

Amazon Bestselling Author

DIANE PORTMAN-RAY



MONTANA

Lone Rider




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Synopsis: Caroline Douglas is a little lady. Her shoes are expensive, there are diamonds around her neck, and her dog is a pedigree. Jax knew she was going to be trouble the moment he saw the new lady boss running around the cornfields in high heels. He had a feeling about all the ways the woman was going to disturb his peaceful country life, but that didn't stop him from wanting to touch, to kiss, and to lick. Something inside him howled like a wolf every time she was around.

The attraction between them was more powerful than a storm rolling down the mountains, but that didn't make it right. Jax Maverick was not the man to offer promises of love and a happily ever after, and he could see in Caroline's eyes that she needed all of that, so touching her was off limits.

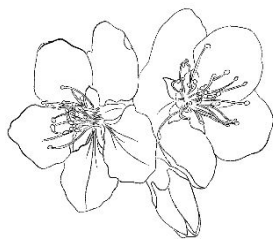
...touching her was off limits.

...touching her was off limits.

That's what he told himself over and over again, but it wasn't enough to stop them from falling into bed together. Life became much more interesting after that. It became much more painful too.

“Every man has a wild beast within him.”

Frederick the Great





Chapter 1

Caroline

The five-inch heel of my Valentino sandal got caught between a plank of wood and something metallic and I had to fight to free myself. The barn looked like it was abandoned long before my grandfather's passing two months ago. It looked like a hurricane had swept through it. It was nothing like I remembered from the few memories that I had from those two summers I'd spent at the farm when I was a kid.

Regina barked from the door, unimpressed with the rural disaster in front of her.

"I know, baby girl. I know." I muttered.

Regina was a three-year-old, purebred Cavalier King Charles. A very spoiled, very loved apartment dog, that has never touched so much dirt with her paws before. I could see why the surroundings were not up to her standards. Only last week she spent three days in a five-star doggy hotel and now

she was here, in the middle of nowhere, somewhere by the side of one forgotten road in Montana. On a farm. On *my* farm.

“What the hell was Grandpa Eddi thinking when he left me this place?” To be honest, it shouldn’t have been a surprise. His daughter was dead and he and my dad were estranged. The only reason that they talked in the past two decades was so my grandpa could keep in touch with me.

He was a nice man, Grandpa Eddi. I can’t say that I’d known him, not really, but he visited as much as he could, he always called and sent a letter to celebrate every milestone of my life. He wrote to me when I graduated high school, telling me how proud he was. He wrote when I got accepted at Cornell and told me how happy it made him that I’d decided to attend his alma mater. He wrote when I got my degree in performance management and when I got my first job. He wrote me a letter when I got engaged and sent me a present when I broke off the engagement. Every single piece of paper was in a folder that was now hidden in the glove compartment of my convertible Mercedes.

For me Grandpa Eddie was more like God – not almighty and powerful, but always watching. He was this mystic creature that lived up in the Montana mountains and looked at everything I did, but for him, I was the only family he had left. Well, I was the only one left that still accepted to see and speak to him, so naturally, when he passed, he left me his savings – a generous sum that I had no need for – and his farm. *This goddamn farm.*

What the hell was I supposed to do with this place now? With the bulls, the cows, and the three stallions in the stables? With the big, rustic house that was overlooking the Mission Mountains? Sure, it would have been a charming place for a weekend getaway, but nothing more.

I was not fit for this place, not at all. I guess the people in town would say I was a city girl, but that was an understatement. I couldn’t function without cement under my feet. For the past seven years I’ve built a career as a powerful

woman in a man's world, working with some of the biggest companies, helping them achieve maximum performance. I lived in every big city, I've traveled to every business center. Today was the first time in six years when I was outside a metropolis and it was already proven to be a bad idea.

I don't know why I came straight to this barn, instead of going to check out the house first. Maybe because I remembered an old picture of me in front of this place, or maybe because I saw that the padlock was open. The barn was used to store equipment, a small tractor, a couple of ATVs, and dirt bikes. I didn't expect to find everything in such disorder. It must have happened after Eddi passed because he was a very neat man, the only thing that was passed down to my father.

I knew from the lawyer that managed the estate that there were a few people still working on the farm, taking care of animals, the corn fields, and the house, and their salaries were secured by my grandfather for the rest of the year, but I was still to meet any of them. Whoever was in charge of this particular barn was not doing their job, but I wasn't sure it was my place to bring it up.

Turning back, I picked Regina up in my arms and tiptoed to the car, so I could drive us both to the house. Her little nose was up in the air while she looked around one more time with a contending look, so I gave her a treat from my purse to apologize that I'd brought her here.

I parked the car in front of the house under an old oak. The place was huge, more than one man could ever need, but from what I've gathered from my father, Grandpa Eddi always had a hope that his family would return to him one day, so he built this place waiting for that moment. Unfortunately, my aunt had passed before she had a chance to make amends, and my father has held on to his grudge until we had to bury Eddi. Now it was just a big house for a woman and her dog. Not that I had any plans to stay more than it was needed. I was here to assess, evaluate, and put it on the market. I had no time to lose. I had a plane ticket for Abu Dhabi in three weeks to do performance consultancy for the CEO of Grand World

Petroleum, an oil company that was in top ten world-wide. This farm had to be dealt with by then.

I had to make three trips to the car to grab all my luggage and all of Regina's things. What could I say, we were both ladies that liked to travel in style. Regina didn't wait for me. She started marching around the house, smelling the corners and trying to get familiar with the place while I arranged all the suitcases in the hallway. I wasn't sure if unpacking was a smart decision since I hoped to be done with this place as soon as possible. I was in the middle of making that decision when the dog started to bark from the living room.

"Hey, what's with all the noise?"

Apparently, she found a small pillow with a poodle embroidered on it and decided to have a fight. When I looked around, I felt like something hit me in the plexus. The place was much more beautiful than I'd imagined. The living room was very spacious, reminding me of a lodge's lobby. It was open, with the tall ceiling, and the back wall was entirely made out of glass, revealing a stunning view over the wilderness of the mountains. The hardwood floors and almost all the furniture was dark wood, except from the white leather couch and the two matching arm chairs. To my surprise, it wasn't anything like I'd thought an old man's house looked like. It was homey, but modern, there was a flat screen TV hanging over the fireplace, LCD lights everywhere, and in the next room I found an impressively equipped kitchen. It looked like grandpa Eddi kept up with his renovation. I knew he was a comfortable man, financially speaking, but I didn't expect the house to be so up to date.

It was time to announce my long-awaited arrival, so I fished my phone from the bottom of my purse, texted my mom and then called the lawyer. He was the only point of contact I had in town.

"Hello?" He answered very promptly.

"Hey, Mr. McFee, it's Caroline Douglas."

“How are you, Miss Douglas? Everything alright?”

“Yes. I just wanted to let you know that I’ve finally arrived at the ranch.”

“That’s great news. Unfortunately, I have business to take care of at my practice in Billings all week, but I can see you first thing next Monday when I’m back at my office in Kalispell.”

“That’s five days from now, Mr. McFee.”

“I know, but I wasn’t sure of when you’d come to Montana, and I have other clients.”

“You know I’m on a tight schedule.”

“I promise you we’ll be done in time. Take the time to get familiar with the place, explore the grounds. You’re going to fall in love with that farm, I promise you.”

Doubt it.

“Sure thing.”

“And go see the town. It has more to offer than you imagine.”

I bit my tongue instead of telling him that I lived in neighborhoods bigger than Kalispell.

“I will go in town tomorrow.” If I had to stay here, I needed to buy some things. There was nothing for dinner in the fridge. Good thing I had water, orange juice, and snacks in the car.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Per your grandfather’s instructions, there’s someone who comes to the house twice a week to clean it. Also, the master bedroom has been renovated after he passed.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, Miss Douglas, Eddi thought that you’d want to stay a while, and he wanted to be sure you’re comfortable. All the furniture is new and his personal things were packed and

moved into the attic. It would be great if you'd make time to get through them."

"I..." really didn't feel comfortable doing that. It was like intruding into another person's life. "Sure, I'll do it."

"Ok, then. I'll see you on Monday."

"First thing in the morning, Mr. McFee. I have no time to lose."

"So you keep saying," McFee sighed. "Find Maverick, he will give you a tour of the grounds."

"Find... who?"

"The ranch hand in charge, dear. He's kept the operation going since your grandfather passed. You need him to give you a tour of the grounds."

"Will do. Have a nice evening, Mr. McFee."

"You too, Miss Douglas."

Finding this Maverick man was yet another thing I needed to do tomorrow. The faster I got to learn what I was dealing with here, the better. I wanted to be ready to sell by the time McFee was back in town to finalize the paperwork.

I spent the rest of the afternoon walking around the house to get familiar with the place. There were four bedrooms, plus the master, a library filled with books, something that looked like a leisure room with a pool table and a few other games, and a garage. The master bedroom upstairs was definitely the jewel. Just like Mr. McFee said, everything has been redone and replaced after Eddie passed. The room still smelled like fresh paint and cleaning products and I was grateful for that. Not that the rest of the house wasn't spotless, but I was touched that Grandpa Eddi had thought of me, that he wanted to make sure I'd be comfortable here. It was a nice thing to do for a man that was bedbound for the last month of his life.

The bedroom was definitely designed for a woman now. The bed had a canopy, the furniture was ivory and

buttercream, the walls were covered in a wallpaper with flower patterns, the bathroom was all white marble with a huge bath tub *and* a vanity mirror, and the closet was so spacious, it could actually fit my entire wardrobe. There was also a balcony that was overlooking the back of the house, the heated pool, and the same untamed view of the mountains that could be seen from the living room. Ok, maybe there were some advantages to coming here because I knew that drinking my coffee out there in the morning would be something.

I walked back into the bedroom with Regina on my trail and my eyes fell on the dresser that was placed on the opposite side of the bed. I hadn't noticed it when I came in, but the top was filled with pictures. There were a few with Eddi when he was young and a woman that I assumed was my grandmother. There were pictures of my dad and my aunt growing up, pictures with me from my college graduation and a few others that I've emailed him over the years, and also, the picture in front of the barn, the one that I'd remembered earlier. Back then, the barn was white, not the rusty red it was painted now. I couldn't have been older than three, dressed in a pink baby doll dress with a matching hairband and shiny shoes. And I was smiling really wide, looking behind the camera. I had no idea why, but my guess was that Eddi was the cause. That kid in the picture, she was ecstatic to see her granddad. I guess time and distance made me lose that feeling along the way.

Regina barked, curious about what I was doing and I showed her the framed picture.

"See? Your mama was born a fashion icon." She lost interest when she realized the picture wasn't food, but I lingered a little more, looking at a portrait of Eddi. He was young, maybe the same age my dad was right now, and I realized something I've never seen before. He and I could pass as siblings. He had the same blue eyes, same blonde hair and same nose as mine. My father didn't look anything like Eddi, but I did. I never stopped to wonder where I got my features before today.

Regina barked again. She was in a mood.

“What is it, girl? Hungry?” She gave me an approving growl. “Well, you’re lucky I’ve packed so much food for you. Come on, let’s go downstairs.”

She followed and waited very patiently while I unpacked her bowl and hydrated the kibble with some chicken broth. Regina was a very well-behaved dog and had a very posh diet, eating only organic foods and taking supplements for her joints, coat, and heart. Luckily for her, I never traveled without packing a good supply of dog food.

“Here you go, girl.” I left her to eat in peace and dragged my luggage upstairs to the master. I really needed a shower and a fresh change of clothes. After two days in a car, tonight was my night to stretch and relax. Dad insisted that I should catch a flight instead of driving all the way from his house in D.C, but if there was anything I knew about Montana, it was that it was damn big. I needed my car. Sure, a convertible Mercedes was not exactly an off-road vehicle, but it was better than a rental. Plus, I had too much luggage to take with me on a plane.

After washing myself vigorously, I changed from the pant suit into some jeans, a silk shirt, and a pair of flats I’d just ordered from Chanel. I still wasn’t farm appropriate, but I had nothing more casual than that. The last time I wore a cotton was in middle school.

The only things I had to eat were granola bars, some rice cakes, and a big bag of dehydrated banana slices. That had to be enough for my dinner because I was in no mood to jump back in the car and go shopping. I’ll see to that tomorrow. The good thing was that I had coffee and six bottles of water, so I fixed myself a cup of black gold and called Regina out on the back porch. We were both city mice, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t take advantage of the fresh air.

There was a swing on the back porch and I sat there while my dog started walking around and exploring. It was beautiful out here. The animal barns were to the side of the house, a good distance from where I was, but I could hear

some noises coming from there. It crossed my mind that I should go and check, but Mr. McFee assured me they were taken care of, even if I didn't see anyone else around, and I didn't know anything about livestock anyway. All of this was alien to me.

The sun started to set behind the peaks of the mountains washing the vast fields in gold and I leaned back, relaxing. I could smell the grass and the corn fields, and the pines from the forests up the mountains. I was so used to the smell of gasoline and pollution, I'd never realized how good the world actually smelled. I could have stayed there all night just like that and maybe I would have if Regina wouldn't have decided she was going to go rogue tonight.

Something moving through the grass caught her attention and she wrinkled her nose. Before I realized what was going on, Regina was running clear across the yard, going under the fence and disappearing into the corn field.

Damn it.

"Regina!" I called her but got no response. "Come back, girl! Regina!"

Desperate and worried, I started following the trail she left through the grass, jumped the fence and started making my way through the corn. It was like stepping into a lush maze and for a second, I had no idea where to go. The few paw prints in the dirt were the only things that I had to guide me and no matter how loudly I yelled Regina's name, she never came back. I looked under every leaf, went up and down the field until my skin started to get itchy from rubbing against the corn. Half an hour later and still there wasn't any sign from my dog and I was fully crying.

Fuck, why did I bring her here? Regina didn't have any skills to live on a ranch, she barely liked to go to the park!

I finally made it to the other side of the field, where the stables and a few other buildings were, and wiped my face. I couldn't lose my dog, for fuck's sake!

“Regina! This is not funny! Come here right away.” I took a deep breath. “Regina!” This time the gods have smiled upon me, because from behind the horses’ stables, I’ve heard her bark. “Where are you?”

I rushed to the side of the barn and finally felt relief when I saw her. Too bad she wasn’t alone. There was another dog – a scrappy-looking grey mutt, with one of his ears bitten and his tail chopped off – that was *licking* my baby’s face.

“Hey! Go away. Regina, come here.” I tried calling her, but instead of coming to sit next to my leg, she looked over at me and turned to the stranger dog. “You can’t possibly be enjoying his attention. Time to go, girl.”

I went to pick her up in my arms and when I did, the mutt had the nerve to growl at me. He barked and wiggled what was left of his tale. He wasn’t going to bite me, I didn’t think so, but he wasn’t going to let it go either. I backed down and he started jumping, putting his front paws on me, trying to get to Regina.

“Hey, back off, pal. Go away!” But he didn’t listen, and Regina didn’t help with her happy squeaks and yaps. “Damn it. Where the hell did you even come from?”

The mutt barked at me some more before a sharp whistle rang out from behind me. The other dog settled right away and ran past me to the source of the sound, so I turned too, to see what the hell was going on.

A man – and I mean a *man* – was standing there, leaning into the stables wall like he had no care in the world. The stranger was tall, a few good inches over six feet, with a powerful, muscular body, and bronzed skin. He was wearing a cotton shirt, ripped jeans, aviator glasses, and leather boots – very cowboy meets rock and roll. His hair was dark and short and his face rugged, with a *very* sexy jaw line covered by what looked like two-day beard, a nose slightly crooked to the left, and scars above his upper lip and right brow. Yes, definitely rugged, but definitely handsome too, especially those lips and

his black eyes. They were nothing like I'd seen before, so dark, I couldn't even see the pupil.

"I think you're lost, *little lady*." He said while taking a cigarette out of his pocket and lighting it. His voice was jagged. It reminded me of a smoky single malt whiskey.

"Excuse me?"

"You're not from here." He said like it was supposed to be an explanation. "They don't make 'em like you in this part."

"Like *me*?"

"Pretty." Oh, it was a compliment. "Was Rusty bothering you?"

"He was all over my dog."

"Sorry, he's not used to strangers, but he doesn't bite, so you two are good."

"I'm not the stranger." I told him. "You're the stranger."

"Me?"

"Yes! Who the hell are you and why are you and your wayward dog on my ranch?"

"*Your* ranch?"

"My ranch." I tried to raise my nose up in the air and look down at him, but the man was just impossibly tall.

"Well, you're not old Eddi, so you must be the granddaughter."

Wait, so he knew Eddi?

"That's me, yes. I'm Caroline Douglas and this is my ranch now."

"Congratulations."

"Don't... I still don't know who you are or why you're here."

“Right.” He put the cigarette between his lips and wrapped them around it, before putting the disgusting thing out. “Name is Jax, little lady. Jax Maverick.”

“Maverick?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Wow, he was a rude bastard.

“You’re the guy I was supposed to meet tomorrow to show me around.”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so?” Did no one tell him or what?

“I was old Eddi’s right hand for some time. No one else knows this place better than I do.”

“Ok, then. I’m expecting a full tour tomorrow morning and I have a lot of questions.”

“Can’t in the morning.”

“Excuse me?” I put Regina down and crossed my arms. “I’m pretty sure I’m your boss now.”

“So you want me to meet you first thing in the morning, *boss?*”

Damn straight. “Yes.”

“And who’s going to free the cattle on the grazing corral and feed the horses, *boss?* I don’t know if you’ve heard, but ever since old Eddi passed, it’s just me and Billy Joe left to carry all the chores, *boss.* Sure, I can meet you and let the cows go hungry for a few hours, and maybe they’d have no milk tomorrow night, but I guess it’s your decision, *boss.*”

Oh, he was a dick. He was a handsome, hot dick with a big mouth.

“First of all, take note that your sarcasm is not appreciated. Second, I’m used to managing Fortune 500 companies, not farms, so give me a break. I don’t know how things work around here.”

“You’re right. How could you know? Five years passed since I came and I’ve never seen you set foot here once.”

I felt slapped across the face. Who the hell was he to judge me?

“You’re very close to crossing a line.”

“Sorry, little lady.”

“Stop calling me that!”

His face remained clear and calm. “Little lady?”

“Yes.”

“Why? You look like a lady.” His eyes dragged up and down my body. “And you’re tiny.”

My mouth dropped. I was probably one of the few women to get angry because she was called petite. In my line of work, I needed to be powerful and demand respect. I was working with a lot of men with big bank accounts and even bigger egos. Being *tiny* was a weakness and I had no weaknesses.

“For your information, I’m 5’4 without heels.”

He walked closer and looked down at me to prove his point. “That’s a sad brag.”

“You are very rude, did anyone tell you that?”

“A couple of people.” He shrugged. “Why are you so mad? I still think you’re smokin’ hot.”

“I don’t care what you think!” But my flaming red cheeks were telling a different story. “You know what, Mr. Maverick? I think this conversation is over.” And it would have been if his mutt hadn’t of start rubbing himself against Regina again before they both took off. “Damn it. You need to control that dog. Regina!”

“They’re going to be fine. Dogs run around.”

“Not mine. She’s an apartment dog.”

“So she needs this. Relax. Rusty knows the farm, they’re going to come back when they’re hungry.”

I turned my back to him.

“Regina!”

“Stop yelling, little lady.”

Oh, this was it. “Listen to me, you son of a…” but I was cut off by the sound of a horn coming from the distance. “Who’s that?”

“Pizza.” Oh, man, I was getting tired of his one-word answers.

“Pizza?”

“Yes. I didn’t feel like cookin’.”

“Wait, you can order pizza all the way out here?”

Jax’s eyes looked at me with wicked mockery. “It’s still America down here, not the end of the world.” Instead of answering, I frowned at him. “We’re only five minutes outside of Kalispell. Yes, you can order pizza. You can order a lot of things: coffee, Chinese, barbeque, you can order all of that. You didn’t know?”

“I just arrived here. How would I know?”

“What were you going to eat? The fridge is empty.”

“I have granola bars.” Just then, my body decided to betray me and my stomach growled. I haven’t had any food since breakfast and I ran around for almost an hour trying to find my dog. That would do the trick.

Jax let his head down and released a laugh. “Granola bars?”

“Yes. Very healthy.”

“Right. Come on, we can share my pizza.”

“I don’t need your stupid pizza.”

“You’re hungry and I have food. Stop being stubborn, little lady.”

I wanted to say no out of principle, but my stomach was still growling now that the idea of pizza was thrown around.

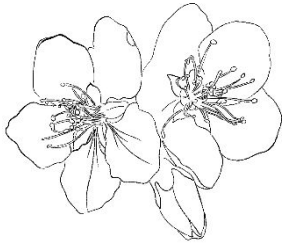
“Is it cheesy?” I asked Jax.

“What?”

“The pizza, is it cheesy?”

“Yes.”

Fuck it. “Fine then.”



Chapter 2

Caroline

Jax not only shared his pizza with me, but he paid too, even when I insisted to go back to the house and grab my wallet. He took me to a place close to the stable, a shed of some sort that was converted to be a small area for the staff. They had a bathroom there, a couch and a few chairs, and kitchen stocked with cold water and what I considered to be a *shit ton* of beer. Right next to that there was a picnic table and that's where we ate.

Apparently, food was the secret to make Jax act less like an ass because while we ate, I asked him about the farm and he was really helpful describing how everything worked. I've also found out that he was in charge of the books and he told me that Eddi managed to bring in quite a profit from selling his cattle and the crops. The farm was doing pretty well and that was a solid selling point to give a potential buyer.

“What do you think about the ranch, little lady?”

“Would you stop calling me that?”

“Fine. What do you think about the place, *Caroline*?”
Oh, that was a mistake. I should have let him stick to little lady because hearing my name said with his husky voice made my arms explode with goosebumps.

“It’s much prettier than I’d expect it to be and it seems the business is good.”

“Business is great.” He said with a cocky tone, obviously proud of the work he did here.

“It could be better.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Obviously, there’s a need for more people, the back-office activity should be technologized to maximize efficiency and cut supplies cost, the crops should get rotated. Things like that.”

To my surprise, Jax smiled. “Nice.”

“What?”

“You nailed it. That was exactly what old Eddi and I were planning before his liver gave up on him.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my job to exploit a business’ potential to the max.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m a performance consultant.”

“That sounds fancy. Where are you from, *Caroline*?”

“Everywhere.”

“That’s a very evasive answer.”

“It’s the truth. I have a condo in D.C close to my parent’s home, but I haven’t been there in almost a year. My job keeps me on the move. I go where the client needs me.” I took a swing at a bottle of cheap beer. “I’ve lived in New York, London, Dubai, Singapore, L.A, Berlin. Everywhere.”

“Impressive. You’re definitely not a farm girl.”

“Nope.”

“Are you one of those boardroom shrews?”

I almost choked on the beer. “What?”

“The type that wears a suit, carries a briefcase, and barks orders all the time.”

He was lucky that I always got a little lazy after eating carbs, otherwise, I might have thrown the beer bottle at his head.

“So you’re one of those man, huh?”

“What type is that, little lady?”

“The type that gets intimidated by powerful women, so he has to call them bitches and shrews.” I watched him with a steel hard glance, but Jax didn’t seem to be fazed at all.

“Oh, powerful women don’t intimidate me.” He leaned in over the table. “They make me horny.”

Son of a bitch. I hated how good his words made me feel. Not that I was *ever* going to admit it. Too bad for him, I knew how to handle men.

“This is the third time you tried to hit on me. When are you going to pick up on the fact that I’m not interested?”

“You say that now.” His smile was brilliant.

“I’ll always say that. And to answer your question, yes, when I have to be a shrew, I am one.”

“You know I meant that as a compliment, right?”

“I can’t possibly see how that would be a compliment.”

“I like my women powerful.”

“Good for you, but I’m not your woman, or your *little lady*, nor will I ever be. This discussion is redundant, so we should get back to talking about the ranch.” *Safe territory.*

“You’re no fun, little lady.”

“No, I’m not.” Never was. Probably never will be. I was sharp, direct, and practical. “You on the other hand seem to know nothing but fun.”

“Life is too short to not live it. Someday you’ll learn that.”

“Oh, how insightful.” How could I not roll my eyes at that cheesy comment; it sounded like something he’d read in a fortune cookie.

I heard barking and turned to see Regina and the mutt coming our way. Rusty went straight to Jax and he was rewarded with a slice of pizza. When Jax got another piece and got ready to throw it to Regina, I stopped him by grabbing his wrist.

“Don’t give her that.”

“Why not?”

“She has a very well balanced semi-raw diet. That’s not good for her.”

“Oh, come on, you can’t be serious.”

“I am.” Dead serious. When Regina was a puppy, I took her to a nutrition specialist for canines. He was very clear with his instructions.

Jax on the other hand, decided he didn’t give a fuck and threw her the pizza anyways. Regina caught it midair.

“Damn it, Maverick!”

“Relax. It’s just some pizza.”

“It’s human food, which she’s not supposed to have *and* she’s already ate tonight.”

“It’s dough and cheese. It’s not going to kill the dog. They can have *human* food.” He mocked my tone.

“Nope. They can’t have chocolate. It’s bad for dogs.” That was a weak argument to hang on to, but I wasn’t above using it.

“Well, lucky for us, this isn’t chocolate.” He shook his head. “She’s pretty. What’s her name again?”

“Regina.”

“It means queen, right?”

“Yes, it does. Her mother was a doggy beauty queen, won a lot of pageants, so the name seemed a good fit.” I pointed to the other dog. “Where did you get Rusty?”

“I didn’t. He showed up one day last year, I gave him some food, and now he refuses to leave.” Figures.

“He’s interesting looking.” I chose to be nice and not call him a walking clump of fur.

