’s idea. They talked her into it.”

“Right.” Logan leaned across Grayson to glare at Keating. “Like they came up with this on their own.” Logan had loudly argued against his wife having to jump out of a tree to participate in the wedding, but Genevieve had loved the idea. Apparently, Logan was afraid of heights, even when he wasn’t the one who had to survive them.

Keating could relate. He worried about Bailey and the girls far more than he’d ever worried about himself.

“They’re living with an adventure park in their backyard,” Jude said from the front row where he sat on the bride’s side with his wife Brianna and their kids. “Of course they came up with the idea themselves.”

“When is this wedding going to start?” Sloane asked from his seat in the second row on the groom’s side of the aisle. “If it takes any longer, Clarion and I are going to borrow your officiant and beat you to married.”

“No, we won’t,” Clarion said from her seat next to Sloane. She’d just gotten back from a five country tour and somehow still looked chipper and alert. “We’re having a Christmas wedding, whether or not you like it.”

Sloane grinned, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her close enough to smack a kiss to her lips. “I love a Christmas wedding. Ours will be way better than Keating’s.”

“Sloane Sullivan,” Keating’s mother said. “You will behave at your brother’s wedding.”



Thank God the wedding march started.

Keating looked up to the platform to see a flash of red as Melody flew down the zip line, laughing hysterically and dumping her entire basket of flower petals onto the heads of the people in the back. She landed behind Cherry and was helped out of her harness by Cherry's cousin, Blue.

Melody leaped down and ran off to join her cousins on Keating's side of the family as Lily took her turn. She emptied her flower basket way too slowly for a zip line and threw out about three petals, one of which landed on Keating's face, before she reached Blue.

Lily, in a jumpsuit that worked in the harness but also looked like a dress because the legs were so poofy, moved to stand next to Keating as the next bridesmaid, Genevieve, came flying down.

Isla flew down next, and then it was time for Bailey. Keating's heart thumped and he couldn't wipe the goofy grin off his face. Fucking finally, he was going to make Bailey his bride.

She flew toward him, and he locked eyes with her. Her smile was huge, her hair down and loose, blowing wildly from the movement of the zip line. Her dress billowed around her like a cloud.

He couldn't wait another moment to touch her, so he left his assigned spot and rushed back to be the one to help her out of her harness.

She smiled at him as she stepped out of the harness and put her hands to her head. "My hair is a mess."

"You look gorgeous." He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her lips, before lacing his fingers through hers and walking her around to stand in front of Cherry.

"Thanks for coming everyone," Cherry said. "In case you're wondering, yes, you can play on the zip line after the ceremony, but you will have to wear helmets. First, let's get these two crazy kids married."

Seventy-five of their closest friends and family cheered.

Cherry cleared her throat and began the wedding service they'd chosen. She had just gotten to the part where Bailey and Keating were going to read vows they'd written themselves when someone screamed.

"Oh, no." Bailey's face paled, but she bit her bottom lip like she was holding back a laugh.

Keating looked in the direction her gaze had gone to see Zed the Alpaca in the back of the audience trying to chew on Keating's cousin Goldie's blond hair while her sisters swatted at the alpaca.

Zed, who must have thought the hair was hay, was not to be deterred. Not even when the wedding planner rushed over and started trying to drag Zed away by his fluffy fur.

"That's never going to work," Bailey said. "Should we help her?"

"Nope," Cherry said. "Once the ceremony starts, we must finish it or we have to start over."

Keating stared at her. "That's not a thing."

Cherry narrowed her eyes. She was wearing hot pink robes over what was probably a hot pink mini-dress. "And what do you think will happen if we stop long enough for you two to chase down Sugar Lips? The last time he got loose, it took us an hour to get him back in his paddock."

She had a point.

Bailey nodded her agreement. "Just make it fast. I'm not sharing my wedding cake with an alpaca."

Keating glanced toward the barn, which had been decorated for the reception and held the gorgeous wedding cake that was three tiers of different flavors of deliciousness. The cake tasting had been the best part of the wedding planning process.

Keating raised his voice over the shouts and laughter of their audience. "Bailey, I never knew I was missing anything from my life until I met you. You drew me in with that fire in your eyes and your sassy snark—"

Someone else screamed from the audience and Keating looked back to see Zed trying to eat the corsage off the bosom of one of his great aunts.