“Safe to say, his mother was not a beauty queen, but he’s a good dog. I think he likes Regina.”

My mouth dropped. “He’s fixed, right?”

“Rusty? No.”

“Oh, my God! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You always want to talk about dog balls the first time you meet someone?”

“Yes, if *my* dog is in danger of being humped!” Regina was not sterilized either. There was no need because she rarely got in contact with other dogs and it was always at a doggy park or other places where people were around.

“They’d make some funny looking puppies.”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“Don’t worry, Rusty is a gentleman.”

He surely didn’t look like one and neither did his owner. I think I had plenty to worry about and not all was about the dogs.

The moon was out now and Jax looked even more handsome in the shadows. It added to his mystery. I knew a lot of men. I worked with most, dated some, but I’ve never met anyone like Jax Maverick. He was so incredibly raw, it gave

me shivers. There is some kind of power, something wild, radiating from him. No man in a ten-thousand-dollar suit could measure up to his masculinity and it was fascinating. With that in mind, I decided it was time to go back to the house where I was safe from thoughts about biting his lips and licking his biceps.

“It’s getting late,” I told him and went to pick up Regina, “we should get back.”

“Yeah, you should.” Something told me that he left some words unsaid.

“I guess I’ll see you around, Jax.”

“You can take that to the bank.”

“Goodnight then.”

“Wait, no kiss?”

I stopped in my tracks. “Pardon?”

“We had dinner under the moonlight. Usually that ends up with a kiss.”

“Ha, very funny!” But he looked dead serious. “It takes more than pizza to charm me, Maverick.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Do you know your way back?”

“Umm, not really. I kinda came straight through the corn field.”

Hearing that made him laugh again. Damn, it was such a delicious sound.

“Take the path that way and make a right. You’ll see the house in a few minutes. If you get lost, just holler and I’ll come rescue you.”

“Aren’t you going home?”

“I’m the ranch hand.”

“So? You don’t sleep?”

“I mean, I live in the ranch hand’s house. It’s half a mile down the main road.”

“Oh.” He was living here? At the farm? Great fucking news. “Ok, then. Thank you for the food. I owe you one.”

“No, you don’t. Go, little lady. Get some beauty sleep.”

I didn’t bother to tell him I had a name, it was obvious Jax was doing this to piss me off and I didn’t want to give him any more satisfaction. I just left and luckily, I didn’t get lost and made it back to the house with no problem.

The squashing silence around me was surprising and a little scary. I was used with the sound of traffic and buzzing cities, but not here. Here, there were only crickets and howling owls, and no human around for miles except from the handsome and annoying ranch hand that said loud and clear that I made him *horny*. For the sake of my peace, I decided to strongly believe Jax was a nice guy and not some creep that was going to try and climb through my window in the middle of the night.

Regina and I made it inside safely and it took me almost twenty minutes to figure out how the alarm system works, despite the instructions that were written down on a piece of paper. It was an older model, another thing that could have been improved around here. One of the few, I had to admit. Between Jax and Grandpa Eddi, the ranch really did great. I still had to check the books myself to make sure, but from what I’ve learned, the place wasn’t only self-sufficient, but brought money in the house, supported quite a few businesses in the local community with its produce, and created a lot of seasonal jobs for the locals. I made a mental note to make sure the next owner would continue in that tradition.

Upstairs, I placed Regina’s bed next to mine and let her get comfortable while I washed my hands and changed into my favorite satin pajamas. Getting ready for a good sleep, I put on some moisturizer and eye cream, and found my sleeping mask before slipping under the covers. The bed was very comfortable and I expected to fall asleep right away, but

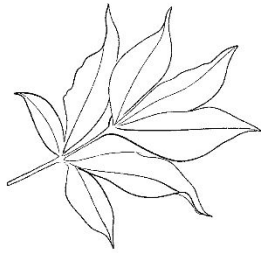
it didn't happen. No, instead of carrying me into some dream, my brain decided it was a good moment to replay my meeting with Jax Maverick, from the way I found him leaning against the stable, to his cocky grin and intrusive eyes. More than once I caught him looking at my breasts or looking at me like *I* was the meal.

It made me angry that a man I didn't know, I had nothing in common with, and wasn't even sure I liked, was making my mouth go dry and my nipples tighten. I praised myself for my impeccable self-control and here I was, all restless because of a *ranch hand*. A ranch hand from fucking Montana. I had to remind myself that I was here to close a deal, nothing more. Eddi left me this place and I had to make sure it had an owner by the time I had to leave it behind for good. No distraction was acceptable – not even one that looked like he'd be a beast in the sheets.

I had no interest in getting involved with any man, anyway. It's only been nine months since I kicked Sam to the curb and told him to stick his ring proposal up his ass. Don't get me wrong, I was healed. I healed right after I saw him packing his bags and leaving, but men were trouble and I just didn't need the complication. Flirting with Jax, sure, that could be a lot of fun – something to keep me entertained while I was out here – but I had to get a grip and not wet my panties every time I hear him chuckle.

Suddenly, I was not sleepy anymore, but angry. I was angry at Jax for showing up all dandy and dapper, I was angry at myself for reacting so strongly to him, and I was angry because I had no idea in what bag my vibrator was and I really needed it right now.

Damn you, Montana! What are you doing to me?



Chapter 3

Jax

For the first time since I got the job at the Douglas farm, I woke up with a hard on for the *boss*. I was with Eddi when he was in that hospital and he'd told me about his granddaughter. He used words like smart, sturdy, practical, and capable. No one said anything about a sexy blonde with big tits and an ass that was just begging for me to slap it. No one said anything about a witty mind and sharp tongue. No one said anything about a woman like her.

All night, all I saw was the way her long legs were filling those damn designer jeans. She was a Barbie doll with a powdered nose, and nerve, and I loved everything about that. I tossed and turned in the bed thinking about how she'd look when all that city shine would go, and I could ride her freely, make her scream my name.

Caroline Douglas was a spoilt woman in fancy shoes, nothing like her grandfather. She liked her designer jeans tight around her ass and her blond hair blown out. The few times in this life I've ran into people like her, they've always brought trouble, so why would this be any different? Because she was Eddi's granddaughter? That didn't mean anything. The girl didn't come once to see her old man, and I've only known him to go see some family back East once in all my time here.

They were related, I could see his eyes looking at me through hers, but that didn't mean much.

Granddaddy left her a ranch and now Caroline Douglas was in my damn back yard, looking down on everything, like she was too good to be here. It was fucking irritating. Eddi had loved this place with his whole heart; the least Caroline could do was respect it.

She was an infuriating woman with her superior attitude, but it didn't stop me from wanting her. Not that it fucking mattered. I was not the man for her. No matter how much I wanted to rip her clothes off and bury myself inside her, she made it pretty clear last night her legs were not opening for me, and maybe it was for the best. I liked my women to not be afraid to get dirty, and Caroline was surely *not* like that. She was more trouble than she was worth and that was that.

Pushing the thoughts about her to the back of my head, I found some clothes, put them on, and gulped down a cup of coffee before leaving the house. It was already six and the animals would start getting fidgety soon. I jumped in my pickup truck and drove to the horses stables first, to get Virgil ready for the day. He was one sturdy horse that Eddi got a few years ago. Because the old man had a bad hip, I was the only one who ever got to ride Virgil and he was a damn beast while galloping. The moment he saw me entering his box, the stallion came close.

“Morning, boy. It's time to get to work.” Nowadays I could put the saddle on him with no fuss, but it wasn't always the case. He used to be much wilder the first time they brought him here.

When we were both ready, I made my way to the biggest barn, the one that hosted all the cattle and opened the doors. The cows were always good in the morning, but we also had two bulls that liked to stray, so I jumped on Virgil's back and guided the herd to their grazing area. When the cattle were secure, I padlocked the gate and checked it twice. I'd learned my lesson after last year when I forgot to put the lock on and

had to hunt down the cows for a week and gather them from the woods.

Mornings were a good time to be at the ranch. There was a lot of work, feeding, filling the water reservoirs, and all that shit, but also when everything was done, I had to ride alongside the fence and check the grounds, make sure everything was right. The sun, the mountains, the chilly fresh air, the smell of the grass, Virgil's powerful hooves making the ground shake, all made me feel alive. I made a full tour of the property before riding towards the house.

I spotted Caroline right away. She was on the balcony of the master bedroom, wrapped in a pale pink scrap of satin that showed her killer legs.

“Good morning, little lady.”

She flinched and looked down to find where my voice was coming from, so I took off my hat and waved it towards her. Damn beautiful woman, she looked like an angel with the sun falling on her skin.

“It's six in the goddamn morning, Maverick. Why all the noise?”

“It's almost seven. Life on the farm starts early.” This was no 9 to 5.

“I can see.”

“Get dressed already. We have things to do.”

“*We?*”

“You want to learn things about the ranch, right? Come and I'll show you.”

“Fine, give me a few minutes.”

A *few* minutes turned into an hour. For some reason, Caroline thought we had time to wait around on these parts. When she walked out of the house, her hair was styled and she had make-up on. The little lady was dressed to impress and trust me, I was fucking impressed. She had white shorts on and

a lacey top that barely covered her full breasts and I was grateful for that. There was no harm in looking. She had sunglasses on a scarf around her neck, but that wasn't all. Regina, who sat very elegantly next to Caroline, had a matching scarf.

"You had me wait for you to get pretty and dress the dog?"

"Style is the only constant in life, Maverick."

"You won't need it where we're going."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I have to clean the stables. I thought it would be a good time for you to meet the horses." I pulled at Virgil's harness and he trapped closer to Caroline, making her step back. "Don't worry. He's a gentle boy."

"Yeah, umm, I'm not exactly a horse person."

"What?"

"I've never seen one up close."

"You're joking?" I asked, but she definitely wasn't. She was looking at Virgil like she just landed from Mars. "Well, little lady, you're about to ride one. Come on, get in the saddle."

Caroline looked at me for a second before bursting out laughing.

"That's not going to happen."

"I don't have any more time to wait around for you, Caroline. Jump in the saddle."

"I can't..."

Oh, fuck it! I jumped down and before she could talk my ear off anymore, I grabbed her by the hips and threw her on the back of the horse. Damn it to hell, she fit in my hands like she was made to be there. When I got back up, she had no

option but to put her legs around me and mold her body to mine.

“Look at that, little lady. Somehow, I’ve made it between your thighs.”

“Don’t be a dick about it.”

“Hold on tight, Caroline. Virgil is a fast one.”

“Wait, we can’t go. What about Regina?”

“She’ll follow.”

“No, I have to pick her up.”

I whistled and Regina pointed her attention to me. “See? She still knows how to dog even if you kept her in bubble wrap. Now hold on to me.”

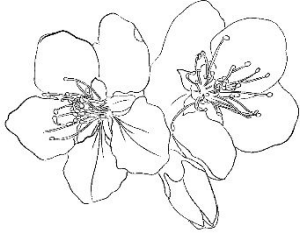
I gave Virgil the signal and he started galloping through the short grass. Caroline let out a sharp, short scream and clung to me like ivy to an old building. I might have enjoyed that a tad too much. Her breasts were pressed on my back and her body was rubbing on me, making me forget she was just a princess with her head in the clouds. When she was this close and her hands were traveling on my chest, she was just a woman, a damn fine one.

“Feeling good back there, Caroline?”

“No!”

“Oh, really? Because I could ride with you wrapped around me all the way to Canada.”

Her angry puffs made the ride even more enjoyable. Pushing her buttons was going to be much more fun than I anticipated.



Chapter 4

Caroline

He hated me. The pizza was just an act to give me a sense of security, only to try and kill me today. Why else would he have thrown me on the back of this beastly creature that was big enough to eat me and started flying across the yard like we were chased by daemons? Answer: *to break my neck, because he hates me.*

I wished to hate him back, but I was too preoccupied anchoring my body to his in any way I could. When I sobbed and he handled the horse to go even faster, I knew he was doing it in purpose. *Asshole.*

Everywhere I was touching, all I could feel was muscle. Jax didn't quite have the definition of a body builder, but he was rock-hard and I knew he got all that fiber working in the field, not lifting weights in the gym. He had a six pack and his legs were strong like they were made out of cement. I had to focus on the fear of falling off the saddle so I won't enjoy touching him too much. I sent out a thank you to the universe when the stables came into view and we finally stopped.

“How are you back there, little lady?”

“Just fine.” I lied, even if my legs felt like jelly.

Jax was the first to get down and then he helped me to return to the ground too. He looked the same today as he did yesterday – jeans, shirt, boots; hotness. I was surprised to – *once again* – find his looks and roughness doing something funny to me and I had no explanation for it. He was a crass mountain man with no sense of self. No refinement. No class. No prospects beyond this ranch. I doubted he ever wore a suit or saw the inside of a barbershop. Bottom line was, he was not the kind of man I was attracted to so why was I so turned on by the sight of him.

Something about Jax Maverick was so untamed, so utterly primordial, it was impossible for me not to notice. He belonged to this land, to the mountains behind us, and for someone like I, that was the oddest, most scary and challenging thing. As it turns out, I was one to get off on scary and challenging.

“What now, Maverick?”

“Now we go inside so you can see the horses.”

“Oh, wait. Where’s my dog?”

“Right there.” He pointed to a tree that Regina was sitting under. “I told you she’d catch up.”

“She must be incredibly thirsty.”

“Rusty’s water bowl is right here. If she’s thirsty, she’ll drink.”

“But...”

“Stop being so overprotective. She’s a big girl. Now let’s go and meet some horses.”

He grabbed Virgil’s harness and made him walk by our side. The smell was not pungent, but wasn’t pleasant either. This barn was much cleaner and more organized than the one

close to the house, though, aside from the rye straws that were covering the entire floor.

“You already know Virgil.” Jax said while guiding the horse into his stall. “He is the most powerful horse in this part of the state and I’m the only one that rides him.”

“Why?”

“He was a little restless when we got him and Eddi was too old to deal with him. Your grandfather preferred Buck over here.” He pointed to the next stall where a grey horse was waiting with his head over the gate. “Buck is a few years older, but he still has some spark in him.”

“He was Grandpa’s horse?”

“Well, they’re all Eddi’s horses, but Buck was his favorite to ride.”

Jax raised his hand and the animal let his head down gently, waiting to be touched.

“Buck seems much calmer than Virgil.” I said.

“Virgil is young, he has more energy, that’s all. You don’t have to be afraid, Caroline.” He must have seen the curiosity in my eyes. “You can touch him, come here.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Think of Buck like he’s just a big, fat dog. Pet him.”

When I moved closer, the horse made a gruff sound and I almost stepped aside, but Jax’s arm stopped me. I did what he said and pet Buck’s big head and to my surprise, he leaned in gently.

“Oh, he’s so nice.” I whispered, amazed by how something so big could be so soft.

“I told you, didn’t I?”

“Grandpa must have loved him.”

“He did.”

“Do you think I could, umm, ride him?”

“Sure, I can teach you, but I had something else in mind for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Wait here.”

He went to the back and from the boxes I heard excited neigh sounds. More horses. When Jax came back, he was followed by a pair, one as black as a raven, the other white as snow.

“I thought this was a cattle and corn farm. How many stallions are here?”

“Just Buck and Virgil. These two are mares.”

“Oh.”

“The black one is named sunshine. See how round her belly is?”

“Yes. Oh, is she expecting?”

“Should happen next month.” I wasn’t sure if that was something I wanted to be around to witness. “The other one is called Dove.”

“She’s as white as one.”

“Yeah. You can ride Buck if you want, but Dove is the one for you.”

What? Did he talk to horses now?

“How can you know that?”

“I know because old Eddi bought her for you when she was a colt.”

I looked at Jax in disbelief. I’ve never heard of anything like that in any of Eddi’s letters. He would have mentioned something about buying me a horse, right?

“That can’t be right.”

“But it is.”

“Why would Eddi buy me a horse? I don’t know how to ride one and I haven’t been here in more than twenty years.”

Jax shrugged and placed a hand on Dove’s thick neck. She was beautiful indeed.

“Maybe he had hope that you’d return.” His words were not meant to be hostile, but that was exactly how they felt. No one had any right to judge my relationship with Eddi, let alone the ranch hand that was clueless about the history of our family.

“I...”

“You’re here now, Caroline. You can still ride her.”

“It’s too late for me to learn.”

“No, it’s not. I’ll teach you tomorrow.” He let the mares go and they returned to their boxes.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Today you get to watch me clean manure. Isn’t that something?”

“You’re going to...” he picked up a shovel, moved Virgil to an empty box and walked in. “You’re doing this on your own?”

“When Eddi was admitted to the hospital, I had to let most of the people go. It was easier to manage things like this.”

“You said something about another ranch hand yesterday.”

“Billy Joe. He’s in town now to pick up some guys. He needs a few extra hands to move the old corn into the feeding barn.”

“Huh?”

“In a few weeks, the new crops will be ready and we store that in the selling barn. The feeding barn is the reserve for the cattle.”

“I see. So you’re on your own here?”

“That’s unless you want to help?” My mouth opened but no words came out and that made Jax laugh. “I’m just kidding, little lady. You can’t handle a shovel.”

He didn’t just say *I can’t*.

“What was that, Maverick?”

“What? It requires muscle and a hard stomach and you don’t have either.”

There was nothing that I couldn’t do. I didn’t build a life like the one I had without being resourceful and adaptable. It was time to shut Jax’s mouth once and for all.

“Give me that shovel.”

“I ain’t giving you my shovel. There’s another one out there. Find it.”

Damn him, he really didn’t think I could do this.

Determined to prove a point, I went looking for that shovel and found it. How hard could it be to clean a floor? I’ve managed multi-million dollar mergers; this was a piece of cake.

When I returned to the horse box, Jax was scraping the floor, so I tried to mimic his posture and do what he was doing. I put the shovel down and pushed, but the dirt didn’t move. He made it look much easier than it was.

“Caroline, come on, get out of here.”

“Nope.”

“I was really just making a joke.”

“You obviously think I’m incapable of doing a job, but incapable is not a word that I associate with myself. If you need help, then I’m here to help.”

“I don’t need help.”

When I saw him smiling down on me, it only made me angry.

“Too bad. I’m helping you.”

“You’re one stubborn woman.”

“I’ve been told.”

“Hey, let me ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Are your shoes expensive?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because they’re covered in horse shit.”

I looked down to see that indeed my suede loafers were smeared with manure. Fuck! I did not pack for this! Not that I had anything close to being appropriate for scraping shit off the floor.

“Damn it.”

“Ok, enough.” Jax came to me and picked me up again, making me sit on the stall gate. “You made your point. Now sit here and let me work. I have to earn my living.”

“Why did you bring me here, Jax?”

He picked up the shovel and went back to cleaning. “Eddi’s office is here, the room out back. You can look at the books if you want.”

“Oh, that’d be great.”

“I thought so. You’re good with numbers, aren’t you Caroline?”

“Yes.” My job was to make a business work from the top down. Most of the time that meant managing immature CEOs with big egos and too much privilege. Handling numbers was infinitely easier than handling people and I was good at both.

Jax nodded and then shoveled some more dirt. I sat there silent, taking the opportunity to look at him. Every time he lunged, his muscles flexed, stretching his clothes. Somehow, he made gathering horse shit look sexy.

A man's man; that was what Jax Maverick was. All rough around the edges, handy, strong, too outspoken to be pleasant. I couldn't read him, which was a pain in the ass. I just didn't know what he was thinking behind those jaded black eyes. Whatever lurked inside him was inexplicably magnetic.

"What did you think about Dove?" He asked me and I blinked, hoping he didn't see me gawking at him.

"She's a beautiful horse, but I'm not sure why Grandpa would buy a horse for me."

"Did you like riding on the back of Virgil?"

"No. Do you know how easy it is to die if you fall down at that speed?"

He came closer, placing his arms at my sides.

"I fell down tens of times and I'm still here."

"You must have hit your head at some point if you think I'm going to be so reckless."

"You said you want to ride Buck."

"Because he was my Grandpa's horse and I meant take a stroll for five minutes, nothing more."

"Are you scared, Caroline?"

He was trying to bait me, I could see it. Two could play this game.

Sliding off the gate and onto my feet, I got as close as I could to him without touching his body and looked up with as much innocence as I was able to channel.

"You keep riding your horses, Jax. I'm just better at riding men."

I saw the exact moment the words registered in his brain. His body tensed, his nostrils flared, and his eyes started burning up. I got him where I wanted, but it backfired. The intensity on his face collapsed over me and made my nipples

pucker. My legs made a step closer against what my brain was trying to communicate and my breasts touched his chest.

Jax didn't lose any moment to react and grabbed my hips in his bear paws, slightly squeezing. There was attraction on both sides. There was also restraint on both sides. Neither of us moved any further, it didn't matter how acute the fire in my gut started burning, or how many times his eyes fell on my lips. We just stood there, staring at each other in the middle of a half-cleaned stall, unable to move further, but also not willing to back down. The stare down might have lasted forever if someone hadn't have called his name.

"Yo, Jax!"

"In here, Billy." He walked out and dragged me along with him. "What's up?"

Billy Joe was a middle age man the size of a grizzly. He was dressed in overalls with a cap covering his head. When he saw I was there, he pointed at me with a smile on his face.

"You have a girl in here! Don't let yourself be fooled by his pretty face, Miss. Make him take you out before he takes you for a roll in the hay."

"Thanks for the advice, Mr. Billy Joe, but that's not why I'm here."

Jax stepped in between us. "This is Caroline Douglas. She's old Eddi's granddaughter."

"Ah, the smart one. You went to that fancy school a few years ago."

"Cornell." I clarified. "Did my grandfather talk about me that much?"

"All the time." Billy Joe took his cap off and scratched his head. "He was pretty proud of you, Miss Douglas."

"Just call me Caroline, please."

"Yes, ma'am. Caroline." He gave me his hand and I shook it. "It's good to finally meet you. Hope you're having a

fine time here at the Douglas ranch.”

“I’m still learning about the place. In fact, Jax was about to take me to Eddi’s office.”

“Ok, then, I’ll leave you to it. Should I give you my reports from now on, Caroline?”

“Reports?”

“About the farm.”

“Oh.” Hell no. “I’m sure you and Jax know more about how things are supposed to work around here than I do. If there’s something I need to know, I’ll come ask.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll go back to work. The guys are waiting for me.”

He said goodbye and Jax and I were alone again.

“He seems like a very nice man.”

“Billy? Yeah, he’s alright. Good worker.”

“The lawyer told me the salaries were secured by Eddi for the next year, but what about the daily workers? The expenses?”

“He left a fund. All the paperwork is in the office. Wanna check it out?”

“Sure, lead the way.”

He showed me to a room in the back of the stables that was separated through a metallic door.

“It’s right behind it. It’s a little messy, though. I didn’t move anything since Eddi was admitted into the hospital.”

I crossed my arms and gave him a look. “Not much of a cleaner, are you?”

Jax just looked at the door and shrugged. “I think I just hoped he’d get back eventually.” But he didn’t. Eddi passed away in a hospital bed in Billings when his liver failed. “I’m gonna go back to my job. Holler if you need me.”

“Ok.”

I waited for Jax to leave before sliding the door open. It was heavier than I expected and I had to tug at it with both my arms to make it budge. When I stepped in, I almost expected grandpa to wait for me in the corner. The office room had Eddi written all over it, or at least, it reminded me of the few times I'd seen him. It was scattered, but not messy. Even if there were notebooks, folders, and post it notes everywhere, something told me that Eddi would have known where everything was at all times. He had a system for everything, just like my dad.

There was a big, brown, worn-out leather chair behind the desk and a white and blue checkered shirt was hanging on the back of it. The last time Eddi came to see me, six or seven years ago, he was wearing a blue shirt. He'd told me it was his color, that it matched his eyes. For some reason, seeing that piece of material hanging there, made my chest tighten. I never considered Eddi and I to be close, but a weird nostalgia has settled inside me.

Gulping to break the knot that formed in my throat, I went to sit in the chair. It was too big for me, so big in fact, I could sleep on it, but Eddi was a big guy. I looked at the signs of arm rests and touched the scratches on the desk. This is where he spent most of his time, or so I suspected. Work ethic was a Douglas must, even if Eddi decided he didn't want to live his life in a board room anymore. I could easily imagine my grandpa sitting here for hours on end, double checking his documents – standard Douglas practice – and barking orders at Jax.

It must have been terribly lonely. I valued my time alone, mostly because my life was so busy and filled with people, but being all alone, here in Montana, seemed too much to bear. Eddi didn't have a choice because my father had sworn he'd never set foot on this ranch and I... well, I was too busy building my career to care too much about it.

To take my mind away from all those sad and mixed feelings, I pulled out all the documents from the drawers and started roaming through them. The archive was in contrast with the room, being kept in perfect order. It was obvious that just by the way he kept track of everything, that Grandpa Eddi had a good head for business, but that wasn't a surprise. Quite a few people in D.C were still raving about how successful he was back in the day. Eddi opened his construction business when he was twenty-six and turned it into a small empire, only to retire early and move out here after my grandmother died. That happened before I was born, but I knew the stories. It was impossible not to. My father had never stopped complaining about it.

Going through the books was a meticulous, jaded job, but it was something I could do in my sleep. Jax was right, the ranch was turning in a nice profit and everything was fine down to the dot. I was almost done when I saw there was another folder in the drawer, with a post it on it. The message simply said '*Jax, give this to Caroline*'. Seeing my name made my heart beat faster.

I opened the folder and found the registry for the expenses fund and a few other instructions that would make the ranch run smoothly for a few months without Eddi being here. There was also a letter addressed to me and I recognized Eddi's handwriting on the envelope.

I opened the letter with a trembling hand.

Dear Caroline,

If you see this, I want to start by saying thank you. Thank you for coming to look after my home. I know this is the last thing you'd want, but there's no one else I would trust to get my affairs in order.

I built this ranch with my own hands thirty years ago. Nail by nail, brick by brick, I put a home together. I had dreams of filling it with love and laughter, but with my dear Nancy and our daughter Patricia gone, it was just impossible. I'm sorry to say, that in the past decades, you were the only good thing that happened to the Douglas family.

This letter is going to wait for you, probably in my desk drawer, so if you got it, it means you're on the land and I've found my peace. In my last weeks, I've tried my best to make this easier for you. I know, dear Caroline, that you're not a country girl, but you have the sharpest mind I've ever known. I'm sure that you can do whatever you have the will to, including running a farm – that's if you want to, of course. The papers in this envelope have details about our day-to-day activity. I didn't want you to worry about money, so I've set up this expenses account that will cover the ranch for a while. I'd do more to help you if I could, dear Caroline, but I'm afraid that's not possible.

Did you meet Jax yet, my lead ranch hand? He's a fine man, that one. Don't hesitate to go to him for anything you need. Jax knows this place almost as well as I do. Be warned, my girl, he can be a pain in the ass, but he's loyal, honest, and he works hard. He works until his shirt is drenched in sweat and his hands are bloody. Do me a favor – when the harvest starts, make sure he doesn't kill himself. When he first started here, I had to drive him to the E.R because the menace stayed in the field for two days with no food and no sleep. I already know he's going to take care of you, so maybe, once in a while, you could take care of him.

Lastly, dear Caroline, I want to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry for leaving all of this to you even if I know it's not what you wish for, but in this last moment of a very long life, you're all I have left. I know I should have come to see you more often when I still could, I should have said more, I should have fought harder, but I'm just one of God's men, and I made mistakes. This farm I have is as much my heart as you are. Leaving it to you is my last apology.

Whatever you decide to do with the ranch, the house, and the land underneath, I'll be happy with it. I trust your judgment. You're a Douglas, after all, the finest one of this bloodline. If you leave or if you stay it's up to you, but if you do decide to hand it to someone else, promise me something. Promise me that once in a while, you'll think back to this place and you'll remember its beauty. Once in a while, look back to see the mighty mountains and open sky. Trust me, dear Caroline, they're good for the soul.

I won't bore you with an old man's words anymore. Go, explore, take a walk barefoot in the grass, breath in the fresh air. Go and see the land, it all belongs to you now.

*Always watching over you,
Grandpa Eddi.*

By the time I got at the end of the page, my vision was blurry. Eddi's voice was ringing in my ears. The words on the page were so... *him*. He was spirited and wise, but in a light way, and he always spoke about me like I was... important... like I was some kind of gift to him. It never made sense to me why. I did nothing to make his life better. Sometimes, I'd go months at the time without even thinking about him or his farm in the middle of nowhere. Only now I was realizing that with Eddi gone, no one will speak about me like that ever again. No one will speak about this land like it was something magical.

And *Jax*. God, why did he ask me to look over him? Was there no one else? A friend, a brother? A girlfriend? I was failing on the job anyways since he was the one who fed me pizza and didn't let me go to sleep hungry the other night.

Like he had heard my thoughts about him, Jax had appeared in the doorway.

"Caroline."

His grave voice made me jump.

“Ah, you scared me.” Jax stayed silent, looking at my eyes and the way they were rimmed by a few tears, so I rushed to wipe them away. “He, umm, wrote me a letter.”

“Oh.” Seeing the few feelings I had out in the open obviously made him uncomfortable. “Was it bad?”

“No, not really. He mentioned you.”

“In the letter?”

“Yes. He was worried that you might work to exhaustion once the harvest starts.”

“Don’t listen to a word he says. That only happened once.”

“I think once is enough. Were you two close?”

“I guess. Eddi was a good man, he gave me a job and a home when I had nothing.” He cleared his throat, quickly realizing this was more than he wanted to share. “Anyway, I came to check on you. You’ve been hiding in here for hours.”

“Hours?”

“It’s almost four, Caroline.”

“Have I been in here all day?”

“Yes. You owe me one, you know?”

“And why is that?”

“I fed Regina. Don’t worry, it was food for dogs. I also gave her a bath.”

“You... what?”

“Ok, a bath is too big of a word. Her and Rusty were getting a little hot, so I sprayed them down with the hose.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope.”

“Did you comb her? Did you put any conditioner on her fur? Did you use a blow-dryer?”

“She dried in the sun. It was just some water.”

“Oh, my God! She probably looks like a bird’s nest.”

“I won’t lie to you, she’s a little puffy. How about instead of worrying about your dog getting a little wet, you go and grab some food. You haven’t had a bite all day.”

He was right.

“I guess I’ve lost track of time.”

“Yeah,” he puffed, “and old Eddi thinks I’ll be the one to work myself to death. You double checked the paperwork, didn’t you?”

“H-how do you know that?”

“That’s what he used to do every damn time. Every piece of paper, he had to read at least twice.”

“It’s the Douglas way.”

“So I’ve heard. Go eat, little lady.”

“Umm, do you think I can get the number of that pizza place?” It wasn’t the best food, but it was my best option.

“Still have no food in the fridge?”

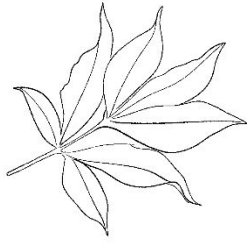
“I’ve been here all day, Maverick.”

“Right.” I’d love to wipe that smile off his face. “I’ll call the order. Meet me at the picnic table in thirty.”

What?

“That was not an invitation, Jax!” But he ignored me.

It looked like I had company for dinner. Again.



Chapter 5

Jax

“Hey, Jax!” Billy Joe called my name from the entry of the cattle stable. “I’ve counted them again. There’s one missing.”

“Damn it.”

“It’s getting late, boy.”

I checked my watch. It wasn’t even five yet, but we started working at four in the morning to avoid the heat, so yeah, we did a full day’s work. Billy Joe and the two guys he brought today deserved a break.

“Go home, Billy. I’m going to look for the cow.”

“A calf.”

“What?”

“A calf is missing. It probably wandered into the woods when we were bringing them back.”

“The back fence is not mended yet?”

“Not entirely. The boys have worked hard, but it’s a big fucking fence.”

“Right. Go then, I’ll find that wandering calf.”

“I’ll be on my way then. Take it easy over the weekend, kid. Get some rest.”

“I make no promises.”

Billy put his hands on his belly and laughed hard enough to shake the ground. “You’re going to need your energy, Jax. We have to transport thirty-five cows to that farm in Missoula. That’s a few days on the road.”

“I know that. When are we leaving?”

“Thursday, first thing in the morning. There’s not much to do until then.”

“Go home, Billy boy. It’s Friday evening, take your wife somewhere nice.”

“Will do. What about you? Are you hitting town tonight?”

“Nah, man. I’ll just go home.”

“You’re not swinging by Phil’s bar?”

“Maybe tomorrow.” *But probably not.*

“That would be the first time you spent your Friday alone and not cuddled with a woman and a beer. There must be about six very fine-looking ladies sulking by the bar ‘cuz you’re not there.”

“I’m tired, Billy.”

My eyes shifted towards the big house and he caught onto that right away.

“Ah, you’ve got the hots for the lady boss.”

I didn’t know anything about *hots* but I had an erection for her from dusk to dawn. Not that I had any intention to talk it out with Billy. “Don’t talk bullshit, man.”

“She’s a fine one, just like her grandfather, but much prettier.”

“She’s a spoilt city woman *and* a pain in my ass.” Both true.

“Right. Grow some balls and ask her out, will you? While you two are still young.”

“Get the hell out of here, old man. I have a calf to find.”

I left him behind and went to saddle Virgil.

Billy wanted me to ask Caroline out. That was a stupid idea if I’ve ever heard one. Where would I even take her? To Phil’s place down in Kalispell? To the country club? Caroline probably liked Michelin star *foie gras* and bullshit like that, not smoked barbeque. We’ve ate together twice now. I’ve seen the way her nose crinkled every time she takes a gulp of beer. She’s a champagne kind of woman and I’m fine with my Corona.

I had no business sniffing around a classy woman like her. Sure, she probably needed a good fuck and I could provide that, but something told me she was not the woman to just leave it at that. She was delicate, sophisticated and communicative. In one word – *trouble*. Trouble for me, because I wasn’t looking to vomit my heart out just to get lucky. I was down with being friends, she was cool to talk to, always looking for a fight, always trying to have the last word. It was entertaining.

The other day when she made that comment about riding men? Maybe it was fun for her but I almost came in my damn pants. She was feisty. Caroline Douglas had some fire in her, but she was a flower no less. In my mind I knew damn well that she was not the type of woman I need – the type that wanted to have fun and nothing more. The few times I’ve got myself in any sort of relationship it turned to shit, so I’ve learned my lesson.

I can’t even tell why I was scattering my brain about this when Caroline wouldn’t touch me with a stick. My beat-up

face with a broken nose wasn't pretty to look at. My hands were all blistered from working in the field all day. A woman that smelled like roses and had skin soft like silk had no place in my bed. She knew it. I knew it...

My dick didn't. The damn thing won't stay put. Every time I caught a glimpse of her, or the thought of how close we stood in that fucking stable crossed my mind, I'd turn hard as stone. Every single damn time she walked her little dog in those short skirts, she made it uncomfortable for me to walk. I've never wanted anyone so fucking fiercely. Even now when I was on the back of my horse riding through the woods, the place that always made me feel calm and carefree, I was too busy wanting her.

That damn calf was not anywhere to be found. At least like that I could focus on bringing it back to the barn instead of how good Caroline's tits looked yesterday in that strapless top.

"Fancy meeting you here." I heard from behind me and for a second I thought it was just in my mind. That I'd somehow thought about Caroline so intensely, I was hearing her voice, but when I turned Virgil around, there she was.

She was wearing yoga pants and running sneakers. Still not good enough for roaming through the woods, but better than those heels I'd seen her in before. Regina was on a leash, with her nose up in the air.

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't have a gym. I have to get my exercise somehow. Are you always on the back of the horse?"

"Pretty much. You shouldn't come here all by yourself. It's too easy to get lost."

"I have a phone that has GPS. I'm fine. What are *you* doing here?"

"A calf got lost. I was looking for it, but I'm not having much luck."

"Oh, poor thing. What happens if you don't find it?"

“Sometimes they come back.”

“And other times?”

“Let’s just say that some aren’t so lucky.” Usually, we’d find the carcass at some point in time.

Caroline pushed her sandy blonde hair out of her face. She looked like she had just stepped out of a beauty salon, like every time I’ve seen her.

“I’ll help you look.”

“Don’t worry about it, little lady.”

“Four eyes are better than two.” That was a good point.

“Fine, we’ll ride Virgil together.”

“Oh, no. I’m not letting Regina free in the woods, no matter what you say.”

“Fine, you can hold her in your arms.”

“Umm, how will *that* work?”

“You scoop your arms.” I told her sarcastically. “Just pretend she’s a baby.”

“Funny. I mean, how am I going to hold her if I have to hold on to you.”

“You’re going to ride in the front. Come on, pick her up and come here.”

She did as I said and as soon as she was close enough, I put my hands on her ass and pushed her into the saddle. It was so fast, she couldn’t react until it was done.

“A little warning would have been nice.”

“Now where would be the fun if I’d tell you every time I grab your ass?” Maybe there were a few other ways to help her up, but why waste an opportunity?

“Ready?”

“Promise me you won’t make him run. I can’t hold on without letting go of Regina.”

I laughed, but then I felt her legs shaking.

“Hey, don’t worry. I won’t let you get hurt, baby.” I didn’t mean to call her that, but it slipped out.

“Ok then, let’s go.”

We rode in silence, Regina being the only one to make noises while Caroline did her best to look around in hopes of finding that calf. I on the other hand had to move every five seconds so she wouldn’t feel my erection pressing on her back. That’s how we spent a good part of an hour. I was ready to give up when Regina started to bark and sniff.

“What is it, baby girl?” Regina barked again and I looked into the direction where she was pointing her nose.

“There.” I showed Caroline. “Good girl. She found the calf.”

The white and brown calf was roaming some leaves from a tree, like she had no care in the world.

“That’s our cow?” Caroline asked when I helped her back to the ground.

“Yeah.”

“She’s so tiny.” When she let Regina down, the dog went on to sniff the other animal. “Would she run if I touch her?”

“No, you can go ahead.”

I didn’t have to ask to know this was the first time she was touching a cow. Apparently, Caroline had never interacted with animals if they weren’t in the zoo or on a dinner plate. It was funny to see her in awe.

Caroline took the calf’s head in her hands and started petting it and telling it what an awfully pretty *puppy* she was. She was treating a cow that soon will weight over a thousand pounds like it was an apartment cat.

“Jax?”

“Yes.”

“Promise me this one is never going to the slaughter.”

“We don’t sell to slaughter houses, baby. Just small producers.” The Douglas beef was getting a reputation for its quality pretty fast. The last couple of years were very good for the business.

“No! I’ve already named her Penelope in my head. You can’t let anyone eat her, you have to promise me.”

“Easy, little lady. This is a dairy cow.” I walked behind her and tugged at the calf’s ear. “See this blue tag here?”

“Yes.”

“Blue means dairy, red means beef, yellow means we’re raising them for breeding. No one is eating Penelope.”

“Oh, thank God. Look how adorable her big, brown eyes are.” I was more interested in Caroline’s big, frosty *blue* eyes that were sparkling with joy.

“Don’t go around getting attached to all the cows. You’ve seen the numbers. They’re making good money.”

“Ah, I’m so glad we found her. Could you imagine this baby alone in the woods at night...”

“Go out with me. Tonight.”

What the fuck are you saying, Maverick? I don’t know if it was the gentleness she showed that damn wandering calf, or how beautiful she looked in late afternoon light, but I lost control over my tongue. The words were out before I had a chance to think about them.

“Pardon?” She blinked, not understanding, or maybe not believing what the hell I’d just said.

Well, there was no way back.

“I know you bought all that food yesterday and cleared out the Farmer’s Market, but it’s Friday and I want to go into town to have some whiskey and a burger. Come with me.” Damn it, I was not good at shit like this. “I mean, would you like to come with me?”

“So it’s a question?”

“Yes.”

“Too bad,” she shrugged her graceful shoulders, “I liked it the first time. I appreciate a man that can take control.”

My instinct was roaring to put her face down and fuck her little tight pussy until there won’t be any question about who’s in control.

“One day, little lady, you’re going to get too close to the fire, and get burned really bad.”

“One day.”

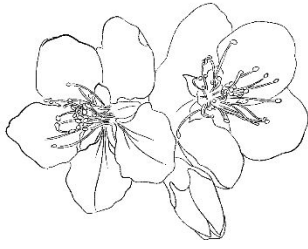
“Let’s go. I need to shower before we leave.” A cold, long shower to set my head straight. We were going out for a bite, nothing more. There were no promises in having dinner with a hot woman.

“Jax, is this... it’s not like a date, right?”

Fuck.

“No. It’s just a night out.”

“Just a night out.” She repeated. At least we were on the same page.



Chapter 6

Caroline

It's not a date. Not. A. Date. Just a night out, that's what he said, so there is no need for pampering, right? And I'm in Montana, not L.A. No need for anything over the top.

That's what I kept telling myself while picking my clothes, but it didn't work. A night out was a night out, no matter where I was, so I slipped into a red dress. It was simple, but also a little slutty, I couldn't lie about that. I wasn't kidding myself to think this was a date, or that Jax Maverick was even interested in dating me, but it didn't mean I couldn't enjoy myself. I've been here for almost a week, on a ranch, socializing only with my dog and Jax, and, once in a while, Billy Joe who turns out, was my grandfather's best friend. I didn't let my expectations get too high because I had big, big doubts that the entertaining scene in Kalispel was anything like New York, London, or Paris, but it couldn't be so bad either.

One of the perks was that I had Jax to look at. He changed his jeans and put on a black t-shirt that was making his arms look huge. It was the first time I saw his biceps uncovered and I wanted to bend down and lick them. The tips of his dark brown hair were still wet from the shower, a few strands falling down on his face. The light was dim in the car, but I could still see his scars and strong profile. *He was a man's man.* Yes, I know I've said that before but every time my eyes landed on him, I had an urge to repeat it.

Seeing Jax in my car made me involuntarily think about Samson. Who's Samson? Samson Samuel Kissinger the III, the man who had a mouthful of a name and exponentially less brain. Sam *Sam* – yes, that was the way he liked to be called in private – was the son of one of the biggest clients I've had. Kissinger Sr., CEO of a big pharma from the UK, needed some help after his stock started tanking, so they employed me. I turned that company around in three months, restructured their board, increased their hiring capacity by twenty percent, and got the price of their stock to an all-time high. Sr. was so impressed, he invited me to a party at his estate in Sussex. Now I knew it was a damn set up and I stepped right into it. Sr. wanted me to meet his son, Samson. At the time, I thought he was dashing because he was.

Everything about Sam was polished and calculated, from the way he did his hair, the way he moved, to every single word he said. He knew exactly when it was the perfect moment to pay a compliment or woo, when to give flowers and when to keep his mouth shut. We started dating and traveling all across Europe together, and naturally, when he proposed marriage, I said yes. I got to see Samson work, commanding the boardroom. He was what I considered to be a strong, powerful man. He always made sure he got his point across in a conversation and intimidate his competitors. I've seen him slam his fist on the table in a negotiation once and every head in the room turned to him. Sam enjoyed that kind of attention – he liked to be seen like the big man in the room

and I liked seeing him take command too. The problem appeared when people looked at me like that too.

What Sam Sam couldn't accept was that I've made a life of handling business and the men and women in charge. When I walked into a room, I commanded respect too. He couldn't come to terms that I did more than him, that I had my own money to fall back on, and that I was a damn powerful, stubborn, self-sufficient woman. When he started setting me up to fail and talk down to me in public, I packed his bag and sent him straight to hell.

Yeah, for a long time I'd considered Samson to be a strong man, but he would squeak in his boots if he'd go face to face with Jax. Jax was so much more. He didn't need the expensive suits or the calculated gestures, he just was. His very essence was forceful and severe.

Jax Maverick was raw, savaged in a way someone who lived such a sheltered life like I did couldn't comprehend, and that was what pulled me to him like a magnet.

He guided me through town and only now was I realizing that Kalispell was not as small as I initially thought. While driving on Main Street, we've passed several restaurants and bars, a few hotels, an artisanal coffee shop *and* an art museum, but I had no idea where we're going. All that Jax gave were directions until we made it to the parking lot of a bar called Purple Moose.

"We're here." He said.

I looked out the window. The place looked fine. It was a western bar, all wood, with big windows. There was a lot of light coming from inside and I could tell it was busy.

"Nice."

"You don't go to places like this, do you, little lady?"

"Bars?"

"Loud bars with no piano music."

"Trust me, in college, I did some bar hopping."

“We can go to the country club if you want, it’s much classier. Or the French restaurant downtown.”

“I hate French food. This is fine.”

“Sure?” He triple-checked to see if I wanted to bolt.

“Jax, what are you so scared of?”

“That you’re going to make a scene because they don’t have fancy wine glasses and see there’s nothing vegan on the menu.”

I turned in my seat to look at him with my mouth hanging open.

“How much of a snob do you think I am?”

“I wouldn’t say snob.” That wasn’t an answer. “I would say pretentious.”

“Wow. Just when I was starting to tolerate you, you go ahead and say something asshole-ish. Nice going.”

“It’s part of my charm.” If that was supposed to be funny, I wasn’t amused, and Jax could see that on my face. “Oh, come on, Caroline. You can’t be mad.”

“Right. Let’s just go.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and stepped out of the car. Jax did the same a few seconds after.

“Caroline.”

I got into his face. “What?”

“I…”

“What is it, Jax?”

“Sorry, umm, it’s only now I’m seeing your dress. Fuck, you’re hot.”

“Really?”

“What do you want from me? An apology?”

What the hell did I want from him, indeed?

“No.” I sighed. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

“Don’t you? You don’t strike me as one of those women who get angry just for the fun of it. Talk to me.”

“I do have a nice lifestyle, Jax, one that I work for, and I don’t like people judging me for it. I’ve been through this before.”

“I’m not. We’re different people. I don’t pretend to understand why you need to use all those lotions I’ve seen you carry around or why you won’t let your dog eat leftovers, but I’m not judging you for it. You’re a grown fucking woman, you can make decisions. Who the fuck am I to have a say in that?”

“Oh, wow.”

“What?”

“That was seriously sexy.”

“What was?”

“You saying you have no right to have a say in my decisions.” I licked my lips and smiled. “That’s the hottest thing a man can say to a woman.”

“It’s common sense.”

I couldn’t help my laugh. “You’d be surprised.”

“Can we go inside now? I’m hungry.” He took me in from head to toe. “Fuck me, I can’t look at you in this dress.”

“You like?” I teased.

“You have no fucking idea.”

He threw his arm over my shoulders and we started walking to the bar. We were almost to the door when I heard the cat calls and whistles coming from the crowd that was gathered outside the bar to smoke.

“Maverick, my man. Who’s the arm candy?” What the fuck did he just call me?

“Keep your mouth shut, Chris.”

“Hey! Can I just slap her ass once?”

“I mean it man. Shut it, or get ready to taste my fist instead of that beer in your hand.”

Jax pulled me closer to him and dragged me through the door.

“Who was that?” I asked looking up.

“An asshole. Let’s go find a table before I go back out there and make him spit his teeth.” I had no doubt he was ready to fulfill that promise.

There was a table good for us in the back and when Jax threw his massive body into the chair, I noticed the grim expression on his face.

“I’ve been cat called before, Jax. Let it go.”

“You are going to end me up in prison, woman.”

“What?”

“That dress. Every man in here is staring at you. Tonight, you’re going to pay my bail.”

I blushed. I couldn’t remember ever receiving a better compliment. Ever. From anyone. *Ever!* I felt my cheeks start burning.

“Try to behave.” I picked up the one-page food menu and gave it a quick read. “What’s good to eat here?”

“Ribs.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Finger food is not really my style.”

“Elk Burger, then.”

“Elk? Like game meat?”

Jax shook his head and chuckled under his breath. “And she got angry when I called her pretentious.”

“Fine, I’ll have the elk.”

“You don’t have to. They have beef too.”

“I said I’ll have the elk burger.”

“You’ll like it. Phil is a very good cook.”

“Who?”

“Phil Morris, he owns this place. His wife, Val, is behind the bar.”

“Oh, a family business. Nice.”

“They’re good people and good customers for the ranch.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, we restock them every two weeks.”

The woman he mentioned saw Jax and came to our table with a smile. Val was young and beautiful. She was curvy and had a baby doll face, with red hair and green eyes.

“Hey, Jax.” She landed a friendly hand on his shoulder. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Hey, Val. Work has kept me busy lately.”

“Oh, that’s great.” Her eyes keep shifting to me. “Who’s your lovely date?”

“Not a date. This is Caroline Douglas. Old Eddi’s granddaughter.”

Val put a hand on her chest and looked down at me with a warm smile. “Caroline, it’s so good to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Val.”

“We really loved Eddi around here. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t feel entitled to her compassion. “Jax was just telling me that the Purple Moose buys produce from the ranch.”

“Yes, we do. Best beef in this part of Montana. Phil, my husband,” she pointed to the kitchen door, “can cook a steak to perfection, if you want to taste some of your own meat.”

“I should, because I didn’t have the chance yet, but Jax already sold me on an elk burger.”

“Sure he did. It’s his favorite. Elk burger, fries, whiskey neat. I’ve served it to him at least a hundred times.”

“Well,” I smiled, “tonight make it a double.”

“Ah, you’re a whiskey kind of girl?”

“Some days.”

“I like you, Caroline.” The seal of approval from Val felt important. At first sight, I really liked her and I wanted her to like me too.

“I’m glad.”

“I’ll put your order in and leave you guys to enjoy your not-date.”

“Definitely not a date.” I assured her.

“Don’t worry, everyone can see you’re too good for him.”

Instead of getting offended, Jax laughed and high fived Val before she returned to the bar to get our drinks.

“She’s nice.”

“Val? Yeah, she’s a good friend.”

“People seem to like you around here, Jax.”

“Some do, some don’t.” He scratched his jaw. “Enough about me. You’ve been here for a few days. What do you think about the ranch?”

“It’s much more than I expected. I knew my grandpa had a farm, but this is a whole business. It shouldn’t surprise me, though.”

“Why?”

“Back in the day, he was one of the most successful men in Washington D.C. He made himself a fortune and then retired to Montana after his wife died.”

“Washington? That’s where your family’s from?”

“Yeah. You didn’t know?”

“No. I just assumed Eddi was from around these parts.”

“Nope. I think he was born in Maryland, but he moved to Ithaca to go to college.”

“A fancy school, right?”

“Ivy league. He went to Cornell, same place I graduated from. Anyway, he got his Bachelor in engineering, went to D.C and started a company. That was before my father was born, but people still talk about him.”

“Was old Eddi some kind of celebrity in his youth?” He joked.

“Kinda. His company was one of the first to guarantee equal pay regardless of color and gender. Sadly as it is, that was rare in the seventies. I’ve been told that my grandfather really cared for his workers, he helped put some through school, in ’63 he marched on Washington. He was a smart, honorable man.” Or according to my father, just honorable, because no one so smart could walk away from a fortune and a ‘civilized’ life to live up in the mountains.

“Yeah, that sounds like him.”

“He was good to you?”

“He took me from the streets and gave me a place to live.” He said it like it was nothing.

I wanted to ask him to explain what he meant, but a young boy came with our drinks and Jax raised his glass.

“What are we rising our glasses to, Maverick?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Smart and honorable men.”

“And they’re equally smart and sexy granddaughters.”