“Really?” Bailey asked. “That’s what you’re leading with?”

He turned his attention back to her, the annoyed disbelieving look on her face belied by the amusement in her eyes.

“Then you hooked me with your enormous heart, your strength and bravery, and your intelligence. Not to mention your incredible beauty.”

Bailey’s eyes went misty.

Someone in the audience shouted, but Keating didn’t look away from his bride.

“You are my heart, my family, my future. You are my everything, and I will love you until my last breath.”

A tear rolled down Bailey’s cheek.

An eardrum splitting scream erupted from the audience. Zed was nuzzling Keating’s cousin Brittany’s lap rather aggressively.

“I brought carrots for a snack,” Brittany shouted as she tried to push the alpaca’s head away.

Next to her, her husband Jared was laughing so hard tears were streaming down his cheeks.

“Jared,” Keating shouted. “You’re a vet. Why don’t you help get Zed back in his paddock?”

“Day off,” Jared shouted between laughs. But he got up, carrots in hand, and started leading Zed away from the noticeably pregnant Brittany.

“Keep going,” Cherry said.

“Keating,” Bailey shouted over the commotion. “This wedding is so perfectly representative of our life. I hope you’re ready for chaos every day from here on out.”

“So ready,” Keating said.

“You bulldozed into my life whether or not I wanted you there—”

As though Bailey had given him an order, Zed turned away from Jared and his lure of carrots and ran down a row of seated guests, knocking a few of them backward into the guests behind them. More shouts and screams erupted.

“I’ll get her!” Lily ran from Keating’s side and raced after Zed, who apparently thought he was playing a game of tag with the little girl as he ran back and forth through the rows of guests.

“And I’m so glad you did,” Bailey shouted, barely containing snorts of laughter as she spoke. “You taught me to relax, to trust, to look for the fun in every moment. I will forever be so grateful you walked into my barn that day, so grateful Sugar Lips ran away to Gray’s ranch. Every day for the rest of my life. I love you.”

The crowd quieted as Zed appeared to run out of steam. He stopped, again at the back of the audience, and allowed Lily to pet him. Jared made his way over with the carrots and Keating relaxed. The two of them would get the alpaca back behind bars.

Cherry spoke quickly as she got them to the end of the ceremony.

As she was closing in on the part Keating had been looking forward to, he ignored the tramping of hooves, because he was almost married.

“... kiss the—”

Keating closed his eyes, leaned toward Bailey, and felt fur against his lips instead of Bailey’s sweet mouth. He opened one eye.

Bailey met his gaze, her lips on the other side of Zed’s face, and burst out laughing.

Without missing a beat, Cherry produced an apple from her robes and held it out to Zed.

“By the power vested in me by the state of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Keating ducked under Zed’s long neck and grabbed Bailey.  
“I love you, Mrs. Sullivan.”

“I love you, Mr. Sullivan.”

He kissed his wife while the crowd cheered, and Zed munched loudly on his apple.

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# Join my Reader Group

Want to read more about Bailey and Keating's happily ever after? You can get a bonus epilogue by joining my reader group, [Katharine Sadler's Sparks](#). I'd love to see you there!

## *What's Next*

Cherry and her cousins will get their own series set in Las Vegas in 2024. Until then, you might enjoy reading about Keating's cousins in small town Southeastern Virginia. Five estranged sisters are forced to live in a house together for a year to get a big inheritance.

The first book in the series of romantic comedies is [Lost and Found](#) about Dandelion Weston and the forest ranger who's determined to prove she's trouble for the town.

Turn the page to get an early peek at the first chapter before the book releases in January 2023.

# Lost and Found

## *Chapter One*

Dani

Using my ab muscles, I curl into a sitting position, sleeping bag still tight around me, breath making clouds in front of me, to watch the sun sneak up over the mountains. I breathe in the crisp mountain air as the forest wakes with the sun, birds chirping to greet the day, squirrels rustling around in the underbrush.

Early October in the mountains of Southwestern Virginia is chilly and I shiver, even with the sleeping bag snug around me, but I don't get up and head home where it's nice and warm.

I hold perfectly still, hoping to see a deer step out of the woods, maybe even a bobcat or a fox.

Instead, a man emerges without a sound from the dark shadows cast by the trees, his breath puffing out ahead of him in a white cloud. Long and lean, his longish hair sticking out in several directions, his cheeks ruddy from exertion or the chill. Exertion, I guess, as I take in his running shoes, athletic pants, and t-shirt.