The whiskey scratched my throat. It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t refined either. I did like the smoky undertones but it

was too strong to think about ordering a second glass. Or at least for me it was, because Jax emptied the glass in one gulp.

“I’m pretty sure this is a sipping whiskey.”

“No one has time for that, Caroline.” His phone started to make sounds in the pocket of his jeans. “It’s Billy Joe. I’ll step outside to take it. Are you ok here for a few minutes?”

“Yes, go.”

I leaned back in my chair watching him leave with confident strides. I kept wondering what he meant when he said Eddi took him in. How hard was his life before? Things seemed to be going fine for him now. Jax was doing great work at the ranch, he seemed content, and people here seemed to generally respect him. Val definitely liked him and on his way to the door Jax stopped three or four times to shake hands. He was definitely part of the community.

I was overdressed, I could see it now. Everyone around had jeans and shirts on and I was the only woman in high heels. My wardrobe was just not Montana appropriate.

I took another sip of my whiskey and this time it glided down my throat. The taste was really growing on me and so was this place. People were drinking, playing pool, laughing out loud. In the past few years, I’ve only been to bars to meet a client, close a deal, or celebrate a win. It was nice to finally have *nothing* to do. I knew this feeling would pass soon and I’ll start craving things to keep me occupied, but for right now, relaxing didn’t feel like the worst thing to do.

Val came with the food and she offered me a refill, but I switched to water. Someone had to drive us back and after a week of hard work, Jax deserved a second glass more than I did. I was already digging into the fries when he came back to the table.

“You started without me. That’s not polite at all, little lady.”

“I’m hungry. Is everything ok with Billy?”

“Yeah. He forgot to lock the cattle barn and wanted to check if I did. Did you try your burger?”

“Not yet.”

“Come on, don’t be scared.”

“Ok, for your information, I’ve had all kinds of meat before. It’s the fats that scare me.”

“It’s just a burger. Eat.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” I rolled my eyes, but picked up the bun anyway. I really was hungry. I had a chia pudding for breakfast, but skipped lunch because I got pulled into a video call that ran longer than I expected. I’ve earned this burger, so it better be as good as he made me believe. Luckily, it was.

“Like it?”

“Yeah. It’s very juicy.”

“Told you.”

I noticed he had onion rings on his plate too, so I took one from under his nose.

“You thief,” Jax joked, but he took some more and threw them over my fries.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I like watching you eat.”

“That’s...” *kind of weird*. “Why?”

“Because of the sounds you make when you like something. It makes me wonder.” I didn’t have to ask what he meant to understand the suggestion.

“For a rugged Montana cowboy, your flirting is pretty smooth.” And as long as it was innocent, I didn’t mind it one bit.

He didn’t have a chance to say anything else because someone interrupted us. It was the same asshole that shouted after me outside – what did Jax say his name was? Chris? –

only now he also had a date. A brunette woman with breasts that were spilling out of her tank top.

“Jax, my man, you’re sitting at my table.”

“I don’t think so.” Jax didn’t even look at them.

The woman slapped her hand on the table to get our attention. “I called Val earlier,” she said, “and told her to keep this table for me, Jax.” I couldn’t help notice that she got very, *very* close to his face when she spoke.

“Really? This specific table?”

“You know it’s my favorite.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Sheila, and I’m eating here.”

“I don’t care.”

Oh, this was ridiculous. Someone would have to be an idiot not to see she wasn’t trying to get to the damn table. She was trying to get to Jax. It was sad, bitchy, and I couldn’t lie, a little funny.

“You two can stay.” I said and all three heads turned to me. “Jax and I will take this to go. Come on, *baby*.”

“You sure, little lady?”

“Yeah. I’d much rather eat this with you at home.”

I called a waiter and told him to pack everything for us and Jax went to find Val to pay the check, leaving me alone with the two intruders. Chris was obviously more interested in gawking at my breasts than the conversation, but Sheila couldn’t keep her mouth shut.

“He’s going to get bored of you before you know it.” She told me while tapping her foot on the floor.

“We’ll see.”

“You might not know, but Jax Maverick has a reputation around these parts.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that?”

“I’m just trying to help. You dolled yourself up for him, but it’s not going to work. He’ll find a new ice-cream flavor next week and forget you.”

“Thank you for the heads up, but Jax likes licking this ice cream just fine. Enjoy your night.” I turned to leave, but stopped to look at her over my shoulder, “I know I’ll enjoy mine.”

I found Jax in the crowd, who was just picking up our to-go containers, and knowing that Sheila is still watching, I put my arms around his neck.

“Hey.” I whispered.

“Umm, hey. What are you doing?”

“Annoying the shit out of your ex.”

“She ain’t my ex, just a scorned woman.” Playing into it, Jax placed a hand on my lower back. “Sheila’s eyes look like they’re about to pop. What did you say to her?”

“Ah, just something about ice cream. Let’s go.”

We waved Val goodbye and went back to the car.

“You didn’t have to do that, Caroline.”

“What?”

“Stepping in. Sheila’s my problem.”

“I don’t like mean girls.” I shrugged. “Should we go back to the ranch? Eat at the picnic table?”

“I have a better idea. Did you ever eat on the hood of a car?”

“No.”

“You’re about to.”

He gave me directions and I followed them until we made it outside of Kalispell and cruised along what looked like a deserted dirt road.

“Umm, Jax?”

“Yes?”

“Did you bring me here to kill me or something? We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“Keep driving.” He sounded amused.

“Where are we going?”

“Flathead Lake. We’ll be there in five minutes.”

He was right. We passed a narrow patch of pine trees and then I stopped the car because there was nowhere further to drive. We were at the edge of a calm, dark lake.

“Is it safe to be here?”

“Yes, Caroline. Come.” He took the food and placed it on the hood of the car, just like he said he would. “There are some piers here, with tables and stuff, but even at night, there are people around. This is quieter.”

“I like it. It’s very peaceful.”

“You should see the lake during the day. It’s amazing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Do you fish?” He asked me before biting into his burger.

“No.”

“Shame. I could have brought you back.”

“I’m a fast learner.”

“I’m going to believe that when you let me get you on Dove’s back.”

God, he just wasn’t willing to let that go. “Horses are not my thing, Jax. I know what I said that day, about Buck, but that was just... I was being melancholic, that’s all.”

“You’ll ride.”

“Nope.”

He took the fries container from my hands and threw it somewhere behind me on the car hood. Before I was able to understand what he wanted to do, Jax's body was between my knees, hands on either of my side.

"You'll settle for riding men, little lady?" He spoke almost in whispers, words dripping down my skin.

"Save a horse, right? That's how the song goes."

"Careful. Some men are wilder than stallions, Caroline."

"Are you?"

"Hell yes." I believed him.

Jax was untamed to the bone and that attracted me as much as it scared me. His crude, unpolished strikingness was too powerful to make me feel calm. His twilight black eyes pinned me down and I didn't dare to move away. He didn't back down either. There was a storm brewing between us, and I for one, was ready to face the thunder, but it never came. Jax never leaned in, our lips didn't touch, we stayed frozen.

"You know, Maverick," I finally found my voice to speak, "if this was a date, right now would have been a good time to kiss me."

He looked down over the low neckline of my dress and growled. A deep, animal growl that made my insides clench.

"Too bad this ain't a fucking date."

"Too bad, indeed. Now move to the side, Jax. You're blocking my view."

He didn't listen to me and kept hovering. His eyes were running over my body, following the hollows of my breasts, making him want to touch. Damn it, I wanted to be touched too. By him. Now. But it didn't happen. Jax finally peeled himself away and went back to his place. Somehow, he left me breathless, without putting one finger on me.

An arcadian stillness fell over us, so profound, I could hear every sound of the woods. To distract myself from Jax, I

moved my attention to the waving lake that was calmly hitting the shore. I was still not used to the beauty of the wilderness around us, and again, I found myself enchanted. Even like this, in the dark, the place was a sanctuary. Only now I've got to see some of the reasons that Eddi left his entire life behind to come here.

"This place is amazing." I whispered. I wasn't talking to Jax, but he answered anyway.

"You like it?"

"Yes. The sky is... I've never seen so many stars."

"They put your city lights to shame, don't they?"

"It's definitely a view you can't find in D.C. Thank you for showing me this."

"Don't thank me. You're the one who wanted to leave the bar."

"After your ex crashed our dinner."

"She ain't my ex." He reinforced the words he said before.

"Are you going to tell me the story?"

"About Sheila?" I nodded. "There's no story. We scratched an itch, she wanted more, I don't do that. The end."

"That sounds a little crude."

"It's the truth. I didn't deceive her, if that's what you think. Sheila knew what kind of man I am and I've always been truthful about my intentions. It's not my fault she didn't want to listen."

"Right. Well, she has it bad for you, that's for sure. She's with that guy Chris now?"

"Don't think so. Chris Noonan is a dick. The loser son of Gary Noonan, a beets farmer, always getting stupid drunk and looking for some woman to nail. They might be screwing, though."

“He’s not your friend, is he?”

“Hell, no. Noonan hates me.”

“Why?”

“I took his girl once. He’s still not over it. I guess that’s why he’s running with Sheila all over town.”

“To get back at you.”

Jax shrugged, very unaffected. Whatever was between him and that woman, he was done with it. That should have put my mind at ease. I liked uncomplicated and Jax was just that – plain and simple. He always spoke his mind. There were no games, no manipulation with him. What I saw was exactly what I got. If we were ever to act on this attraction between us, there won’t be any mess left behind.

“It’s getting late.” He said in his hoarse voice. “We should get back.”

“Right, but you have to promise to bring me back here.”

“Deal.”

“And you owe me a night out. A fun night out.”

“This wasn’t fun?”

“It was fun enough, but I want loud music and a crowd next time. No scorned women.”

“I’ll see what I can do about it.”

Jax collected all the trash and leftovers and put everything in a bag so we could throw it away back at the ranch and then jumped back in the passenger seat. The road leading back home seemed familiar, but I still needed his instructions. I was a long way from knowing my way around Flathead County, not that there was any need for that. I’d be out of here and back to my life in ten days tops.

For the first time, the prospect of leaving the ranch behind didn’t excite me. I wasn’t sad about leaving. I couldn’t wait to get back to a place with pavement, so my heels won’t

get dirty all the time, but I wasn't ecstatic either. There will be a lot of comfort and luxury waiting for me back in D.C or wherever my work would take me next, but there won't be any mountains, or starry skies like the one I've seen tonight. I wasn't kidding myself thinking I'm a nature lover, but there was something about this place, something I could see now. Maybe the same thing that called to Eddi to settle here and make a home for himself.

I pulled the car in front of the house that Jax lived in and killed the engine. It was the first time I saw it up close. It was a nice, cozy, rustic house with a veranda. There were two chairs out, but only one had a cushion on it.

"So this is where you spend your nights, huh? Lean back, relax, and have a beer in peace?"

"Yeah. Eddi built it."

"It's nice."

He let out a chuckle. "It's more than any ranch hand in the area ever had. Eddi was a generous old man."

"You said that before. You said he did a lot for you."

"You have no idea." But once again, he didn't give me any details. He just got out of the car and I followed.

"I liked the bar. Who would have thought the night life in Kalispell could be so exciting?"

"Ah, now you see, Big City. We have some good things going on around here."

My eyes fell on his lips. "Now I see, yes."

Once I moved an inch closer there was no stopping. Jax came crashing down and I clung to his body. My hands knotted into his hair and I let my head fall slightly back, so he could have easy access to my mouth. The moment our lips touched it was like the crash of a tidal wave. I was engulfed completely by him and his kiss. It was shamelessly hearty and daring, not holding anything back.

Jax tasted like scotch and manliness, and the moment it landed on my tongue, I craved more of his essence. There were a million things I wanted to do with him, or rather have him do to me, but right then, feeling more on his aroma seemed more important than anything.

Our tongues were dancing around each other, my leg was up on his hip, his hands were down on my ass grabbing me hard. There was nothing about this kiss that wasn't perfect. I didn't slow down, I couldn't, not even when I remained out of breath. Jax was better than air, better than anything.

He picked me up and walked a few steps, but I had no idea in what direction because my head was spinning. Jax was stronger than whiskey and he was getting me drunk fast. When he pulled back, I was dizzy.

“Fuck, baby.” He whispered above my lips.

His put his forehead on mine and I let my hands slide from his hair down to his neck.

“Jax.” His name came out as a plea.

“It's late, Caroline. You should get back home.”

Motherfucker. He was turning me down.

“I...”

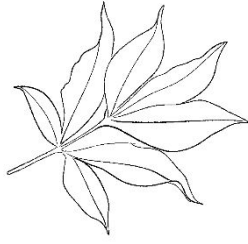
He planted one soft kiss on my lips.

“It has to be like this.” He put me down, letting my wobbly legs touch the ground, and tucked me nicely behind the wheel of my Mercedes. He leaned down again dragging his mouth down the curve of my neck and his breath turned my skin into goosebumps. “A woman like you shouldn't get in bed with the likes of me.”

“Jax, that's just...” *stupid*. But I didn't get to say it because he closed the door in my face. The next thing I saw was his fine backside walking through the front door of his house and turning off the veranda lights.

That was a flat-out dismissal. I threw myself in Jax Maverick's arms and all I got was the cold shoulder.

Let that be a lesson, Caroline. Let it be a fucking lesson.



Chapter 7

Jax

It didn't matter what I did, I couldn't fucking forget it. Her lips, her taste, the soft sobs she released in my mouth; none of that wanted to go away.

I woke up before dawn and took Virgil out for one of the longest rides we ever had. I took him up rocky mountain trails and down Flathead River, damn nearly exhausted the poor animal just so I could take my mind off Caroline for one goddamn second. She left her scent on my skin.

I did the right thing stepping back when I did, I knew that. She was soft – *sophisticated* – and expected the same in return. I had no soft to give. I didn't have much of anything to give except a couple of cold beers and a good fuck. Hell yes, I could fuck her like no one ever did, make her pussy throb and her knees buckle, but Caroline deserved more. She deserved a whole man, not some broken pieces in the shape of a body.

I did the right thing stepping back when I did, *I* knew that, but my steel hard cock didn't agree. I was in pain for her.

Before settling here at the Douglas ranch, I was a nomad, going from one place to another, one job to another, anything to get some cash, feed myself, and buy a bottle of whiskey once in a while. My legs took me all over the Big Sky state and I've seen some beautiful women. Had some in my sheets too. Pretty ladies caught my eye, but not one has made me so desperate to have her. I was like a wolf following a trace of fresh blood in the snow, salivating thinking about the prey.

Caroline. She was my prey – my trophy – but it wasn't wise to go there. For one, she was my boss, sitting in old Eddi's chair. Mixing work with desire was never a smart choice, for me or anyone else. Second, we were too fucking different. She was a woman that came with pretensions and demands, and I wasn't a chariot horse good at meeting standards. I was a wild Mustang.

Caroline didn't even know me. She saw a ripped body and she got all hot and bothered for it, but she had no idea who the fuck I was or where I came from. That wasn't a bad thing, I preferred it that way, but if I'd fuck her, she'd want me to let her in and I wasn't game for that. I would love to put my dick in her tight body, but anything closer than that was risky and I was done with risk.

When I made my way back to my house, Caroline wasn't less present in my mind, but I was more used to having her there. My dick was in the same shape, though – up, hard, and painful.

I took Virgil back to the stables and checked on the other horses before returning to my place. Dove was restless today, probably wanting to stretch her legs. She spent too much time in the box since Eddi wasn't around to ride her. I decided to come back later and let Dove free in the field for a few hours. It was the weekend, so my time was mine, but I doubted Caroline was going to try and ride her any time soon, so I had to look out for the horses. The rest of the animals were good

for a few days. Billy Joe had a boy to do the weekend feedings and he already saw to that while I was out with Virgil. He'd come back Sunday afternoon for his pay.

Back to the house, I found Rusty waiting on the porch with his tail wiggling. He looked worse than usual today, his fur covered with splashes of mud.

"Now what kind of fucking trouble did you get yourself into, boy? Another mud bath?" He answered with a happy bark. "You hungry?" He barked again. "Stay here. I ain't letting you inside the house before I spray you down with the hose."

I found a can of dog food, emptied it into a bowl and brought it out to him, along with some fresh water. "Here you go." Rusty went straight to the food and devoured it. "Good, isn't it? It's not some organic, healthy bullshit like that lady dog you fancy had for dinner, but it will do."

Damn Rusty was as smitten as I was. Since Caroline got here, he started sniffing around her house from morning 'till the sun set just to see Regina. Because neither of them was fixed, Caroline didn't allow my pup to play with her precious dog unless she was there to supervise, so neither of us was getting lucky.

After he finished his bowl, I gave him a bath because sooner or later, I'd have to let him back inside, and I didn't like sleeping on a dirty bed. When he was done, there wasn't much left to do. Putting my feet up and relaxing was not a damn option because that meant more thinking about Caroline and all the ways I want to fuck her, so I went back to the stables. Giving Dove some exercise had to be enough to stir my thoughts in a different direction.

The mare was happy to see me, or at least she was happy to get some attention. With the harvest coming fast, I didn't have as much time for the horses as I'd usually do and since Caroline looked at them like they were aliens, Dove really needed some one-on-one time. I put her in a harness and took her on the open field. She lost no time and started running

around. It didn't feel right for me to ride her when she was supposed to be Caroline's horse, but I gave her some good exercise regardless. We had a few good hours out there.

I was taking her back to the box when I noticed the big, fat, ugly looking tick on her back leg.

"Damn it, girl. How long has this sucker been on you?" Judging by how big it was, I'd say a few days. "Don't worry, I'll take it out for you."

I went into the office to look for a pair of tweezers, but couldn't find any. It would have taken too long to go all the way to my place and back, so the best option was to go to the big house and ask Caroline for some.

That was the last thing I wanted to do, but fuck it. I went to the house and knocked on the door before I could think too much about it. When she opened the door, I was greeted by a wall of coldness and whetted blue eyes.

"Can I help you?" She asked politely. Something was fishy.

"I need some tweezers."

"What for?"

"Well," I cleared my throat, "Dove has a tick on her leg. I want to remove it before she gets tularemia."

"Anything else you need?"

"Rubbing alcohol if you have it."

"I have it. Wait here." And the door was slammed in my face. She came back five minutes later with everything I needed neatly packed in a bag. "Here."

"Caroline, are you ok?"

"Fabulous." Her mouth was saying one thing, but her face...

"You don't seem fabulous."

"Excuse me?"

“I mean... shit... not the way you look. You look fine, but you’re acting weird.”

“Well, at least the way I look is *fine*.” Something was definitely off. “Anything else?”

“Yes, I would like to know what the fuck is going on with you. Did a tick bite your ass too?”

“Ha, funny.” There was no laughter, though. “You have your tweezers, Jax. Why are you still here? Are my goddamn tweezers not good enough for you either?”

“Good *enough*?”

“I know I’m not.”

“You’re...” *Oh, fuck me!* “Caroline, is this about last night?”

She raised one of her delicate hands and placed it in front of my face. “You know what? Let’s not do this.”

Let’s not do this? She gets all pissed off and now she doesn’t want to *do this*? Caroline Douglas had another thing coming if she thought she could make the rules in my fucking playground.

She tried to turn and disappear into the house, again, but I was faster. I grabbed her arm and dragged her back until her sexy little body crashed into me.

“We’re doing this, because I don’t like tiptoeing. I’m not a fucking ballerina.”

“I think we’re done talking.”

“Well, I think we didn’t even begin talking. You just gave me some bullshit attitude and didn’t tell me what’s wrong.” My anger crawled up in my throat and the words came harsher than I thought they would. “See, Caroline, I don’t do this shit. The mad girl. The ‘I’m not mad, but I’m actually mad’ game. The complication. Really not my style. So *talk*.”

“You’re a rude jerk. How’s that for talking?”

“Because I kissed you?”

“Because I kissed you!” She shouted back. “I’m sorry if you’re little man ego can’t take it, but *I* kissed *you*. I did my hair, I put on a dress, and I kissed you. Now, I’m sorry if I lack some of Sheila’s sex appeal and her charming belly button piercing.”

“Sheila? What the fuck does our kiss have to do with Sheila?”

“Are you being obtuse on purpose? You turned me down. I was all but throwing my panties in your face, and you packed me in my car and sent me away. I didn’t even rate a look back, huh?”

I was stunned. Pissed off and stunned. I kicked myself in the balls the other night so I could let her go, do the right thing by her, and now she was bitching about it? The one time I tried to be a gentleman and this is what I got in return? Fuck it.

“That’s why you’re acting like this? Because I turned you down?”

“You humiliated me! You just turned back and left, didn’t even say goodnight. Who does that?” She was hurt, I could see it on her face now.

“Caroline...”

“I really don’t want to talk about this anymore. Can you let me go, please?”

She wasn’t willing to listen to words, so I just had to show her. I took one of her wrists in my hand and pushed her open palm to my crotch. My erection was raging, hard against her hand.

Caroline looked at me with her eyes round like glazed doughnuts, but instead of pulling back, she got closer.

“If you think I don’t want you, woman, think again. I want you now, I wanted you last night, and I haven’t stop wanting you since the first time you came to this damn ranch.”

“Then why...?”

“I was trying to do the right fucking thing, Caroline. I’m not the man for you. I’m not a lover, I don’t do the shit you expect from me.”

“Excuse me, but how do you know what I expect?”

“I know what women want, baby. I’m not built for the boyfriend thing, and I don’t want to make you mine, only to have you bite my head off like Sheila does. I actually like you.” I couldn’t help myself from kissing her soft lips one more time.

Caroline’s hand tightened around my hardened length and gave it a stroke through my jeans. It was enough to make my entire body tense up.

She looked down at her hand and then back at me. “Impressive equipment, Maverick.”

“Thanks, little lady. Are you still mad at me?”

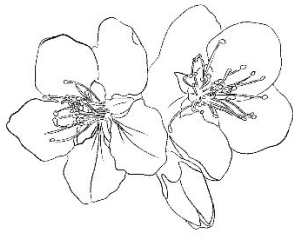
“I can’t be mad at you for trying to be a good guy, can I?” She stepped away from me. “Go see to Dove. Is she ok?”

“Yeah, she’s good, just a little uncomfortable.” I knew quite something about that. My balls were the size of coconuts. “Wanna come check on her?”

“I can’t. One of my clients has been waiting on a phone call from me for a couple of days, but I can stop by the stables later.”

“Fine. See you around, little lady.”

“Yes, Maverick, you will.”



Chapter 8

Caroline

“And the press won’t leave me alone about it. I cannot believe this is actually affecting me at work *after* it ruined my home life.” Jacques-Jan Flaubert finally stopped to take a breath after talking for fifteen minutes straight. That’s why I delayed this phone call for so many days. The man talked so damn much, it was unbearable. It was one of the things I’ve never been able to fix about him.

Jacques-Jan was the president of Flaubert Delicacies, one of the biggest cheese exporters in all of France. His brother Pierre was the one who started the company, but after his unexpected departure last year, Jacques-Jan was left in charge and it’s been downhill ever since. The board of the company called me in four months ago, and I’ve fixed some of their problems, but Flaubert had a long road ahead.

“Jacques-Jan, I can’t believe you even need advice on this. Drop her.”

“W-what?”

“Your mistress. You need to let her go.”

“But I love her.”

“Really? You’re thinking about getting a divorce from Mirra? Start a new life with your other lady?”

“Of course not. Mirra is the mother of my children.”

“Ok, let me tell you what else Mirra is. A shareholder. Don’t toy with someone who can have you fired, Jacque-Jan.”

“Let me understand, I can’t be happy and keep my company?”

“No, you can’t. Break up with your mistress.”

“You know what, Miss Douglas? You were supposed to be on my side.”

“No, I am on your company’s side! Your midlife crisis is hurting your business, especially when the press has a sex tape of you and your paramour in the facility where your product is made. It’s disrespectful both to your wife and your mistress, and it’s disgusting. I’m surprised you didn’t lose more contracts over it.” I was harsh because I needed to be, and also because I was frustrated with Jax and Jacque-Jan was the perfect punching bag.

“I can’t just...”

“Yes, you can. Do it, or I’ll go to the board and have you removed from your position myself before you ruin the reputation of Flaubert Delicacies.”

“I am Flaubert!”

“Fix your mess then. Don’t make me come there and do it myself!” I hung up the phone without letting him say another word. I’d been in contact with the board members and the P.R team at Flaubert for a couple of days, ever since the story broke out in the press. There were a few things we could do before getting rid of Jacque-Jan, but everyone in his company made it clear that this was his last chance, so he’d better listen to me.

Throwing my phone on the bed, I packed away all the files and put them in my briefcase. A few hours of work were a welcomed distraction from all the cowboy bullshit Jax was throwing at me.

“I’m not the man for you.” I mumbled in an attempt to imitate his stupid hot voice and it made Regina bark. “Yes, girl, I know. He thinks he’s so smart, doesn’t he?”

His moral speech was nice, it made me feel less rejected... for about five minutes. After I had some time to think about it, all I felt was angry. Jax Maverick obviously had some image of me lined up in his head – too fragile to handle him. Well, *F* that! I could handle him and his no-feelings-sex policy, but for some reason, Jax was sure that I was too soft for it, like my heart lived in my vagina or something.

“I know what women want, baby. I actually like you.” I kept mocking his voice. No, he had no idea what this woman wanted because what I wanted was quick, dirty, and not complicated. I wasn’t Sheila or whatever other women tried to hunt him down and get him to the altar before. Hell, I’ll be gone and back to live my life in a few days, leaving him an all of this behind.

I picked Regina up in my arms and walked out on the back patio. Today the temperature was up, way over 80° so my eyes fell on the flickering water in the pool. I didn’t have a chance to get my toes wet yet and I did pack a strappy, turquoise swim suit that still had the tag on. The clerk from the boutique I got it from said it was perfect for me, that the color made my eyes sparkle, but he also tried to get my number so half of that must have been bullshit.

I looked down at Regina and petted her little head.

“Do you want to go for a swim, baby girl?” She barked and started wiggling right away. “I thought so. Let’s get ready then.”

She followed me upstairs to change, not leaving my side until I was done and then we jumped together in the pool.

Regina knew how to swim very well, she got lessons when she was a puppy because we stayed in many places that had open pools and I wanted her to be safe, but she was also very well trained. Without permission, she'd never get in.

The water was very nice, cooling off my body. I loved swimming. Of course, like every other thing I liked, I didn't get to do it often enough. It was nice to have this entire pool for myself, not like those in hotels where tens of other people were roaming around.

I wondered if Eddi liked to swim too or if this was another thing he built thinking that one day he'd have family gathered around and splashing water everywhere. He seemed to do a lot of things with that in mind which was bittersweet. We never came to splash water around.

Speaking of family, I heard my phone ringing on the edge of the pool, and when I got there, I saw my mom was calling.

"Hello, Mother."

"Honey, you always sound so formal when I call."

"Can't blame me for that. I got it from Dad."

"I know. How are you? All this radio silence made me worry. Especially when you're out in the middle of nowhere."

Her tone made me laugh. "Mom, you know what, it's not so bad out here. It's actually... it's nice."

"In Montana?" She asked, doubting my words. "Is this my daughter? The one that only washes her hair at the beauty salon?"

"Oh, that was hard, but I've learned my way around the blow drier. Grandpa Eddi didn't live like we thought he did."

"What does that mean?"

"He built a beautiful house, very rustic chic. The farm is making money, the mountains are amazing. Right now, I'm

chilling in a huge heated pool, looking at the sky. I'm just saying it's not the worst thing."

"Honey, that's great. I'm glad you like it. After all, it's yours." She took a deep breath. "Your father doesn't say this enough, but your grandfather loved you very much. I'm sure he's happy you like his home."

"Yeah, Mom, that's the thing. It's not his home. I mean it is, but everything here was built for us, for his family. He had the master bedroom remodeled for me, there's a huge reading room and a library that you'd love, the bar in the living room is stocked with fine whiskey and wine, all of dad's favorite brands. He... he thought about us a lot."

She took a moment to take that in.

"I know, honey."

"What?"

"Every time he came to see you, he asked us to visit, but you know your father. He was too determined to hold on to his grudge."

"For thirty years?"

"He felt abandoned. He lost his mom to a car accident, his sister to a disease, and after all that, his dad decided to move across the country. It made no sense to him."

"I get that, I do, but..." didn't Eddi deserve a second chance? I was too young and distracted by my own life to think about it, but my father wasn't. He just chose not to give it.

"Don't judge dad too harshly, ok?"

"I'm not judging him, but I've been walking in Eddi's shoes for the past few days. It just makes me look at things differently, that's all."

"Well, nothing bad can come from learning more about Eddi. He was a good man."

"Yeah. I'm starting to see that."

“How’s Regina? She’s never been to the country before.”

“God, she loves it more than me. She even got a boyfriend. I’ve been trying my best to keep that mutt away from her, but he’s sleek.”

Mom laughed into the phone.

“That’s great. Don’t you get bored there all by yourself?”

“I, uh, well, no. I’m not completely isolated from the world. The city is only a few minutes away.” I had to tell her about Jax. I needed someone to debate with and my mom gave great advice. “Also, Eddi had a ranch hand.”

“A ranch hand? Are you living with a *man*?”

“No. He lives on a different house here at the ranch.”

“Is he old?”

“Nope? Maybe thirty.”

“Mhm. Is he handsome?”

“Well,” what was the point in lying? “Yes. He’s very sexy, all rugged and stuff. He rides a horse everywhere.”

“Oh, a sexy man with a horse. That sounds exciting. So did he ask you out yet?”

“How do you know I’m interested?”

“Caroline, why else would you tell me about your sexy cowboy? So did he?”

“No, but I did. We went out last night.”

“But?”

“No but, that was all. It was nice and now it’s over. He’s too... I’ve been told he has a reputation.”

“Don’t tell me you’re listening to what people say.”

No, but it didn’t matter anyways. He threw in the towel.

“Mom, there’s no point. I’m going to come back home very soon, and I’m jumping on a flight to the Middle East right after that.”

“I know, but that’s the future. You live in the present, Honey. Make it count.” Like I said, she always gave the best advice.

“Will do. Love you, Mom. I’ll talk to you soon, ok?”

“Yes. Oh, make sure to email me a picture of that sexy cowboy.”

“Mother!”

“What? There’s no harm in looking.”

“I’m hanging up. Tell daddy I love him.”

I closed the call and put the phone away. Regina got bored and jumped out too, leaning in the sun to dry her fur. I’d have to brush her very well tonight.

I made another lap around the pool, not to clear my head, but to come up with an action plan. First, I tried to approach the whole Jax situation like it was one of the companies I worked with – assess, strategize, apply, but then I realized I was overcomplicating things for no reason. He was not a company, he was a man, and men are simple creatures.

With that in mind, I threw a white macrame cover-up over my swim suit, put Regina on a leash, and decided to go on a little walk. It took me fifteen minutes to make it all the way to Jax’s house on foot and three seconds to get up the stairs and knock on his door.

Jax took his time before opening. I almost thought he wasn’t home, but he did show up, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. His hair was all ruffled and he looked sleepy, like I’d just woke him up from a nap. Hopefully, he was too sleepy to notice the way my knees buckled when I saw his chiseled abdomen. Jax looked good in his clothes, but goddamn it, he was gorgeous underneath.

“Caroline.” His voice was even more delicious now that he had just woken up.

“Hello. Am I interrupting?”

“No. I was watching the news and dozed off on the couch. Is everything ok?”

“Yes. Regina and I played in the pool for a while and then decided to go for a walk.”

“Here?”

“Yes. You mind? I thought you *actually like me.*”

Jax let his head fall back and growled. “Oh, fuck me. Are you here to fight with me some more?”

“You’re a big boy, you can take it.”

I pushed him from the door frame and made my way inside. The moment we stepped in Rusty came along very happily and started sniffing around Regina.

“Hey, behave, you little tramp.” I pointed at him. “I have my eyes on you.” Both him and Regina ignored me and started running around happily.

“Let’s hear it, Caroline. Tell me what a jerk I am for walking away from you without a word.”

“Oh, yes, that was a shitty thing to do.” I said, pulling at the knot that was holding my cover up in place. “I forgive you.”

“I didn’t ask for it, but thanks.”

“After all, you were being a gentleman.”

He chuckled. “Don’t be fooled, little lady, I’m not a gentleman. I was just trying to not be a complete jackass.”

“Good enough.” Without warning, I took off the cover up, remaining in my bathing suit and high heel sandals. “This thing got wet, you don’t mind if I take it off, do you?”

His wolfish smile was answer enough. “Caroline, what are you doing?”

“What? You don’t like my bathing suit?” I turned around so he could see my ass.

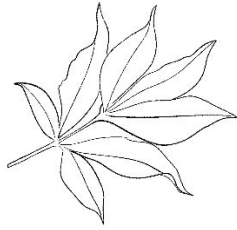
“Is this my punishment?”

“No. You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes, Caroline, I like your fucking bathing suit. I almost came in my pants when you uncovered yourself.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, baby. I last more than that.”



Chapter 9

Jax

“You know, Jax, you only have to pull two strings and all this fabric will just slide off.”

That’s when I fucking lost it. I ran and picked her up with ease and slammed her back to the wall behind. It wasn’t gentle, and for a second I was afraid that I might have hurt her, but Caroline moaned and put her limbs around me.

The way she fit against me was unnaturally perfect, like someone had put her body together just for me. Caroline Douglas was a piece of fucking art and I got to touch her with my dirty, blistered hands. It was ludicrous and it felt fucking amazing.

I moved my hand from her hip upwards, exploring her exposed abdomen. Caroline’s skin was lush and it felt like silk under my palm. Just touching her like this was making me feel more than I ever did in my entire miserable life.

“What strings do I have to pull, baby?”

She did it for me, tugging at the knots, and two seconds later she was naked. Absolutely fucking naked. I was mesmerized. I wanted to touch her, lick her, feel her, fuck her. I wanted it so bad, I couldn't even move.

"Fuck." I said under my breath.

"Is that a compliment, Maverick?"

"There are no good words for how beautiful you are."

"I'm not letting you walk away from me a second time, not after I got naked in your living room."

I crooked my neck and took a nipple in my mouth. The bundle was screaming for me to caress it, so I gave it a good suck. "A saint couldn't walk away from you right now, woman. And I'm definitely not one."

She arched against me and dragged her pussy along my erection. Even through my pants, I could feel how wet and hot she was for me. Fucking perfect.

"Take me to your bed, Jax."

I wanted that. I wanted it so fucking bad. I licked her skin from the curve of her breast, along her neck, until my lips made it to her ear.

"I can fuck you, Caroline, until your legs give up. I will make you feel better than any man ever did."

"I know."

"I have nothing more to give, baby. I wish I had, but that's the only thing I'm good at. You know that right?"

"Jax, I'm a big girl."

"I don't want you to turn bitter on me. I can take it from others, but not you."

"Because you actually like me."

"Because I actually fucking like you." I repeated. She was interesting and challenging, and I liked spending time

with her. All that would go to shit in a minute if she got angry because sex wasn't enough.

“Let me be clear, Jax Maverick. Either you take me to your bed in the next two seconds, or I'm taking care of myself right here. I'm wet, I'm horny, and I will have a damn orgasm with or without you.”

Now *that* was my type of woman.

“Hold on, baby.”

I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder. Her laugh filled the room and it was fucking beautiful, like chimes in the winds.

When I threw her on the bed, her legs opened wide making way for me, so I lost no time in throwing my shorts away. My cock was harder than it's ever been, already throbbing. Foreplay would have to wait because I couldn't lose any more time. I had to be inside her.

“Are you on birth control, baby?”

“I... yes, but...”

“I got my blood work done a couple of weeks ago. All good.” I rarely took a woman ungloved, but I wanted to feel as close to Caroline as was possible.

“Ok.”

“You trust me, right?”

“I do.” I saw in her eyes that she meant it. “Touch me, Jax, please.”

She didn't have to ask me twice.

My body covered hers and a lot of things started happening. My mouth descended over her, playing with her tongue, teasing. She tasted even more delicious than last night.

I felt her small hands feeling my back before she put them in my hair. Caroline was responsive. Every time I touched her, I felt a matching movement or a shiver. Her body

was craving me just as much as I did her. There was no better feeling in this whole wide world.

“Jax, you’re so damn hard.”

“You have no idea, baby. I’ve been like this for days. For you.”

“No, I mean, you’re hard everywhere. Is there anything on you that’s not made of muscle?”

I chuckled over her mouth.

“Not much.”

“I want to lick you from head to toe.”

Yeah, I wasn’t going to survive her. There was no fucking way.

“Later, baby. Now I need to fuck you.”

“Please.”

“It won’t be gentle.”

“I don’t want gentle. Shatter me, cowboy. Don’t hold back.”

I grabbed her hands and pinned her wrists on the head board with one hand while guiding the tip of my dick into her entrance with the other. I knew she’d feel amazing, but I didn’t expect such tightness. I pushed my hips forward firmly, making my way inside her body and after a little resistance, she fit me like a glove.

Her inside was warm and sleek. I had good sex before and never thought it could get better, but this? This was phenomenal. Caroline Douglas was fucking phenomenal.

With a hand on her hip and one holding her wrists, I had her captive. She was mine to do whatever I pleased. My good little girl, so willing to please me. She came all the way here, hot and bothered, and seduced me. The thought alone was enough to make a man go crazy, but seeing her under me, with her straw-colored hair spread on my pillow, was beyond

words. Perfect body, perfect face, perfect woman, and in this moment, she was all mine. How the fuck did I get so lucky?

“Look at me.” I told her and she opened her eyes.

“Yes?”

“I just needed to see your sparkling blue eyes when I move inside you.”

I pulled back and found a rhythm – hard and fast, just how I liked it – and Caroline cried out my name. Pinning her down, I drilled her pussy faster, but nothing seemed to be enough to diminish my hunger. I wanted more of this, more Caroline.

“I need to get deeper.” I growled through my teeth.

“Yes, baby.”

“Put your legs on my shoulder.”

She followed the instruction and when she did, my cock made it to new depths. I was balls deep in my woman. Finally, I was close enough to her.

“Jax, fuck me hard. Make me come.”

Her wish was my command. That, I could give her. That, I’d *promised* her. I freed her wrists and grabbed her thighs to keep her in place while I drove inside her. The craze took over me and unleashed all my desire over her. My moves were abrupt and I worried about bruising her pussy, but there was no way of stopping.

The pleasure built inside her slowly and broke fast. It took two strokes from the moment Caroline told me she was close to a throbbing orgasm. Her walls tightened around me and she arched her back, pleading for more.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand and kept going, kept fucking her until every last drop of her climax was consumed. She tightened around me like a fist and then that threw me over the line. I came inside her, spilling my cum on her inner walls.

When she felt my orgasm, Caroline let her legs fall and hugged me tight to her body, smashing her tits on my chest and her mouth on mine. She was everywhere, all over me, and we were both spent, desperate to catch our breaths.

Whatever would come next, this would have been worth it. This time with Caroline was worth anything.

I didn't want to collapse over her, so I rolled to the side, but didn't let go, so Caroline rolled with me.

"Oh, Gosh." She whispered.

"You good?"

"That was... I knew you'd be good. I just didn't know you'd be this good."

"I don't know if it's polite to return the compliment."

"Oh, it's polite. Go ahead, ravish me with praise."

Easy job.

"Baby, when there's nothing more amazing than being buried in your pussy."

"Ah, that's good."

"I just come inside you and I'm still hard. You're *that* good."

"Keep going, Maverick."

"You're the best fuck I've ever had."

She stayed silent for a moment. "Big words."

"It's the truth, Caroline. It was never like this. With anyone."

"Right back at you." She placed a kiss on my chest.

"Look, I'd love to stay in this bed with you for hours and take your body for another round, but I need a drink."

"Beer?"

“After this? Hell, no. I need hard liquor. Want some whiskey?”

“Yes, please. With Coke if you have it.”

“That can be arranged.”

I found a clean t-shirt and pulled it over Caroline’s head before finding my shorts. I didn’t mind watching her naked, but there was something so sexy about seeing her in my clothes, I couldn’t pass the opportunity.

We walked into the kitchen and found the dogs running around the dinner table.

“What is your ugly looking dog doing to my princess?” Caroline tried to step in between them, but both pups ignored her.

“Calm down, they’re just playing. And Rusty is not ugly, he is interesting looking.”

“Whatever you want to call it.”

“You know you love him and he loves Regina.”

“He’s not good enough for my baby.”

“What are you talking about? He’s a very good boy.”

Caroline laughed and put her hands around my waist. “If he’s anything like his owner then no, he’s not.”

“Good fucking point, baby.”

I fixed our drinks and gave Caroline the glass. We went out on the veranda to let the dogs run free and when Caroline wanted to sit in the chair, I pulled her onto my lap instead; she complied without a word. I wanted to have some time to slowly caress her body, learn her curves, so I moved my hand along them while we drank in silence. There was nothing awkward about this, just comforting, something I haven’t shared with anyone before. It was nice.

Caroline let her head down on my shoulder and drew little circles on my chest with her delicate fingers. Everything

about her was so gracious and soft, from the way she moved, to her voice, to the way she dressed, but despite all of that, she was fearless in the sheets.

I looked down at the hand that was resting on my chest and picked it up to examine the redness on her wrist.

“You’re going to bruise.” I kissed the places where I squeezed her skin too hard.

“It’s ok.”

“Same on your thighs. My hand prints will be visible there.”

“Is it wrong that I like that?”

Wrong? It was fucking sexy.

“Really? Who would have thought that you’re such a dirty little lady?”

“I’m not, it’s just... I just like it.”

“I like it too, baby. I’d cover you in bite marks if you’d let me.”

“Savage man.”

“*Possessive* man.” I corrected her. “Like that, anyone that gets close to you can see you’re mine and not to touch.”

She laughed and leaned in to kiss my jaw. “I like that too.”

“As long as we’re on the same page.” Just the thought of another greedy motherfucker putting his hands on her was enough to make me want to smash my fist into a wall.

“Jax, should I go back home now?”

“What?”

“I mean, we had sex, we’re done. I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

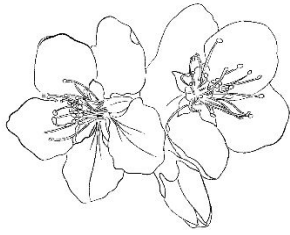
What the hell was she talking about? “You can walk, can’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then we ain’t fucking done. I’ll have to carry you back to your place when we’re *done*.”

“Promises, promises.”

The smile on her face was the biggest challenge I’ve ever seen and I was glad to accept it.



Chapter 10

Caroline

When I woke up Monday morning I was in pain. Real pain. Jax kept me chained to his bed for two days straight and I wasn't complaining, but now I was paying the price. My joints were sore, my legs were shaking, and my boobs looked like something out of 101 Dalmatians because of all the bites and bruises. I haven't felt so deliciously exhausted since... nope, I've never felt this way, because I've never been with anyone remotely as amazing in bed as Jax.

He was a man's man. Nothing about Jax Maverick came in half measures. His personality matched his body and his *cock* matched his personality. He was hung like a horse and every time he put that thing inside me, I saw stars and felt a need to scream my lungs out. It was glorious. Hell, I saw stars even when he put that *cock near* me.

I rode him all weekend, fucked him in every room of the house like our lives were depending on it, and I wanted more. Never before has my sexual appetite been so abundant. Maybe

it was Jax who awakened such hunger in me or maybe it was the fact that I knew I only had a few days to enjoy it. Whatever the answer, I woke up in my bed, dreading the fact that I was alone, and wanting him again.

Regina got out of her little bed and stretched before barking.

“Yes, baby girl, I’m awake.” She barked again. “What? You’re hungry? Just give me a minute and we’ll go have breakfast.” But she was impatient today, so I had to move my ass. She was a little neglected too. All weekend, Regina only had Rusty to keep her company and play with her because I was too busy getting busy with Jax.

I filled her bowl with fresh water and fixed her a portion of organic kibble, Greek yogurt, blueberries, and supplements for her fur and joints. She really ate like a princess and there was nothing wrong with that. I liked spoiling my girl and she was so good all the time, she deserved it.

While she ate, I fixed myself an extra foamy cappuccino and nibbled on some buttered toast. I’d kill for a fresh croissant and from what Jax told me, I’ve heard that there was a very good bakery in Kalispell, but I didn’t feel like driving so early in the morning. Maybe if I’d talk to them today, I could have them deliver some fresh croissants every morning. That was an idea.

I ate, showered, put on some make-up and a sundress and then I found Regina.

“What do you say, girl, should we go find Jax and Rusty?” She wiggled her fluffy tail happily. “You really like that shaggy hound, don’t you?” I was starting to see the appeal.

We walked out together and started crossing the huge yard. It was another sunny day today with clear skies and when I looked at the mountains, they took my breath away for a second. They had a type of beauty I’ve never believed I’d appreciate so much. Everything was so wide and open, so free.

Green meadows stretching for miles, tall peaks, rapid waters, infinite skies, Montana had them all. It was indeed a little piece of paradise and it was just a little crazy to believe all these untamed places existed in the same world as New York and Tokyo. The contrast was overwhelming.

When we made it to the horses' stables, Regina started sniffing around the barn, probably looking for Rusty, but it was quiet, except from the sounds coming from the animals inside. There wasn't anyone in sight. I pushed the door open and saw that all the horses were there, including Virgil, which was weird. Jax always took him out to move around the ranch. Who knew, maybe he drove into town or something. I wasn't exactly sure of the schedule they kept around here, but it seemed to be working just fine.

The horses looked good and seemed pretty uninterested in my presence, except Dove, who put her head over the gate of her box and neighed, almost like she was telling me to get over there. She was such a pretty animal.

"Hey, girl. I'm not exactly sure what you want from me." She just stared with her incredibly wide black eyes. "If you want to go for a ride, I'm sorry, but Jax is not here and I'm no good at that."

Dove knocked her hooves on the ground in protest. Yeah, I was pretty sure she wanted out.

"Fine, fine. Look, I can't ride a horse, I just can't. I know that Grandpa maybe had this idea that I would, but I'm scared just thinking about it. I mean, you look nice and all, but it won't happen. I can however, take you out for a walk, if you promise not to run, or kill me, or anything like that. Deal?"

She made some sounds again and I took that as a verbal, legally-binding agreement, so I started looking around for a harness until I found one. This could have been a terrible idea, but I couldn't let her just sit there and get bored. Animals needed time to exercise and I was here to assist. I might not have been so handy around the ranch, but I was an animal

lover. Even if horses scared me, I still thought they were freaking awesome and so was getting to know Dove.

It took me some time to figure out how to put her head through the harness, but she was docile and patient. The look in her eyes was also very understanding, like she pitied my clumsy hands.

“Ok, you’re all set,” I opened the box and pulled at the harness. “Come on, now.”

She got out of the box trotting and moving her ears. That had to be a good sign, right?

Once we were out, Regina come to join and I wasn’t really sure where to go from there. I was debating between walking her around the barn like she was a big dog, or let her free in the corn field which seemed like a judgment call. I didn’t have to choose because a boy’s voice interrupted me.

“Top of the morning to ya! You must be Miss Douglas. I’m Mike.” He was young, maybe twenty, and I have never seen him around before.

“Hi, Mike. Yes, that’s me. You can call me Caroline.”

“Caroline. That’s a fine name.”

“Thanks. Umm, do you work here, Mike? I haven’t seen you before.”

“I’m on feeding duty on weekends or when Jax and Billy aren’t around. Like now.”

“Oh, ok.”

“You’re taking Dove for a ride? She’s ready. I gave them food and water an hour ago.”

“Oh, no, no, no. I don’t know how to ride a horse, but she seemed ready for some fresh air. I was thinking about letting her walk around for a while, but I don’t know where.”

“Take her to the enclosed riding paddock. It’s right there, see?” He pointed to the distance where I could see a fence.

“I didn’t know we have that.”

“Yeah. Jax built it when Virgil was brought here. The horse was too restless to take the saddle, so he built that paddock to have a safe place to train him.”

“Looks like Jax got to Virgil after all. He seems pretty harmless now.”

“Oh, yeah. Jax is the best, he taught me a lot.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Mike rubbed his neck, looking a little embarrassed. “I’m his apprentice. Or at least I’m trying to be. He’s not ecstatic about giving lessons, but I get to follow him around sometimes, see how he does things.”

“That’s nice. You want to be a ranch hand?”

“Yes!” He answered excitedly. I haven’t seen as much enthusiasm in years. It was refreshing. “Well, I want to build my own ranch, eventually, that’s why I follow Jax around. He’s very good at managing a farm, but he’s also a very handy carpenter. I’m thinking that if I know how to build stuff, eventually it would cost me less to build... It’s stupid, I know. It’s too big of a dream for me.”

“Hey, no,” I put a hand on his shoulder, “never stop dreaming big. Big dreams will take you to great heights. Trust me.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m sure Jax will teach you everything you need.”

“Nah, he’s annoyed when I’m on his trail, but I do it anyway.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you, Mike.” I smiled. He was a good kid. “Hey, where is Jax? Did he go to the city?”

“No, ma’am. He and Billy went to Missoula this morning. They’re transporting some of your cattle to a dairy farm there, making some good money. They won’t be back for a few days.”

Missoula? Where the hell was that?

“Days? They’ll be gone for days?”

“Don’t worry about it, ma’am. I have everything under control around here.”

I wasn’t worried about the ranch, but I was pissed that Jax took off without a warning after I spent the last two days with his cock between my legs. A phone call would have been nice. A ‘hey, bye, see you later’, or something.

I meant what I said before. I wasn’t getting attached, but it was basic courtesy to warn a girl about these things.

“Thanks, Mike.” I told him before turning and taking the horse towards the paddock.

Dove seemed to be pretty excited to gallop around and roam on some grass, but I didn’t pay much attention to her. I was more preoccupied with the fact that my moody lone cowboy had packed up and left town right after I left his bed. I just wanted to know if this trip was pre-planned or he just ran away to make sure I wasn’t getting attached. A little voice whispering in the back of my head was saying that the second option seemed more likely which was infuriating. I was a grown woman; I didn’t need to be treated like a teenager with hearts in her eyes.

Jax had no idea, though. He didn’t know that in my twenty-nine years of being alive, I’ve only committed to one man and that turned out to be a disaster, so I wasn’t all eager to try that again, let alone start day dreaming about someone who was obviously not available. Maybe I’d have to make that clear, maybe even in writing, when Jax would be back.

~ ~ ~

The first twenty-four hours after I found out Jax left were busy. I had to make them busy, otherwise I’d have spent the entire time thinking about the *ifs* and the *whys*. I hated that he was making me think about him so damn much, so to

distract myself, I cleaned. I've vacuumed, I've changed sheets, and I've done laundry, things that weren't usually on my to-do list. Moving from one hotel room to another had some perks, but I had to say, the cleanup had a therapeutic effect. I slept like a baby after that, no thoughts about Jax, no dreams.

When I woke up the next day, the sky was restless. Thick clouds were rolling down from the mountains, everything looked gray, and rain was drizzling on the windows. I loved rainy days, so I went downstairs, fed Regina, made a big steaming cup of coffee and then opened the doors to the back patio as wide as I could, to be able to enjoy the sounds of rain and cool air. I really had to take advantage since I'd be flying out to the desert in a few days. No rainy days in Abu Dhabi.