I hold my breath. Maybe he won't notice me and he'll go back to his workout. He's probably not a serial killer, but I am a woman alone on the side of a mountain and he is a man.

He doesn't jog in place or check his pulse. He breathes deep, hands on his narrow hips and looks around the clearing. His gaze zeroes in on me with an intensity that makes my heart pound. He strides toward me, his long legs eating up the distance, his scowl becoming clearer the closer he gets. His face is all sharp bones and disapproval, and my nerves thrum.

This is not good.



Needing to be able to run, I leap to my feet. Or, I try to.

My legs get tangled in my sleeping bag and I tip forward. I don't even get my hands out to catch myself before the ground rushes up to meet me face first.

I wince and close my eyes, preparing for the pain. It doesn't come.

Strong hands grip my shoulders so hard it hurts and push me back up to a standing position.

Except my feet are still caught in the sleeping bag, so I end up on my butt, staring up at the clearly annoyed man.

"You haven't paid for this campsite." His voice is rough, and sort of creaky, like he's more tin man than human. Like maybe he hasn't spoken to anyone in a long time.

"My butt bone is sore, but I think I'll be okay. Thanks for asking." I shove myself out of the sleeping bag and get to my feet, making sure to keep a good amount of space between myself and the hostile stranger.

Yep, my butt is gonna have a nasty bruise.

"You are camping illegally."

"And you're going to make a citizen's arrest?" I pop my hands on my hips, feel the soft fabric of my favorite sweatpants, and remember that they have about fifteen holes in them. At least they aren't stained with chocolate icing like my favorite sweatshirt, which I'm also currently wearing. And I did nothing to my hair after my shower last night, so my curls are almost definitely a wild ass mess. "I don't see any room for handcuffs in those track pants."

I take another step back. The man doesn't follow or try to get in my space.

Somehow, he produces a small notebook from a secret pocket, along with a tiny pen. "I'm not going to handcuff you. I'm going to write you a ticket."

"Under what authority? Misanthropes against sleeping in nature?"

He doesn't pause in his scribbling. "This campsite is owned by the Forest service and this is National Park Land. Camping here without paying the fee is a federal offense."

I stare at him. Who the hell is this guy? "For all you know, I have paid for this site. You're wasting your time."

He looks up at me, his eyes narrowed. "I know, because I checked the box." He points behind himself with his pen. "The box where you are honor bound to pay before you camp."

My blood goes cold and all the snark and bravado drains right out of me. "Do you really need to write me a ticket? Can't I just pay the fee? I didn't even get up here until like two this morning and I didn't even sleep." I'd been wide awake, staring at the stars. Two months unemployed and I still woke at three AM like I had a job to get to.

That gets his attention. He looks up at me, a frown digging deeper into his face, brows furrowing so hard they practically connect. "You hiked up here at two in the morning?"

"The moon was so bright it was practically daylight, and it's only a mile to hike in here from—"

"Did you miss the signs warning against hiking at night? What if something had happened? Do you know how easy it is to trip over a root and twist an ankle in the dark?"

"Nothing happened. I'm fine. How about I promise not to hike at night anymore and pay the camping fee? How much is it?"

He turns his attention back to his notepad. "Twenty dollars. But—"

"Twenty dollars?" I squawk. I barely remember the days when I could have pulled out a twenty and not even think about it. At the moment, twenty dollars means I won't be able to eat this week. Actually, at this point, it's possible I'll overdraft my paltry checking account. I've been a good saver, but two months unemployed has rendered me practically penniless. "Twenty dollars for a ten-by-ten square of dirt in the middle of the forest? Do I get turn down service and a mint on my pillow?"

“No. What’s your name and address?”

“Ima. That’s I M A. Broke. Fifteen never going to pay—”

The misanthrope huffs out an exhausted sounding sigh and looks up at me. “Fine. You want to do this the hard way? I’ll hike down and get your license plate number.”

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him, but my throat is tight and I feel like I might be having a heart attack. How did I get here? I love our national park system. They deserve my twenty bucks. They need it. I just can’t afford it.

I’m sad and scared and feeling like a pathetic loser, which is why I triple down on acting like an entitled brat. “Good luck with that, buddy. I don’t know who you think you are—”

“I’m a forest ranger.” His brows and lips twitch like I’m pissing him off when he’s the guy who didn’t tell me that from the outset.