Regina came and sat on the couch next to me and I played with her floppy ears while finishing my coffee.

"You're so pretty, baby girl." She made an approving sound. She knew how pretty she was. "I'm going to give you a bath later and make you even prettier, but I'll have to go to Kalispell first. We're running low on doggy food. I'm not sure I'll find your brand here, but we'll manage." I also had an appointment I had to get to.

I looked into my luggage to find a pair of jeans, some running shoes, and a silky top with thin straps. I didn't bring a jacket, not that I owned many of those, so one of my blazers had to do. I picked up a black one to go with the shoes. I'd take high heels over sneakers any day, but not in the rain.

Regina had to stay home because this type of weather was making her fur puff up, so I put out some toys for her to stay busy while I was out.

Luckily, all the roads were paved and in good shape, otherwise my Mercedes would have ended up stuck in a ditch.

Despite the drizzle, the streets of Kalispell were pretty busy. It seemed that people in Montana were not intimidated by a little rain. It was a good thing I left the house early, so I

would make it in time to Mr. McFee's office. He texted early this morning saying he'd be able to see me at ten and I didn't like to be late.

The office looked more like a shop than a law practice, with large windows and a revolving door. I parked my car out front and ran through the rain hoping it wouldn't ruin my hair entirely.

Mr. McFee was just like I'd pictured him in my head – a nice looking man with kind eyes, white hair, and round in the middle. He was wearing a clean suit with a white shirt that was a little too small for him and was waiting for me behind a heavy mahogany desk filled with files and all kinds of paperwork.

“Ah, Miss Caroline Douglas. Welcome! Come in, come in!”

“Good morning, Mr. McFee.”

“It's so good to finally meet you in person. Don't get me wrong, I've loved our long phone calls, but this is much better. Can I get you anything?”

“Just water, thank you.”

He yelled at the secretary working at her desk and she came back with a bottle of water.

“Mr. McFee, it's good to see you too.”

“You are just like Eddi described you. Tell me, how are you accommodating in Montana?”

“Better than expected. The house is beautiful.”

“I'm glad. When Eddi built that house, all he had in mind was you. He really wanted you to like it.”

“I do. He built something beautiful out here. The ranch is doing great too. His work really paid off.”

“Can I hope that you had a change of heart and might want to keep the house?”

I sighed. This was obviously an important place for Eddi and now that he left it to me, I was responsible for it, but it wasn't my place, not really. Putting down roots was not something compatible with the life I chose for myself and Montana was definitely not the place. I was mature enough to admit that I'd underestimated the place – it was beautiful out here and yes, there were some good people, but that was about it. A nice house, a few smiley faces, and some good sex wasn't enough to make me reconsider my entire life.

“Mr. McFee, I still want to sell the ranch. I'm not the right person to take care of it.”

“I just want to point out that Eddi has done everything in his power to make it as easy for you as possible. The two men you have working there, they know everything about how to run that ranch.”

“Mr. McFee...”

“Ok, ok, I won't push it. It's just... Eddi Douglas was very loved around here and so is the ranch. He was a friend of mine, too. I know he would have wanted for his business to stay in the family, but it's unfair to put all of that on your shoulders. I apologize.”

“No need. Look, I'm not in a rush to sell. Eddi left enough money for this place to run at least a year. I promise, I'll make sure the owner won't destroy what my grandfather put together. I'm not looking to make money out of this deal, Mr. McFee, just to find someone who can take care of the ranch.” I took a deep breath. “I'm just not that person.”

“I see. Well, you'll be happy to hear that while I was in Billings, I had time to take care of the succession paperwork. All you have to do is sign the deed.”

I found my fountain pen in my bag and signed my name on the piece of paper Mr. McFee put in front of me. It was done, at least part of it, and sooner than I'd expected. I had to give some kudos to Mr. McFee. For a small-town lawyer, he did a good job of managing this without inconveniencing me

one bit. When I left his office, he gave me directions for the real estate agency because there was only one in Kalispell, so I went there and met Nora, the realtor.

Nora already knew who I was and she informed me that I was hot gossip around town ever since Jax took me to the Purple Moose on Friday. We made waves. She was happy to get the listing for the ranch and we went over all the details.

“Nora, don’t make this a public listing until I’m back to D.C, ok? I’ll leave you a set of keys, but I don’t want to host open houses or anything like it.”

“I won’t. Now, about the price. Are you sure you want to go below market?”

“Yes, but there are conditions. I want to sell to a farmer, someone who wants to keep the business alive.”

“Sure.”

“And they’d have to guarantee they would keep everyone working there at least for another year. I don’t want to leave Jax and Billy Joe without jobs.”

“That’s very considerate.” She smiled and wrote everything down. “Anything else?”

“Nothing I can think of right now, but I’ll give you a call.”

“Ok, then. Since we’re not in a rush, I’ll keep this under wraps for now and we can talk more when you have everything else in order.”

“That would be great. I just wanted to talk to you now to have a plan laid out.”

“Good thinking. Eddi was right. You really are a smart cookie.”

“Did he talk to everyone in this town about me?”

“Yes.” Nora answered without hesitation. “All Eddi could talk about was his granddaughter from the big city. How beautiful she is, how smart she is.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t get embarrassed, girl. He was just a proud grandpa.”

“Yeah.” I just never knew. We were polite to each other every time he came to visit me. I liked spending time with him and he was always interested in my life, but I thought he was happy here. That he had *enough* here on his ranch. I thought we had to have a relationship because we’re family, not because he cared so much. It made me feel miserable that I never saw how much he did for me. Not until it was too late.

“Are you ok, Caroline?”

“Yes. I should go now. I still have to stop and get some groceries and dog food.”

“Be on your way then.” I wanted to shake her hand, but instead, Nora dove for a hug. “It was nice meeting you, Caroline.”

“You too.”

~ ~ ~

When I was done with my list of errands, I was drenched, my mascara was running down my face, and my stomach was rumbling. I had a trunk full of groceries, but the thought of going home and starting cooking was too much, so I drove around until I found my way to the Purple Moose. The place was much quieter during the day and the parking lot was almost deserted.

When I walked inside, I saw a very different crew than on Friday, only a couple of people having lunch and a few beers. I spotted Val behind the bar cleaning glasses and that’s where I went.

“Hey, Val.”

“Hey, you!” She turned to look at me. “Oh, wow, the rain really got to you, didn’t it?”

“Do I look that bad?”

“Nothing a wet wipe can’t fix. It’s good to see you again, Caroline. I was so sorry you and Jax took off so soon.”

“We went to the lake. It was very nice.”

Val let the glass down and smiled at me like a sleek fox.

“How nice?”

“Really nice. The weather was good, the water was calming.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it, lady!”

“I know what you meant,” I winked. “I just don’t want to answer.”

“Oh, come on. You and Jax looked so cute together. Is it serious?”

“You’ve known him for a long time, Val. You really have to ask me that?”

Val sighed and let her head down. “A girl can hope. He is such a good man. He just needs a good woman to ground him. Dare I say, a woman like you?”

“I’m not the one, sorry. He is an amazing guy and so damn hot, but I’m leaving soon. I have to go back home.”

“You have a home here too.”

“I have a house. It’s different.” I didn’t have a home anywhere, to be honest. I was a traveler. Couldn’t remember the last time I’d spent more than a couple of months in one place. It was a good thing. My work allowed me to see the world, but sometimes it was tiring. Catching my breath here in Montana was good for me, but it couldn’t last forever.

“We’ll see. That’s what I thought when I moved here from L.A.”

“What?”

She shrugged again. “What can I say. I came, I saw, I was charmed, I never went back.”

“I want to hear more of that story, but can I get something to eat first? I’m starving.”

“Sure. Phil is not here yet, but his sous-chef makes an awesome cheese steak sandwich.”

“Oh, gimme.”

“Do you want fries with that?”

“Please.”

She called my order and was nice enough to make me a hot lemon tea which was life-saving because I could feel a chill settling in my bones. When the food came, I offered to share my fries, but Val said she’d stay with me even without the bribe, which was great.

“So, you’re from Los Angeles?”

“Born and raise. My dad’s a banker, my mother is a dentist.”

“And how come you own a bar in Kalispell, Montana?”

“I like hiking. When I graduated college, my dad gave me a trip out in the Mission Mountains as a present, I met Phil, and that was it. We married three months later.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, no one believed we’d last, but it’s been twelve years.”

“Don’t you miss L.A? I mean, the beach, the palm trees? The shops?”

Val opened a light beer for herself and laughed. “Not one bit. We go there to visit my parents once in a while and every time I feel suffocated. Oh, and I can’t sleep because of the noise.”

“I see. I’m glad it worked out for you, but I’m made for big cities.”

“That’s what I used to think.”

“No, it’s different. You know this is the first time I did laundry or washed my hair myself in years? I send my laundry out and go to the salons because I’m always on the run. I like living at a fast pace.”

“That’s not living at a fast pace. That’s just being spoiled.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Maybe you’re right, but it’s my life. I have a good career, a comfortable life. The view might be nice out here, but I’m not ready to give *that* up.”

“And Jax?”

“Jax is...” I rolled my eyes. “He’s good. He makes me feel really, really good, but we both know it’s just a fling.”

“So you *are* sleeping with him!”

I opened my mouth to say something to her, but a feminine voice made me look behind.

“Who’s sleeping with who?”

The woman who just came in didn’t seem familiar. She was curvy, and fabulous with her nice boobs, olive skin, and golden hoop earrings. A nice brunette, taller than I was, with a sparkling smile.

Val obviously knew her. “Hey, Steph. Come meet Caroline.”

The other woman jumped in the high stool next to mine and took a few fries from my plate. I didn’t mind, but she could have asked, that’s all I’m saying.

“Hi! I’m Stephanie Velasquez.”

“Caroline Douglas. Velasquez? I think I’ve seen your name on a sign somewhere in town.”

“The flower shop. *Velasquez’s Tierra de Flores*.”

“Oh, that’s right! The one on Fairview Drive, I just passed it earlier. It looks nice.”

“Thank you. You’re old Eddi’s niece, right?”

“Granddaughter.” Word definitely traveled fast in Kalispell.

“And who are you sleeping with?”

“Umm...” I wasn’t sure I wanted to answer that in front of a woman I’d seen for the first time ninety seconds ago, but Val answered for me.

“Jax. She’s sleeping with Jax.”

“Oh!” Stephanie smiled to Val like they were accomplices or something. “You’re a Maverick girl.”

Really? They had a name for it? Did he fuck the entire town before I got here?

“Hey, I’m not taking any judgment from any of you.” I defended myself. “I’m single, he’s single, and he is a beast in bed. I understand why women get hung up on him.”

Stephanie shook her head. “I had better, to be honest.”

Wait, what?

“How do you know... Oh, come on, you too? I can’t have a bite in this town without bumping into someone that slept with Jax.” Steph looked at me with an apologetic smile. “You’re not bitchy like the other one, are you? What’s her name? Sheila?”

“God, no. It was a long time ago, I was drunk, and it really didn’t mean anything.”

“One night stand?” I asked.

“Eh, maybe it was two nights, but really, it was nothing. I’m engaged now.” She blurted out like she was trying to plead her case. “Victor, my fiancé, is a great guy. Jax and him are friends, actually. They go hunting together.”

“So we can be friends too.” I concluded.

“I don’t see why not. I think I like you, Caroline.”

“How can you tell?”

“Eh, I’ve heard a rumor about this badass blonde chick that gave Sheila the middle finger the other night and took her man.” She had probably heard it from Val, or at least I hoped she did. The other option was that more people were talking about it.

“I didn’t give her the middle finger, I told her to fuck off, and Jax is not her man.”

“Right, ‘cuz he’s yours.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“He’s too wild to belong to anyone.” I said, trying not to think too hard about that.

Val crossed her arms under her breasts and rolled her eyes. “That’s bullshit. The way he looked at you when you jumped into his arms? I’ve never seen that look on his face. He really likes you.”

“You read too much into it. Stephanie, tell her she reads too much into it.”

“Mmm, I don’t know. I’ve heard a rumor that the way he looked at you was fire.”

“Well, I’ll be damned, you hear a lot of rumors.”

All three of us laughed and Val came from behind the bar, putting her arms over Stephanie and I. “Do you girls have plans for the rest of the day?”

Stephanie shook her head.

“I don’t either. Jax is out of town to sell some cows or something like that, and I’m all done with errands.”

“Good.” Val approved. “How about we make a girl’s day out of it. Phil will be here in twenty minutes and he can manage the bar for the rest of the day. I feel like drinking wine and having a pedicure.”

“Sure.” It wasn’t like I had better plans. “We’ll have to do it at my house. I have to feed the dogs.”

“Oh, how many do you have?” Stephanie asked me.

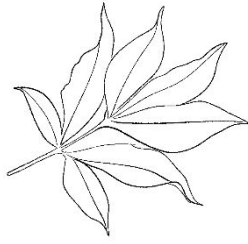
“Just one, but Jax left his mutt behind so I’m fostering.”

“Hear that, Val? She’s fostering. How cute is that?”

“So cute.”

Gosh!

“You two are terrible.”



Chapter 11

Jax

Finally, back home. I couldn't remember ever being so eager to return. I even made Billy drive the trailer through the night. We made it back late, it was almost three in the morning. I was tired, hungry, my dog was nowhere to be found, and my bed was cold and empty, but it still was better than the hotel. At least I knew that Caroline was close, peacefully sleeping on her pillow. I would much rather her be on *my* pillow, which was an unexpected desire that sneaked up on me.

I woke up groggy and not really rested, but it was a new day and I had a shit ton of work waiting for me. Mike probably did his best, but the workload was too much for one person.

To my surprise, the horses looked good, well fed and brushed when I arrived at the stables. Even Dove was more active than when I left her and she popped her head out of the box to look at me.

Eager to see how things were around the ranch, I put the saddle on Virgil and jumped on his back. We did three laps around the fields before I pulled on his harness and directed him to the big house, just so I could tell myself, I wasn't desperate to see Caroline, but I couldn't wait any longer. I had a fire inside me and I had to get to her right the fuck now. Too bad she wasn't here.

The house was completely silent, there was no one around and Caroline didn't open the door when I knocked. Not a sound, not a bark, nothing. When I checked the garage, I saw her car was gone. She was definitely not home, so I returned to Virgil and pet his neck.

"Well, boy, seems like our ride is over. Let's get back to the stables."

I took the horse back to his box and gave him a carrot. It was the end of the month, so I had payments to make. I went in the back to Eddi's old office and turned on the computer. This was the least favorite part of my job, but someone had to do it and Caroline hadn't got the hang of it yet. It will take some time for her to learn how this place needs to be managed and I could do it for now. I was done with it in two hours. All distributors have been paid and so were all the bills, so I put on my cowboy hat and walked out.

I was on my way to go check on the house again when Rusty let out a *woof* sound.

"Finally, a familiar face. Come here, boy." He ran to me with his tongue out like he always did. "You look... different." I went down on one knee to pet him. "Damn, Rusty your coat is soft like a cashmere sweater, and you smell... like fucking strawberries. What the hell happened to you?" I left him tangled and dusty and now he looked like a damn show hound.

"I gave him a bath."

Caroline.

"You did?"

"Yeah. He needed it."

“You didn’t have to.”

“You abandoned him. Someone had to see he’d be fine.”

I sat up straight and crossed my arms, narrowing my eyes at Caroline.

“I left him enough food and the doggy door was open. He was fine.”

“Oh, as long as you left him enough food.”

“Rusty is not a pretentious dog. He’s tough.” Unlike Regina, who was stepping around like the dirt was hurting her. She was cute, though. “Where were you this morning?”

“Ha!” That sound was all I got before she turned her back to me and walked into the stables. I had no choice but to fallow on her tail.

“Ha? Ha is not a place, Caroline. Where were you?”

“Oh, so we’re informing each other of our plans now?”

“I’m just saying. I came to see you and your car wasn’t there.”

“Well, the last time I came to see you I found out you had left town for three days, so let’s call it even.”

“What?” She just shrugged her shoulders and looked away. “Are you pissed at me?” Still no answer. “I was gone for work.”

“I know. Mike told me.”

“Then what’s the problem, little lady?”

“*Mike* told me. I would have preferred to hear it from you.” She smiled, but it was too sweet to be trusted. “All things considered.”

Oh, my fucking God! We were having the stupid fights already.

“All things considered? We talked about this, Caroline. I’m not your fucking high school sweetheart. I’m a grown man

and sometimes I have to fucking go places. Why does that bother you so much?”

“Oh, yeah, we talked about that.” She came closer to me and frowned. “What we *didn't* talk about is the fact that I'm not your damn whore. I'm not someone you picked up at a fucking truck stop, Jax. The least you could give me is respect. Like telling me you have to leave six hours after I left your bed.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Caroline, I didn't mean...” Oh, fuck. I was choking on my words. “I didn't want to make you feel like that.”

“Like a whore you used to cum inside?”

“Goddamn it, stop calling yourself that!” An inexplicable rage started floating through my veins. No one was allowed to speak about her like this, not even herself. “I didn't think to tell you because I'm not used to giving people explanations about my whereabouts. I didn't use you! You're too damn precious to let anyone use you woman, and fuck if I'm going to let you think I did that.”

“Ok.”

“Being with you was good, you fucking know that. I've told you again and again. Your pussy blew my fucking mind and you... damn it, you're an awesome woman. What more do you want from me? I respect you, goddamn it.”

When I looked back at her pretty doll face, she was smiling, truthfully this time. Damn, she really liked playing me.

“Maybe I should be mad at you all the time.”

“Not fucking funny, Caroline.”

“It's a little funny.”

“See, this is the complications I don't like.”

“Oh, so now I’m a complication.”

“No. Stop twisting my words. You came here acting like a pissed wife, scolding me about coming home too late and you know I’m not about that.”

“I’m fine with that, but it made me feel weird to hear you’d left. I don’t even have your phone number.”

“I will give you my fucking phone number.”

I walked a few steps away from her to calm myself down and went into one of the empty boxes. I was pissed because she was pissed, but I also was pissed that even for a moment, she thought she was worth less to me than she really is.

“Caroline, come in here.”

“Yes?”

“Did I really make you feel like a whore? Did I fuck up that much?”

Her beautiful blue eyes rolled into the back of her head.

“I might have exaggerated a little, but I meant it when I told you that I deserved to hear from you. It doesn’t mean you’re my boyfriend, Jax, it means you’re polite.”

“Noted. That was all, right? You didn’t think that because I was too rough with you or because of something I’ve said?”

“I like how rough you are, and I love your filthy mouth.”

“Ok, then. Come closer.”

“Why?” She asked the same time she made a step forward.

When she was close enough that I could reach her, I grabbed her arm, turned her and pushed her chest into the box wall, slamming her with my body.

“Because I already know you’re drenched and I need to get my dick wet.” I pushed her head to the side and kissed her

neck. “I’ve been on the road three days. Do you have any idea how hard I need to fuck you?”

“Please, Jax.”

My hand shamelessly slipped under the hem of her denim skirt and I grabbed a handful of her ass.

“Please what?”

“Please, fuck me.”

“Yes, baby.”

I pushed down her lace thong and sneaked a finger inside her. It slipped in with no problem because she was so damn wet already, just like I thought she would be. Caroline wanted me just like I wanted her – just as hard, just as fierce.

“Lift your leg, baby. Make room for me in your tight body.”

She did and I hooked one arm under her knee to hold it up, while pushing her chest flat on the wall of the box. Like this, I had full control over her body. She was mine to have and mine to fuck however the hell I wanted. It was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Jax, I need your cock. Now.”

“Stay still for me, baby.”

I guided the tip of my cock to her pussy and pushed inside. Caroline pushed back the moment she felt me at her entrance and took all my length in. If she felt any discomfort, she didn’t let it stop her.

“Easy.” I growled.

“No, I don’t want easy. Take me hard.”

“Fuck!” I sunk my teeth in her delicate neck and sucked on the skin. “You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. Are you ready for me, Caroline?”

“I’ve been ready for you since before you took my panties off.”

Jesus fucking Christ! She was going to kill me. I was going to put my cock in her pussy one day, listen to her talk, and just drop dead.

I pushed her skirt up her hips until I had a front row view to her amazing round ass and started fucking her. I looked down at the way my cock was coming in and out of her body and I lost my fucking head. There was no way I could control myself. I wanted to give it to her hard – harder than any other man – and make her scream my name.

With my hand in her hair, I pulled her head back and fucked her relentlessly, moving my hips like a maniac. I was on a mission to erase the memory of any other man that had touched her, with my cock. I wanted her to feel just me, *know* just me, the *Montana lone rider* that loved her body in the way no one else could.

Her fist slammed into the wood wall. “Goddamn it, Jax.”

“Talk to me, baby. Tell me how you feel.”

“Like you own me. I feel like you own me.” She breathed out. “And I love it.”

“I don’t own you, Caroline. The determined boardroom boss lady doesn’t belong to anyone.” I leaned closer to her ear. “But the dirty slut hidden inside you, baby? *She’s all mine.*”

“Oh, my God! Jax.”

“You’re close, baby.”

“Yes.”

“Is it my cock or my words? Which do you like better?”

“Both. Make me come.”

I drilled her until she melted into me, consumed by pleasure. She moaned and said my name through soft little cries while the orgasm was ravishing her body.

“Let go, Caroline. I’m here to hold you.”

“It’s so good.”

“I know.” I let go of her leg and took my hand between her legs, prolonging the climax and she bucked like a wild mustang caught in ropes. “Shh, easy, baby. I’m not done with you. I still have to fill you up.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I want to taste your cum, Jax.”

“Fucking hell.” I thrust inside her a couple more times and pulled out. “Get on your knees.” I barked and she eagerly executed.

She sat in front of me with her mouth open and tongue out. Caroline was more sexy, more beautiful than a fucking porn star. Seeing her at my feet was enough to set me on fire. I fisted my shaft, stroked it a few times, and guided the tip into her mouth to spill my cum, letting out the relieved growl that was crawling up my neck. My body tensed and I felt heights of pleasure, I was sure no other man had touched.

Caroline didn’t hesitate to swallow every drop and lick her lips and after she was done, I lifted her up and pulled her into a devouring kiss, feeling our love making lingering on her tongue.

“You fucking amazing woman.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Yes, you fucking are.” I was in awe of her and the way she embraced her desire. I liked a woman who was not afraid to ask for what she wanted. It was fucking sexy.

I helped her get her clothes in order and tucked my cock back in my pants. There wasn’t much hope of hiding what just happened because I was breathing like my lungs were giving up, her hair was a mess, and her knees were red from sitting on the hay covered floor.

When she was done, Caroline jumped in my arms and I didn’t hesitate catching her.

“Hello, little lady.”

“Hello, baby.” She kissed me slow, very sensual. “Are you going on any more work trips any time soon?”

“No.”

“Am I going to see you tonight?”

“Your place or mine?” I asked her. It really didn’t matter. I’d be fine spending the night with her right here.

“Mine. Bring Rusty with you.”

“Sure.”

“I hope you don’t mind, I bought him a new collar today. His old one was a mess.”

“That was nice of you, but don’t get any high hopes. He won’t keep it clean for more than a day.”

“Terrible dog.” She laughed and we walked out of the box. Caroline went to Dove’s box and petted the mare’s head. “Hey, girl. How are you today?”

“She’s fine. I’m happy to see you’re not scared she wants to eat you anymore.”

“Oh, we made friends. I took her out for a walk.”

“*You* took her out?”

“I wasn’t in a saddle, Jax. I just put a harness on her, which took me some time to figure out, and took her to the paddock. It was like walking a huge dog.”

I laughed so loud, it echoed. “Nice.”

I heard noises coming from the entry of the stables and turned to see Billy Joe getting out of his pickup truck.

“Good day, Miss Douglas.”

“Hey, Billy. How was your trip?”

“Good, thank you for asking.” He nodded at me. “Jax, I need you to check a tractor, boy. The radiator is acting funny again. Whenever you have time is fine.”

Caroline stepped in between us. “It’s ok, you can have him now, Billy. I have to go to the house anyway. You guys have fun and don’t stay in the sun too long, ok?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I told her and winked.

She called Regina and Rusty and all three of them disappeared out of sight.

Billy came to me and slapped his heavy palm on the back of my head.

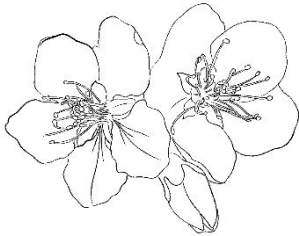
“What the hell, old man?”

“She is a lady and this is a horses’ stable, boy. Eddi’s granddaughter is not your play thing. Have some class.”

Asshole.

I guess we didn’t hide the signs as well as I thought, not that I was trying to keep Caroline a secret.

“Mind your own business, Billy.”



Chapter 12

Caroline

My heart was beating like the wings of a butterfly and speaking of butterflies, there were a few in my stomach too. The last few days with Jax have been amazing and he made me feel so damn special and beautiful. All it took were a few words, or a look that made it seem like he was ready to eat me whole, to twist my insides like a pretzel.

He slept in my bed every night and I woke up screaming every morning. It couldn't get much better than this, I was sure of it. Except it did get better when I came downstairs to find a shirtless Jax making coffee in my kitchen.

“Good morning, handsome.”

“Mornin', little lady.” He looked at my satin pajamas and smiled. “Aren't you gorgeous today? Come here, give me a kiss.”

I almost ran to him. He tasted like fresh mint and pure man, and I loved it. Nothing could compare with kissing Jax Maverick.

“I made coffee, but just so you know, you're running low.”

“I'll pick some up today. I'll have to go to the postal office anyways.”

“Are you sending a letter?”

“No, smartass. My mom's birthday is next week and I've seen a very pretty dress at a boutique that she would love.”

“Such a good daughter.”

He kissed me again but we were interrupted by the dogs that came into the house barking and looking for attention.

“Hey, guys.” I petted both of them. “Did you feed them already, Jax?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, so let's give them a treat.”

I walked to the freezer.

“Are you giving them ice cream?”

“Nope. *Pupsicles*. They’re doggy safe popsicles. I always make some for Regina, she loves them.”

“I swear to God, I’ve never heard of a more spoiled dog.” Jax sat his ass down on the kitchen floor and Regina ran to snuggle at his chest like that was her place. Yeah, I knew the feeling. “Yeah, I’m talking about you, lady. Your mama spoils you.”

“Shut up, she deserves it. Look at her pretty little face.”

“She is awfully cute.”

I called Rusty and Regina and they gladly accepted my treats.

“Good dogs.” I said when they took the popsicles to their bowls and started eating.

“What’s in those things? Dog food?”

“Greek yogurt, peanut butter, banana, and some blue spirulina powder. You can try one if you want.”

“I’m good. I already ate some cold pizza from last night.”

“Jax, that is a terrible breakfast.”

“It’s food. It will do. I’m in a hurry.”

“You have to go already?”

“Yeah. I have a lot of work this morning. I have to go look for a tractor part and I’m not sure I’ll find it in town. Might need to go all the way to Kila and pick it up from the factory.”

“Busy day.”

“There’s a salesman coming too. I have to meet him here at five.”

“Salesman?”

“Yeah, we’re due for an update on our milking system. This guy has some good offers.” I knew the system he was talking about. Billy Joe had shown me the main barn the other day, the one where the cows were kept. It was huge, the size of an airport hanger and much more modern inside than anyone could tell from the outside.

“Can I help with anything?”

“Just sign the order if we decide to take this one.”

“Ok.” I put my hands around his neck and pulled him down to kiss me *again*. I just couldn’t get enough of it. “You taste so good.”

“Baby, I’d love nothing more than stay here and suck on your tongue, but I really have to get out. I have to go check on the cornfields.”

“Oh, wait.” I found my bag and took out a sunscreen spray. When I put it on his face, Jax stepped back.

“The hell is that?”

“Sunscreen. You stay too much in the open field. I was thinking about it for days.”

“I’m used to the sun, Caroline.”

“Well, it’s damaging your skin, so please keep this on you and apply it every three to five hours. Thank you.”

He rolled his eyes while chuckling. “You’re adorable.”

Eddi’s letter came back to me, about how Jax let himself get swallowed by work and someone had to be there to take care of him.

“Jax, promise me you’ll use it.”

“Yes, ma’am. Anything else?”

“Drink lots of water.”

“Will do. I’ll see you tonight, baby.”

“See you.”

He left me alone, watching him with a longing look.

Damn it, I was in big trouble. The way my heart flips every time he walked into a room was not the way a heart should react at a fling. The sex was out of this world amazing, but it wasn't the only thing I liked about Jax. I loved the way he made me laugh, the way he held me when we went to sleep, the way he was so focused on work, I loved the way he loved my dog. Slowly, but surely, I was starting to love everything about him.

This was just the opposite of what we promised each other would happen between us, but it was a chain reaction that no matter how hard I've tried, I couldn't stop it, or even slow it down. Jax was one of a kind and it was impossible not to take him in my heart.

Yes, I was in trouble and it was up to me to take myself out of it. I couldn't let my growing feelings for Jax trick me into thinking that we stood a chance in the long run. He was not made to belong, he was made to be free. I wasn't a naïve teenager; far from me to have the idea that I had the power to change who Jax Maverick was, or the things he wanted in life. He had his path and I had mine. Nothing was stopping us from enjoying what we had now – *carpe diem* and all that shit – but I had to remind myself that even if I was falling, I'd still have to go. He wasn't looking for love and I wasn't looking to give my love to anyone.

No matter how my heart felt about it, one day soon I'll step on a plane, leave this ranch behind, and probably never come back. Jax will be just a bittersweet memory.

I wondered what Eddi would think about it if he knew I was falling in love with his ranch hand. He loved me, I knew that now, and it was clear from his letter that he cared about Jax a lot. Would this make him happy or would he take out the shotgun? The thought made me smile. It would have probably made Eddi very happy. He wanted me to come here, to live this life and see why he left my dad behind the way he did, and now I understood. There was a lot of beauty, a lot of peace. I

liked to think that wherever he was now, he was proud that I got to see this place through his eyes.

Rusty came and licked me on the leg. It was his way of checking on me.

“I’m fine, buddy.” I stretched my hand to scratch his chin. “Just thinking about your daddy. I’m going to miss him when I leave. Hell, I might even miss you and your ugly face.”

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After sulking thinking about the future and the things Jax involuntarily made me feel for another hour or so, I went on with my day. I mailed my mom her present like I said I would and then I was ready to go back home, but I got a phone call for Mr. McFee asking if I could stop by his office, so I did that. When I got there, he was waiting for me in the parking lot.

“Hello, Caroline.”

“Hey, is everything alright, Mr. McFee?”

“Yes, dear. I just forgot to give you this.” He showed me a big cardboard box.

“What’s in there?”

“Your grandfather’s journals. When he passed, he asked for most of his personal belongings to be donated. You know, clothes, the car, things like that, but not the journals. I completely forgot about them until today, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, I had no idea he kept journals.”

“He never left home without one of these in his pocket. If you don’t want them...”

“No, I do. Can you put them in the trunk, please?”

“Sure thing.”

I got out of the car to help him and we made sure the box was safely in place before I left. This time I was on my way

back to the ranch, but in a deserted parking lot between two industrial looking buildings, I spotted Jax's car. I was sure it was him because he had a very nice pair of wheels – a sixties mustang that he restored himself in a gorgeous teal color. An American muscle car for an American muscle man.

I killed the engine and walked to his car. I could hear the radio from a distance. Jax was inside listening to music with his window down. He had his head back, eyes closed, and was holding a lit cigarette between his fingers. When I heard the song, my heart dropped. It was Neil Diamond singing *Sweet Caroline*.

I couldn't control my smile while I walked to his window.

“Hey, cowboy. Are you thinking about me?”

His bottomless dark eyes snapped open, finding mine with surprise. He had such beautiful eyes, it almost knocked me off my feet.

“As a matter of fact, I was thinking about you. Where did you come from, little lady?”

“The lawyer's office. He wanted to give me some things. I saw your car on my way back and decided to say hello.”

“Well, hello, beautiful.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for that spare part.” He pointed to one of the buildings. “They say it will be delivered in half an hour.”

I leaned in through the window and put my lips on his. I wanted to give him a soft peck on the mouth, but instead we ended up devouring each other. When I pulled back, I wrinkled my nose.

“You taste like tobacco.”

“Don't kiss me then,” he said cockily, knowing damn well I couldn't keep myself away.

After checking if anyone was around, I discreetly pushed my panties down from under my dress and threw them in his face before climbing in his lap.

“Push your chair back, Jax.” I told him, licking my lips.

He found the piece of satin that covered my pussy and picked it up to look at it. “What do you want to do, baby?”

“I want to blow your mind. Push the chair back.”

“We’re in a parking lot.”

“An *empty* parking lot.” I started grinding on his already erect cock and licked his neck. “I’ve missed you. Let me show you how much.”

“Fuck. Are you always this dirty or is it just the effect I have on you?”

“It’s you, Jax. You’ve turned me into this crazy woman who can’t go an hour without your cock inside me and who wants to ride you in your car.” The boldness was new to me. I wasn’t an exhibitionist by any means. In fact, I pretty much was a under the covers kind of girl, but he was awakening a new side of me and I loved it.

“You’re playing with fire, baby. If some fucker sees you like this, I’m going to get very angry.” But despite his words, he pulled at the dress, freeing my tits. “No one gets to see you like this but me. You’re mine.”

“Just you.” I whispered while tugging at his belt. “You don’t want me to stop, do you?”

“No, baby, but it’s gotta be fast.”

I took his cock out and wrapped my hand around it. He was hard and throbbing in my hand and it made my mouth water when I looked down. He had an impressive member, all thick and veiny, always ready like a loaded gun. I gave him a few strokes and Jax made a feral sound.

“You like this?” I teased him.



Jax let his head down on the head rest and looked at me. “Do you have any idea what you do to me, woman?”

“Tell me.”

“From the moment I looked into your crystal blue eyes I wanted to have you. I wanted to put my hands in your silky blonde hair, pull your head back, and kiss you until you couldn’t fucking see straight, and now that I have you, I can’t fucking stop wanting more. You’re more compelling than hard liquor.”

“Damn it.” The way he spoke made the hairs on my body stand up. It was *that* intense.

Desperate and unwilling to wait any longer, I pulled at his shirt until the buttons popped open and uncovered his chest. Aside from his cock, his hard chest was my favorite part of his body. I couldn’t get enough of it. I wanted to look at it, lick it, bite it, all at once.

“Are you ready for your first riding lesson, baby?”

“On you? Sure I am.”

He helped me get up and guided his shaft to the entrance of my pussy. When I lowered myself on him, I felt stretched to the limit. This angle was so deep, I could feel Jax everywhere in my body.

“Oh, my Gosh.”

“Easy, Caroline. Don’t hurt yourself.” He licked my neck with slow strokes, calming me down while I was adjusting to the new position.

Jax was a well-endowed man. Sex with him always came with a little pain, but it’s what made it so delicious. The roughness, the rawness, the severity of our love making was out of the ordinary. How could anyone gather the strength to walk away from something like this?

Not wanting to think about leaving him, I focused on the way he filled me up and the pleasure spreading through me.

“Oh, this is so much... Jax.”

“You can take it, baby. I know you can.” He tilted my chin so he could kiss me. It was a soft touch of our lips, but it carried so much hunger. “Move up for me.”

I did what he said and moved up and down a couple of times, getting accustomed to the feeling. With every thrust, the pleasure grew deeper and stronger. I was a slave to the way he made me feel. I was a slave to the way he fucked me. I knew right then and there that there won't be anyone like him in my life ever again.

“Jax.”

“Ride me, Caroline. Don't fucking stop.”

“I *can't* stop.”

I pushed myself up and down over and over again, riding him like a mad woman while his mouth caressed my tits. The car filled up with the smell of sex and the sounds of our tempestuous breaths. We were in a parking lot in broad daylight, screwing the hell out of each other, and it was the most erotic thing I've ever done.

The pleasure gathered like a yarn ball in my gut, ready to explode but I wanted to hold on just one more minute. I needed more time with him like this.

“You're ready, Caroline. I can feel it. Come for me.”

“No.”

“What?”

“I don't want it to end. I want...” I just wanted to be with him like this forever. My heart was begging me to not let this moment pass.

His big hand got to my neck and he wrapped his fingers around my throat.

“Listen to me, baby. I love how insatiable you are, it's hot as fuck, but you come whenever I tell you to come.”

“Jax...”

“Now, Caroline.”

I was gone. There was no way I could resist when he spoke to me like that. My body submitted itself to Jax’s will and I broke down in moans and cries, letting the orgasmic wave swallow me. Every single one of my muscles was throbbing and my heart was slamming into my ribs.

Jax was chasing his own pleasure, taking control and pushing inside me from underneath at a furious pace. When I had enough strength to move, I let my mouth fall on his pectoral and bite it. *Hard.*

“Fuck!” Jax cursed through his teeth and I knew he like it.

“I want to feel you come, Jax.”

“Yes, baby.” He let go and I felt him coating my insides while I dragged my nails down from his neck to his torso. “Fucking hell.”

I put my forehead on his while we gathered ourselves.

“Jax, that was...”

“Yeah, it fucking was. You’re going to drive me insane.”

“You keep saying that like it’s a bad thing.”

He laughed. I loved hearing him laugh.

I was still in his lap when his phone made a sound.

“Cover yourself, baby. My delivery was made. I have to go inside and pick it up.”

“Ok, then.”

Jax saw my pout and kissed my nose playfully.

“I’ll see you back at the house in half an hour, ok?”

“Oh, I have to stop by the supermarket. We’re running low on coffee, remember?”

“Fine, wait here, we’ll go to the store together. I’m going to drive behind you.”

He tucked my breasts back into the lace bra gently, kissing each one and helped me clean up before tucking himself back into his jeans. When he was done, there weren’t many signs left of our illicit encounter.

Jax walked me to my car and kissed me before opening the driver’s door.

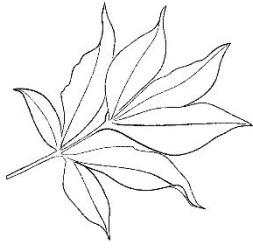
“I’ll be back in a sec.”

He moved fast and then we drove together to the store, parking our cars next to one another. The contrast between my sleek Mercedes and his edgy Mustang was striking. A very good metaphor for Jax and I.

I grabbed my purse from the passenger seat while Jax went and found us a shopping cart and then we walked inside, holding hands, like a married couple that have done that a million times before. My heart swelled to the size of a ripe watermelon.

It was the little things. I was falling in love with the little things. Things that I haven’t shared with anyone else. Samson never made coffee for me in the morning, we had a chef. He never went shopping with me, or took me to a midnight picnic by the lake. In fact, short of the bedroom and some very fancy dinners, we didn’t share much of our lives at all. Sam and I almost got married and he gave me a few crumbs. How could I resist falling for Jax when he made me feel like the center of the world?

Jax and I won’t go on the same path I had with Sam. There won’t be a ring, or a promise, or a future of any kind, but still, what we had meant a million times more.



## *Chapter 13*

### **Jax**

We were domestic. Caroline moved from one shelf to another, picking stuff up and placing it in the cart while I followed behind her in silence. She was fucking adorable, checking the ingredients of every product and frowning when something was not up to her standards.

She got three bags of organic coffee imported from some tropical places and a few bottles of creamer.

“Jax?”

“Yes.”

“We don’t need milk, do we?”

“You have a herd of dairy cows, baby. We have storage for milk, eggs, and beef next to the main barn.”

She might not have noticed, but I put a couple of milk bottles in her fridge every time I sent out a shipment to clients.

“Right. I guess we’re done then. Oh, we should get some ice cream for dessert. What kind do you want?”

“You pick. I’m not big on ice cream.”

“How can you not be *big* on ice cream? It’s amazing. We’re getting vanilla and I’m going to make a brownie to go with it. You’re going to love it.”

She bent over the refrigerator and I walked behind her, grabbing her hips and pushing her ass back into me.

“I know a way you could make me love it.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really.”

“Tell me, Jax.”

“I’d love to lick it from your tits, little lady. I’d *love* to trace a path of ice cream all the way down to your pussy and eat it.” She shivered and I spun her around to get access to her luscious mouth.

“We’re in the middle of a supermarket.”

“And earlier we were in a parking lot.”

I pulled her closer and kissed her, opening her lips with my mouth and going as deep as I could. She tasted like sex, and sunshine. Hot and soft, she was one fucking amazing woman and I couldn’t get enough of her. The deeper I kissed her, the more I wanted. I wouldn’t have pulled back if someone wouldn’t have cleared their throat behind us.

When we looked to see who was standing there, we saw Val and Phil.

“Well,” Val winked at Caroline, “you two seem to be having fun.”

“Hey, what did I say when we had that girl’s day? I take no judgment, so shut up.”

I looked down at Caroline. “Girl’s day?”

“Yeah, baby. We had one when you were on the road. Val encouraged me to day drink and gossip. It was awesome.”

“Sounds like my wife.” Phil muttered and shook Caroline’s hand. “I’m Phil and you must be the Douglas girl. I’ve heard a lot about you, but don’t worry, it’s all good.”

“That’s me. I’m a big fan of your elk burger, by the way.”

“I like you already. You have good taste for good food.”

“It’s Jax you have to thank. He convinced me to order it.”

“You actually listen to this idiot?”

I glared at Phil and bumped his shoulder with my fist. “Shut up, man.”

“You shut up. Me and your girlfriend are having a conversation.”

*Girlfriend.* Fuck. She wasn’t... was she? Sure Phil didn’t mean anything by it, he was just being polite, but Caroline and I were too damn cozy. Sex, sleepovers, dinners, we were practically living together. Not that I didn’t enjoy having her ass within a reaching distance so I could smack it whenever I wanted, but we were getting dangerously close to a place I had no interest in going.

“Val, how do you put up with him?” I deflected.

She shrugged. “He’s good in bed. What are you two up to?”

“Caroline needed a few things from the store, that’s all.”

Phil started looking through the cart. “Salad, coffee, ice cream, frozen pizza? Boring. Grill the girl a proper steak, asshole.”

“She didn’t ask me for one, *asshole.*”

He turned to Caroline. “Don’t tell me you’ve been here for so many days and didn’t taste a juicy piece of steak.”

“I didn’t, sorry.”

“Take this from a cook, Caroline. The Douglas beef is the best in Montana. You have to taste it.”

“Well, I have an idea.” She put her arm around my waist and smiled. “Why don’t you and Val come by tomorrow night? I’m sure Jax will grill all of us some steaks.”

Val clapped her hands. “Ah, that would be amazing. We’ll bring dessert. Phil makes the best pies.”

“Girl, that’s perfect. We already bought three pints of ice cream to go with it.” She winked my way and I nodded. “We’ll see you tomorrow night.”

I shook hands with Phil while Caroline and Val kissed goodbye. The whole thing was too damn suburban, like we were couples living in a cul-de-sac or something. How the fuck did we get to this? How did I let it go so far? With any other woman, I would have pulled the brakes after the second night spent together.

Caroline kept making plans out loud on our way to the register, talking about the salad she wanted to serve and what kind of plates she needed, but I barely heard one word. I surely couldn’t answer her because I was feeling like there was a collar around my neck choking me.

When we got to the cars, I was so fucking desperate to get out of there, I let her handle all the bags and jumped in my seat.

“Jax.” She called right before I had a chance to turn on the ignition.

“What?”

“What time are you coming back?”

I kept my eyes on the dashboard. “Later.”

“I know it’s going to be later, but when do you think I should have the dinner ready?”



“I don’t fucking know, Caroline, goddamn it! I don’t need you to feed me!” When I finally raised my head to look at her, she was frozen like a deer in headlights, squeezing two brown grocery bags at her chest. It was official – I was the world’s greatest dick. “Caroline, I’m sorry...”

“Is it something I did?”

“No,” I sighed and opened the door, stepping back out. “No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

“Fuck no, you shouldn’t have. What did I do?”

“I’ve told you, you did nothing.” I walked in circles, not knowing how to say the things I was feeling.

“Is there something wrong then?”

“The thing that’s wrong is that nothing’s fucking wrong.” I made no sense. “Look at us, a modern fucking fairytale. We have coffee in the morning, you make me wear sunscreen, and now we’re hosting a fucking dinner party. You know what this is? This is a relationship, Caroline, and it’s not fucking real.”

“The nerve on you.” She turned her back to me and walked to the trunk on her fuck-me high heels, throwing the bags inside. “If you don’t want, don’t come, Jax. Don’t come to the dinner party.”

“You promised Val I’d grill the steaks.”

“Phil was right, you are an idiot.” She slammed the trunk closed, barely missing my fingers, and I’m sure it was on purpose. “I can grill, Jax. I can grill like it’s no one’s business. My dad is an avid meat lover and we take barbecue very seriously in the Douglas family. I don’t need you there and I won’t force you to be there if you don’t want to be.”

“Caroline.”

“Just like I didn’t ask you to come to see me every night. I didn’t ask you to make breakfast every morning. I didn’t ask you to come to the fucking supermarket. It was all you.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but words didn't come out because I didn't know how the fuck to respond to that. She was right. I went to her because I couldn't control myself enough to stay away more than a few hours. My dick always dragged me back to Caroline's door. The need to have her overpowered my mind and I ended up doing all the things I swore I would never do. I was shacking up with her. It was a shitty situation, but I've put myself in it, so the only one that deserved to be yelled at was me.

"I'm sorry." I repeated myself for the third time. "It's my fault. I'm sorry I raised my voice at you."

"I'm sorry you raised your voice too."

"Damn it, Caroline, I'm trying to apologize."

"Well, thanks, but I don't accept your apology." She opened her car door and turned to me before getting in. Her eyes, usually so sparkly and happy, were vicious. "I'm not going to be your punching bag every time you think I'm trying to drag you down the aisle against your will, Jax. If you have issues, work them out on your own."

"Caroline, just listen..."

"Can't. I'm having a dinner party tomorrow night and I need to go get ready for it. Looks like I'm grilling." She left without giving me the chance to say anything else.

I was smart enough to read between the lines and understand that she just told me to go fuck myself and not come to dinner with Val and Phil tomorrow which was for the best. I needed to put some space between us; sleep in my bed, alone, enjoy a beer in peace. Do all the things that I fought so hard to have and vowed to not let a woman ruin. This solitary life was the one that I wanted. Right?

~ ~ ~

The day only got shittier after I went back to the ranch. Knowing Carolina was so damn close and I couldn't go to her was a very effective brand of torture. To keep myself distracted, I worked. I worked in the field all day, hard, determined, until my palms were raw and my muscles were sore. The exhaustion was a welcomed distraction, so I stayed and kept working long after everyone else was gone. It was almost nine when I made it back to my house.

The place was dead quiet when I walked in, something I usually enjoyed, especially after such a fucking long day like the one I've had. Tonight though, the silence was just fucking lonely, mocking me for losing my temper with Caroline earlier.

I looked around for Rusty, but he was nowhere to be found. Of course, my dog still had a fucking lady to visit and Caroline had dog popsicles. Sure he would chose her over me any fucking day.

I opened the fridge and reached for a beer, but took a bottle of water instead and my eyes fell on the few cans of hard seltzers I bought for Caroline. She loved them, the mango ones especially, and now I had fucking seltzers in my fridge. Even when I wasn't with her, I wasn't without her. In such short time, she became part of my life and I mostly liked it, but I just wanted to keep some things for me.

I went out on the porch, sat in my favorite chair and looked over the green fields that were running all the way to the mountains. Beautiful. *Peaceful*. This house and the heart-stopping wild view used to be enough to fulfill the hole in my chest, but now that hole was Caroline-shaped.

Fuck it. There was no reason to stay here and mope around like a stupid motherfucker when she was five minutes away. There was no need in missing her when I could just make it right. Space just didn't seem so appealing anymore after I've spent so many nights with my cock buried deep inside her.

Finding my car keys, I drove back to Kalispell faster than ever before. It was late and almost everything was closed, but luckily, I knew where to go to get help, so I drove until I found the house I was looking for and rang the doorbell. The clock on my phone said it was well past ten, so maybe dropping by at this hour was not the polite thing to do, but desperate times required desperate measures and I was in deep shit.

“Jax! What’s up?”

“Hey, Victor. Sorry, to bother you at this hour, man. I know you have work in the morning, but this is urgent. Is Steph home? I drove by her shop, but it was closed.”

“Yeah, she’s taking a shower. Is everything alright?”

“I need some flowers.” I regretted my words the moment I saw his face. “Wipe that stupid smile off your face.”

“Lady problems?”

“Just go get Steph.”

His laugh was screeching in my ears. “Ok, ok. I just didn’t know I’d live to see this day. Come in.”

I waited in their hallway, awkwardly moving from one leg to another. The last time I’d been in this house Victor wasn’t living here yet, but that was a long time ago. All three of us moved on.

When he came back, Stephanie was behind him.

“Ok, Maverick, what happened? Why are you at my door?” I’ve always liked her. She was a no-bullshit kind of girl.

“I need you to hook me up with a bouquet of flowers. I know it’s late, I know I’m a dick for coming here, but I’ve been a bigger dick to someone else. Help me out, Steph.”

She crossed her arms and giggled. “Look at you, Jax, ready to apologize for your mistakes. You’re growing.”

“Flowers without the mockery would be great.”

“No can do. You’re lucky, though. I have a few vases of fresh white roses here. I don’t have anything but some satin ribbon to dress the bouquet, but it will save us a trip to the store.”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll be back in a jiffy.” She said before leaving the room.

Victor and I chatted a little bit about how bad the hunting season was going, but we didn’t have time to get too deep into it because Steph worked her magic very fast.

“Thank you, Stephanie. I owe you big time.”

“Oh, I’ll remember that. Say hi to Caroline for me, please.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You two know each other?”

“Oh, yes.” *Fuck me.* “Jax, I love her. Don’t screw this up.”

I nodded to the flowers. “Can’t you see I’m trying?”

She laughed and walked me to the door.

“Try harder, Maverick.”

“Is this a thing? Are you two friends now?”

“Oh, yeah.”

We said goodbye and I drove back to the ranch, taking the road straight to the big house and parked right in front. I couldn’t see any lights on, but Caroline’s bedroom had the window on the other side of the house, so she might still be up. I tried the door, but it was locked so I started ringing the bell... for ten minutes, until she finally took pity on me and came down the stairs.

“What, Jax?”

I pushed the roses under her nose.

“I’m sorry, I was dick. Again.”

“Yes, you were.” But she took the flowers and bit her lip to hide a smile. “This is unexpected coming from someone who was scared that I was trying to have his babies.”

“I deserve that, I get it. I know the flowers don’t fix much, but it would mean a lot if you’d accept them.”

“They’re beautiful, thank you. I love roses.”

“Ok.” She didn’t move and I was running out of ways of saying I’m sorry. “I guess I’ll go back home now. Sleep well, Caroline.”

I turned to leave, but she grabbed my shirt and pulled me back.

“Come inside, Jax.”

“You want me to?”

“I do, but if you want to spend a night alone, that’s fine too. All you have to do is tell me, you don’t have to yell.”

I thought I wanted to go. I really believed that I needed to get back to the way things were for a while, but I’ve dreaded every moment when I looked at my side and she wasn’t there.