I stare at him. “I don’t see a badge or a uniform or any—”

He pulls an ID from his secret pocket and flashes it at me. I have no idea how to tell if it’s real or not, but it sure looks legit.

“Fine,” I say. “Go ahead and hike on down that hill and get my license plate number. I’m not telling you my name.”

He stares me down, and something around his eyes eases just the tiniest bit. He’s got pretty eyes, hazel with sparks of emerald green.

He rocks back on his heels. “You don’t have a car down there, do you? Where’d you park?”

I imitate his earlier huff of irritation. “Like I’m going to tell you.”

His smile is not friendly or comforting. In fact, he looks more like a feral wolf baring his teeth. “Guess I’ll just have to stick close until you show me where it is.”

Nervousness lowers to my gut and my early morning hunger turns acidic. “You’re going to follow me around all day over twenty dollars?”

He shrugs. “Today’s my day off. I’ve got nothing better to do.”

I look him up and down. “Why does that not surprise me? Not too many people wanting to hang out with you, huh?”

He is completely unfazed. Now that’s he standing so close and I’m not terrified he’s a serial killer, I can appreciate that he’s got more muscle than I’d first realized and some very nice forearms. Without the unattractive scowl, he might almost be good looking.

“Ugh,” I growl at myself. What’s next, Dani? You going to ask him to smile?

“You alright?” he asks. “Feeling sick?”

“I’m fine. I’m just going to mosey on into the woods and use the facilities.”

“Not unless you have a shovel with you.”

“I’m not going to take a shit in the woods.” An odd urge to giggle bubbles up. “I just need to pee. Is that illegal, too?”

He crosses his arms over his chest and glares, those green flecks in his eyes darkening. “If you haven’t paid for the campsite, it is.”

I really do need to pee, but I’d actually been hoping to sneak off after my pee break and run home. If he won’t let me pee, there is no way I’m going to win this standoff.

In fact, just thinking about not being able to pee until I’m able to lose this guy has me pressing my thighs tight together. “That can’t be a real thing. Hikers pee in the woods all the time.”

His jaw sets and twitches like he might be grinding his teeth. “Fine. You have to be at least one hundred feet from this campsite and you need to make noise so I know you haven’t run off.”

“Seriously? Y’all must really need my twenty dollars.” Is this guy for real? I kneel and start rolling up my sleeping bag.

“Leave it,” he says, all gruff and intimidating.

I look up at him, confused. “The twenty dollars? You want to let it go?”

“The sleeping bag,” he says slowly. “Leave it here so I can be sure you’ll come back.”

I keep rolling. “You’re not seriously taking my sleeping bag hostage right now.”

“You are not taking that sleeping bag with you into those woods.”

I keep rolling.

He steps on the end of the bag. “I’m confiscating this until I have your license plate number.”

His deep, commanding voice should piss me off, but it sets off a shiver that starts at the base of my spine. Looking up at him from the ground as he stands legs apart, arms crossed over his chest, staring down at me with hot anger in his eyes... Let’s just say the tingling in between my legs has nothing to do with my need to pee at the moment.

Which only annoys me more.

“Fine.” I stand and dance in place because even with the distraction of this ridiculous man, I have to pee so badly my bladder is starting to ache. What was I thinking drinking a half gallon of water while I was stargazing? “I’ll give you my real name. It’s—”

“Why would I believe you? Go pee. I’ll be waiting here.”

I really, really want to yell at this law-enforcing asshole, but peeing myself in front of him will be a humiliation from which I doubt I will ever recover.

With one last glare in his general direction, I turn and race into the forest. Since it’s October, the underbrush isn’t too bad and I’m able to make my way without getting hit in the face by a branch or tripping over anything. Once I figure I’ve gone one hundred yards, I lean against the largest tree in the vicinity, drop my sweatpants, squat, and sigh with relief as I pee.

Has anything ever felt better than the relief of a long overdue pee?

I snort at the thought. It's a pretty good sign that I've done all the things wrong in my life.

I shake and stand, pulling my pants up with me as I step away from the tree. I start back in the direction I came from, except... Nothing about it looks familiar. I turn in a circle, but see no landmarks to guide me back the way I came.

Did I go left around the big tree or right?

Where the hell am I?

Lost and Found will release in January 2023. Preorder it [here](#).