“Fuck no.” I whispered and walked inside, picking Caroline up in my arms.

She put her legs around my waist and let her head down to laugh. “You have such a foul mouth.”

“Don’t you like it?”

Caroline kissed me. “I love it.” She sniffed one of the roses and then looked at me. “Did you go to your ex in the middle of the night to get me flowers?”

“I... fuck, she told you?”

“Yes. It’s fine, don’t worry. I actually think Steph is a fantastic woman. Funny and smart.”

“She is.” Not that it mattered. It didn’t take long for me to understand that Steph and I were like oil and water. She was

much better at being a friend than anything else.

“I’ve also invited her and Victor to dinner too.”

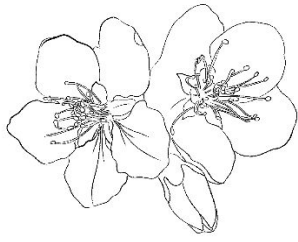
“Nice. Am I still invited? I get it if you don’t want me there.”

Her arm curled around my neck. “Of course you are. I’ll even save some ice cream for us, so you have something to play with after they leave.”

“That sounds like a fucking wet dream, baby.”

“Let’s go to bed, Jax.”

We did and no one slept for hours.



## *Chapter 14*

# Caroline

I've been reading through Eddi's journals all day and the more pages I've got to turn, the more I wanted to keep reading. All of his life was mapped out in these notebooks. He didn't write every day, but all his thoughts were laid down on paper in cursive handwriting that looked a lot like my father's.

The first entry was dated June seventeenth 1987, the day his wife died. June seventeenth was the only day of the year when my dad would step into a church. He's the one who had told me it was the anniversary of his mother's death.

The entry that Eddi wrote that day was short, but the pain was so real, it made my chest tighten. Eddi didn't just lose a wife and the mother of his children, he lost part of his soul. The few scribbled words smudged by tears shook my core in a way I couldn't quite explain.

I went through some of the story of his life, reading his thoughts and understanding why he did the things he did. In a



few hours I'd learned more about my own grandfather than in all the years I've been alive.

When Jax came back to the house, I was still curled up on the couch with one of the notebooks in my lap.

"Hey, little lady."

"Hi, baby."

"Is that a good book?"

"Eddi." I simply told him and sniffed. "Those are the diaries his lawyer gave me."

"McFee?"

"Yeah. I was reading something about my dad and got emotional."

"There's a story there isn't it? About Eddi and your daddy? I knew he had a son, but he rarely spoke about him, just you."

"Yeah. Grandpa was a very successful man. He made a lot of money, made a name for himself, and then decided to give it all away and move here. He sold the business and donated most of his fortune, except from my dad's trust fund, some money he put aside for himself, and a fund that was given to me after I graduated. It hurt my father a lot."

"Because of the money."

"Because of the business. Dad grew up looking up to Eddi and all he wanted was to inherit that business and expand it. He prepared for it since he was a boy and he always felt betrayed because Grandpa chose to sell the business and come here." I shook my head. "Eddi couldn't stay in D.C because that's where he lost his wife and his daughter, dad never wanted to leave."

"Your dad never got over that shit?"

"No. He lost his mother too, and his sister, and after all that, his father just left everything behind. It was hard on him."

Every time Eddi came to visit, they only spoke a few words to each other.”

“I’m sorry for your dad, baby. Eddi was a great guy. The type of man worth having in your life.”

“Yeah, I guess dad and I both missed out on that.”

“What are you talking about? Eddi loved you. He wrote to you, came to visit, and all that.”

“Yeah but... we were never close. We never really talked about things.” I picked up the notebook and showed it to him. “Only now I’m starting to see the kind of man he was.”

“I’d see him write in those things all the time.”

“Yeah, it’s very messy. Sometimes he just scribbled down thoughts without any context, but I really feel like I’m starting to know him.”

Jax came and kissed my forehead, his lips lingering on my skin.

“You’re going to have to leave Eddi to the side, baby, because you’ve promised four people that we’re going to feed them today, remember?”

“What time is it?”

“Almost four. We have about two hours until they arrive and you don’t want to see Phil hungry.”

“Ok, then. I’ll prep everything in the kitchen and set the table. Can you make sure the grill is ready?”

“Sure thing.”

“Is the beef ready?”

“Marinating in the fridge. Move fast, woman, because I want to take a shower with you before everyone arrives.”

Well, that was some motivation. I managed to have everything done in record time and virtually ran up the stairs, just in time. Jax was stepping in the shower when I got there. We made love under the water spray and he once again made

me scream his name from the top of my lungs. He bruised my breasts with love bites and I refreshed the claw marks on his neck. By the time we walked out of the shower, I was clean, but my legs were wobbly.

I left Jax in the bathroom to shave his stubble and I looked through my clothes to find something to wear. I found a strappy bodycon black dress and paired it with my favorite scarlet-red Prada sandals, a present from my mom. I was all dressed and with my hair done when Jax came behind me and pulled me into his arms.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“I like this dress on you, baby.”

“You don’t think it’s too much?”

“A little much, ain’t gonna lie, but you look goddamn gorgeous.”

“Right back at you.”

Jax was wearing black jeans and a simple black polo shirt, but he looked like someone picked him from a runway, tall, dark and absolutely fucking handsome. Just looking at him made my mouth water and my pussy clench.

“Stay away from the grill,” he said. “I don’t want your pretty dress to smell like smoke.”

I ruffled his dark, wet hair and smiled. “Ok.” I turned back to the tall mirror in the closet to check myself once again. “Jax, there’s a jewelry box right there next to you. Can you pick some earrings for me, please?”

“Sure.” He sounded anything but. Yeah, I could have done it myself, but I wanted something on me that he picked. Something he wanted to see on my body.

“Caroline, can you come here for a second?”

“What is it?”

Jax raised his hand to show me a 24k gold ring and the blinding marquise cut diamond encrusted on it that lay forgotten in a side drawer of my jewelry box.

“A ring.”

“It looks like more than that.”

I sighed. Yeah, he was onto something.

“It’s an engagement ring, Jax.”

His features were hard and unreadable “What the fuck?”

“Listen...”

“You’re fucking engaged to someone?”

“Relax, we broke up two years ago. He never wanted the ring back.”

He threw it back in the box like it burned his hand and went into the bedroom.

“Don’t you think that was something worth mentioning, Caroline?”

“My ex?”

“A man you were fucking engaged too.”

“Umm, it’s my past.”

“You have no problem talking about my past. You even have Stephanie over tonight.”

I wasn’t quite sure what his point was, but sure as hell his passive-aggressive tone was annoying, so I responded accordingly.

“You won’t bump into Samson at the Purple Moose, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m sure not.” He spoke without looking at me. “I’m sure you didn’t want to hitch yourself to some low life. He was the fancy restaurant type, right?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Sam Sam was a pretentious prick, it just took me too long to see it. “He was also the type

who hated to see me succeed. Samson wanted a home-staying wife that worshipped the ground he walked on. We broke up when he tried to sabotage my career.”

“What kind of fucking name is Samson?”

“It’s from the Bible.” I shrugged and went to sit on the bed next to him, stroking his shoulders. “Jax?”

“What?”

“Are you... jealous?”

“Of a tuxedo-wearing buffoon named Samson? Nope.”

“Mmm, it kinda sounds like you are.”

He finally turned his raven eyes to me. “Maybe for a second I was. That ring blindsided me.”

“I’m not going to apologize for having a past.”

“You don’t have to. Did he really try to fuck with your work?”

“Yeah. He bad-mouthed me to a client in hopes I wouldn’t get a contract.”

“Asshole.” Jax’s rough hand rubbed against my thigh. “A rich, pompous man, that’s who you see yourself marrying?”

“No. Samson had status and a lot of money, but I didn’t care about that. I have it too. I thought he was a good guy. I was wrong.” I climbed in his lap and grabbed his face in my hands, forcing him to look into my eyes. “I’d been with him for three years, Jax. Not once had he made me feel like you do. He never looked at me and I forgot to breathe.” I kissed him. “And no man has ever made me come as hard as you.”

“Keep talking like that, baby, and you’ll end up with my cock inside you again.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He threw me on the bed, making me squeak, and came on top of me. I was already pulling his shirt off when someone

rang the doorbell.

“Oh, shit.” I cursed out loud. “Our guests are here.”

“I told you it was a bad idea to invite them. We could be fucking right now.”

He helped me up and I fell into his chest laughing. “Behave, Mountain Man.”

Val, Phil, Stephanie, and Victor were all waiting for us when we finally dragged ourselves downstairs. There were lots of loud hellos and kisses on the cheeks before Val shoved a covered tray under my nose.

“As promised, huckleberry pie baked by my amazing husband.”

“Thanks, Val.”

Stephanie came to me with some beautiful peach roses and Victor was carrying a few bottles of wine. “Steph always brings flowers, I always bring booze.” He told me.

“Great choice, Victor. The Zinfandel will go great with the steaks.”

“Thank you for inviting us.” He turned to Jax and grabbed his shoulder. “Jax, my man. What’s that on your neck? You look like you’ve wrestled a mountain lion.”

The slick smile that spread on Jax’s face left no room for doubts.

“Lioness.” He clarified and my cheeks started burning.

Everyone walked inside and we split into groups. The girls helped me carry everything from the kitchen to the terrace, and the guys started the fire for the barbecue and started bickering about who was the best at grilling.

I opened one of the bottles Victor brought and shared it with Steph, while Val grabbed a light beer.

“So,” Stephanie elbowed me playfully, “did you forgive him?”

“I did. Your flowers helped a lot.”

“Girl, when I saw him moping at my door like that? It was adorable. Can I ask what the fight was about?”

“Nothing, really. He had a momentary freak out because we got very close lately. It doesn’t exactly feel like just sex and the boy is allergic to commitment.”

“Don’t worry, he’s a smart guy. He can learn.” Steph laughed and I dismissed her with a hand gesture.

“Don’t get any ideas. We’re not getting married.”

“Are you sure? Because Jax Maverick has never given a flower to anyone in his entire fucking life. I can practically hear wedding bells.”

“Do you know what I hear, Steph?” I asked her over the rim of my glass. “The sound of my plane taking off soon. Neither of us is available.”

“You can’t leave us. Val, tell her.”

Val didn’t miss a beat. “No, you can’t. I forbid it.”

I was ready for this conversation to be over, so I was grateful when the guys came to the table with a plate of perfectly cooked meat. Jax came with me to the kitchen to help me bring the sides out and the moment we were out of sight, his hands grabbed my ass.

“Fuck if I can stay away from you.” He whispered with a grave tone.

“Then don’t.”

I turned to put my arms around him and I ended up on the kitchen counter, kissing him longer than I should.

“Can we kick them out yet?”

“We’ve promised them food first.” I winked. “And we have to make it to dessert. We have plans with that ice cream, remember?”

“I’m going to make you keep that promise.”

“Oh, please,” I rolled my eyes, “If those people weren’t here right now, I’d be riding your dick.”

“That’s it, I’m going to kick them out. They can take their fucking steaks to go.”

“Oh, baby,” I bit my lip and put my hand in his soft hair, “where would be the fun in that?”

“You enjoy pushing my buttons, don’t you?”

“I really, really do.”

“I thought I was the one who was supposed to behave.”

I gave him another short kiss and jumped off the counter, grabbing the salad bowl.

“Let’s go, Mountain Man. You need to eat and get your energy up because you have to make me come later tonight.”

“Don’t I always?”

*Cocky bastard!*

We returned to the party and the night was great. Good food, good people, and good conversation over a glass of wine was something any girl could get used to. I just never imagined I’d find it all the way in the hidden heart of Montana.

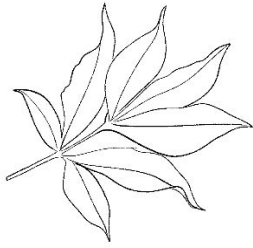
Halfway through the meal, Jax reached under the table and causally took my hand and kissed it and even if no one noticed, I melted in my chair. When I looked at him, I could swear there were angels singing and stars in my eyes.

Every time my heart beat, Jax’s name echoed in my chest. There was no more question mark left. I had feelings for him. Big, strong feelings that I didn’t want to look into, but they made me feel so warm and soft inside. That never happened before and even if I’d never let my stupid, in love heart sway me from the decisions that were already made, I decided to enjoy it while it lasted.

I let my head fall on Jax’s shoulder and took a deep breath, accepting the fact that he was the man I loved.







## *Chapter 15*

### **Jax**

I was a new man, or so Victor told me in a text this morning. Ever since they'd been over for that grillin' everyone saw me as a new man, all wrapped up around a woman's finger. I didn't care what anyone could see from outside. Caroline and I knew our deal and it worked. We worked well, we had fun, and at the end of it there won't be no crazy woman stalking me, saying that I've broke her heart.

Caroline and I were good. We were just the right thing. I kept saying those words in my head while laying down fresh hay for the horses. True, we were cozy, more than I've ever felt with any other woman. I've never spent so many days in a row with the same woman, but I've never met anyone like her either. She made me feel things I didn't even know I was capable of feeling.

I've got it so bad for the little lady, it troubled my sleep. If she'd roll away from my arms at night, it made me wake up

and search for her in the bed. I had no appetite if she wasn't at the table. I didn't wanna do anything if she wasn't around me.

I tried not to look too deep into what all of that mean or why Caroline had such an effect on me, because I didn't want those answers. I liked uncomplicated things and I wasn't going to overthink something that was suiting us both. I enjoyed her company and I enjoyed her damn seductive body. End of story. Nothing more, nothing less.

I've tried going through my day without letting that woman intrude my thoughts, but it was damn near impossible. Every time I blinked, I saw her face and cloudless blue eyes with shades of faded green in them. I couldn't complain, though. Images of Caroline made the work day go by faster.

Before I knew it, it was past noon, and I stepped out of the stables, the sun hitting me in the face. I cracked a smile remembering how Caroline ran after me before I left her this morning to once again put sunscreen on my face. I found her care to be touching in more ways than one.

I was about to take a break and find some food when I heard a sharp noise coming towards me. It took a second to register it was a bark. First, I expected to see Rusty, even if it sounded nothing like him, but instead, it was Regina who sprinted out of a bush with her floppy ears in the air.

"Hey, girl. What are you doing here? Did you run away?" Caroline would have never let her wander free like that, so either she was close, or Regina went rogue.

Regina was such a well-behaved dog all the damn time, it would have been out of character for her to run out alone, but when I looked around for Caroline, she was nowhere in sight. I called for Regina to come so I could pet her, but instead of listening, she went frantic. Barking and running around me like I've never seen her do before.

"Regina, what's with you today?" her teeth sank in the hem of my jeans and she tried to drag me along with her. "Wanna go somewhere? Now?"

The dog started running the way she came and I followed because she was obviously on a mission. As soon as she saw I was on her tail, Regina started running. She went straight for the edge of the forest.

“Regina!” I called, but she didn’t stop. Why the hell was she so agitated? A bear? A moose?

She led me through the trees and bushes, going off the walking trail and I had no choice but to chase after her. Caroline would strangle me with her bare hands if I’d let her precious baby get lost in the woods. After a while I started hearing other sounds, but not from a damn bear. It sounded more like Rusty and Caroline.

I followed the noise behind a few old larch trees and stopped dead in my tracks when I saw Caroline was on the ground, holding her hands around her ankle.

“What the hell happened?”

Her head snapped in my direction. “Jax, oh, God!” Her breath was agitated and her eyes glassy. “How did you get here?”

“Regina. I thought she saw a bear. What happened? Did you fall?”

“No.” She moaned and when she took her hand away, I saw a few drops of blood going down her leg.

“Is that a bite?”

“Yeah. A snake bit me.”

I dropped to my knee and picked up her ankle as gently as I could.

“Baby, do you remember what the snake looked like?”

“I think Rusty killed it.” She pointed where my dog was sniffing. “It was brown.”

*Goddamn it!*

“Stay here, Caroline. Don’t move.”

“I don’t think I can.”

Rusty had his paw on a dead snake and when I saw it, I ran back to Caroline with my heart in my fucking throat and looked at her leg again.

“I need to get you out of here?”

“Is it bad, Jax? Is the bite bad? It hurts like a bitch!”

“It was a rattlesnake.” I said, examining her ankle again and seeing she was bruising fast. “You’re having a reaction.”

“Oh, my God! A rattle... that’s venomous.”

“Yes. Try not to panic, ok?” But she was shaking already.

“You have to suck it out.”

“What?”

“Suck the venom out, Jax!”

“When do you think that snake bit you, woman? 1875? I’m taking you to the hospital.”

I picked her up and started running back, calling the dogs with a whistle. Caroline’s house was closer so that’s where I took her. She stayed silent and held me tight, but I could feel her body shaking and I didn’t know if it was from the scare or from the venom.

“It’s going to be ok, Caroline.” I said to her when we made it to the big house. “Where are your car keys?”

“Living room table.”

I ran inside as fast as I could even if my legs were burning and were ready to give up on me. When I had the keys and the dogs were safely inside, I went back, threw Caroline on the passenger seat and started the car.

“How are you feeling, baby?”

“Not good, Jax.” Her voice was shaking and it pained me to hear her like that. “I’m really hot, almost like I’m running a fever.”

“How long were you in the woods after you got bitten?”

“I don’t know. Ten, fifteen minutes, I think.”

Fuck! My heart slammed against my ribcage and I felt coldness settling inside, but didn’t let it show on my face. The last thing I wanted to do was alarm Caroline further.

“We’ll be there in a second, baby. Hold my hand, ok?”

“I’m dizzy, Jax.”

“Don’t do that, Caroline. Don’t you fucking dare scare me like that. We’ll be at the hospital in a second and you will be fine, got it?” I squished her hand into mine. “You’re going to be just fine.”

“I can’t breathe.”

“Caroline...” I warned through my teeth. I needed her to stay calm, so I would be calm and not drive the fucking car into a tree.

“I think it’s a panic attack.”

“A what?”

“I’ve been bitten by a venomous snake, Jax. I have a right to feel panic.”

“No! If your pulse goes up, your blood moves faster which spreads the venom faster through your lymphatic system.”

“Oh, you’re a fucking doctor now!”

“Please, Caroline.” I said with my voice shaking. “Stay calm.” It wasn’t a request, it was something I needed from her right now. I was angry and scared shitless, something I’ve never felt before.

I just wanted to make it to that damn hospital and have a doctor see her. She was there for fifteen minutes with a snake bite on her leg. How much time did we had before the anti-venom would be no good? I was no fucking herpetologist, but I’d say not much.

I flew through every red light and broke every speed limit known to man. Luckily, Caroline's convertible could go fast and we were finally getting close to Kalispell General Hospital.

Caroline's shaking hand crept up and grabbed my bicep.

"Jax."

"A few more minutes, baby."

"I feel like throwing up."

"Hold on to me and take deep breaths. We'll be there in a second."

In three minutes I was parking the car in front of the main entrance of the emergency room, definitely something I shouldn't have done, but really didn't give a shit about right now. Everything inside me was focused on getting Caroline inside and treated as soon as possible.

I opened her door and picked her up, running inside as fast as I could, but she stopped me a few steps in.

"Let me down." She whispered.

"What?"

"Now, Jax! Let me down!"

I did and Caroline skipped to a trash bin nearby and threw up the inside of her stomach.

"It's ok, baby. You're ok." I needed to believe that as much as she did.

Two nurses ran our way and grabbed Caroline to support her.

"Sir?" One of them looked at me. "What happened?"

"Rattlesnake bite, it's on her right ankle. It happened about twenty-five minutes ago."

"We'll take care of her."

They better.

“Is Dr. Garcia here? Call him!”

“He’s on call in the E.R. He’ll be here in a second.”

Caroline was escorted to a bed. The E.R wasn’t busy, so a flock of people came to look after her, helping her get comfortable, checking her pulse and pupils, and examining the bite.

When I saw Dr. Mitch Garcia walking through the doors in his gown and all gloved up, I could finally breathe again. When Eddi got sick, Mitch was the one who supervised his treatment every step of the way and bought the old man as much time as he could. He was a good fucking doctor, the best we had around here. He’ll take care of her.

“Jax?” He sounded surprised to see me. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah. My... Caroline. Caroline Douglas, Eddi’s granddaughter.” I pointed to the bed. “She got bit by a rattlesnake. It’s bruised, I saw it bleed, and she threw up.”

“Breathe, son.” Easier said than done. “Are you sure it was a rattlesnake?”

“Yes. My dog killed it.”

“Ok.” He called for another doctor, a young guy. “Get 3 cc’s of anti-venom, check her B.P, and give her the shot.”

The young doctor ran to Caroline’s bedside.

“Doc, you have to do it.”

“Don’t worry, Jax. Allan is a great resident. Miss Douglas will be taken care of.”

“Doctor, you have to make sure he does it right and she’ll be ok.”

“She’ll be fine. It’s a snake bite. Do you have any idea how many we see every month?”

“I don’t give a damn! Make her... make sure she’s fine.”

Dr. Garcia raised an eyebrow. “Special friend?”



Special? She was so much more than that. I knew that he was right and snake bites were routine in Montana. The hospital was prepared for situations like this. Damn, even I got bitten a few years ago when I didn't pay attention to where I was walking and everything was fine, but seeing Caroline so pale and scared was scrambling my insides. She was not a *special friend*; she was the only one that counted.

The resident prepared the shot and I saw his hand shaking a little bit.

"Hey, young Doc!" I barked. "Don't screw it up."

Dr. Garcia put a hand on my shoulder. "Let the doctor do his job, Jax. Do you need a sedative? You're shaking."

"I just need her to be fine."

"She will."

"She's Eddi's granddaughter." I reminded him.

"I know. I've heard in town she was around." Doc looked down at me. "Eddi was a good man and a better friend, but I'm guessing that's not why you're so agitated."

"What?"

"Boy, you are terrified because of a snake bite. I'm expecting you to drop off your feet any minute. You like the girl."

"Doc, I have nothing but respect for you, but none of that is your business."

"You're right." He glanced at Caroline. "You can stop worrying. Miss Douglas is fine. We'll give the shot some time to work and then you can take her home."

"How much time?"

"I'll recommend she stays here a couple of hours for observations and some blood work."

I exhaled, a huge weight lifted off my shoulders.

"Thank you, Dr. Garcia. Thank you so much."

“Go and keep Miss Douglas company. She’ll still feel like crap for an hour or so. I’ll come check on her later.”

I walked the distance to Caroline’s bed with my legs still shaking like jelly and covered her hand with mine. The nurse that stayed behind to write in her chart smiled up at me. “Don’t worry, sir, your wife will be fine. We gave her a pain killer, so she might be a little loopy.”

*Wife.* What the fuck? Why did everyone think they could see something between us so damn easily? Was it written on my face or something?

“Caroline, how do you feel?”

“Better and a little sleepy. It’s so good to see you here!” Oh, yeah, the drugs were hitting her hard. “Can you sit on the bed with me?”

“I don’t think I’m allowed to do that.”

“Do it anyway.” She gave me a look that reminded me of Rusty when he saw me eating and I couldn’t resist.

“You scared the shit out of me, little lady.”

“I could tell.” Her head rested on my shoulder. “I was worried too.”

“Scared of snakes?”

“No, Jax. For you. You looked ready to faint.”

She was the second person to tell me that, so it must have been true.

“I just... why the hell did you stay there after you got bitten. Don’t you know you have to find help right away! Jesus!” All the fear and frustration bubbled out of me.

“How would I know that? I’ve never seen a snake in my life. That one just dragged himself over, I wanted to take a look and he snapped.” She couldn’t blame that stupid decision on the pain killer. What the hell did she want to do? Pet the damn thing?

“You wanted to take a look, are you serious? Snakes bite, Caroline, and you happened to stumble upon the only venomous species in the state.”

“Whatever. That snake was a bitch.”

“You could have died if Regina didn’t drag me to you!” My voice boomed through the entire E.R and she flinched. Fuck! I needed to get a grip and stop biting her head off.

“Wow, Jax.”

“Yeah, you should have known better.”

“You’re mad at me?”

“Fuck yes.” I whispered through my teeth. “What part of ‘you could have died’ don’t you understand?”

“I don’t think you’re mad. Wanna know what I think?”

“What?”

“You care about me.” She looked up with a silly, childish smile all over her face. “You care about me a lot.”

“I don’t...” the rest of the sentence got stuck in my throat because I was many things, but not a liar. I couldn’t bring myself to say something that wasn’t true anymore. “Yeah. I care about you.” The words felt strange on my tongue. As weak a declaration as that was, I’ve never said it to anyone before.

“I knew you do. You were all scared for me. Do you love me, Jax?”

She could have taken a fucking scalpel and stabbed me in the shoulder and I wouldn’t have been more shocked. I felt electrocuted. Whatever drugs they gave her, I fucking hated them.

“Jesus Christ Caroline...”

She giggles. “I’m just fucking with you. Relax.”

“Funny little lady.” I said with no amusement.

“It feels good to know you care about me.” She nestled at my chest. “I care about you too.”

“I know, baby.”

“How?”

“You put sunscreen on my face every day and bring me lunch when I work long hours.”

“Eddi told me.”

“What?”

“In his letter. He told me to take care of you because no one does.” Damn Eddi and his weak spot for strays. “Someone should be taking care of you.”

“I’m a big boy, Caroline.”

“You’re a good man. You deserve good things.” Her voice was all soft.

“If you say so.”

“I’ll be your good thing.”

I put my lips on her forehead. “You already are, baby.”

“I wish I would have known Eddi better. I wish I would have been a better granddaughter.”

“Hey, what are you talking about? He loved you.”

“Yes, but I never came to see him. When he called, I was always rushing, always working.” Her voice started to break. “I didn’t even invite him to my engagement party because my dad didn’t want him there and he sent me the most beautiful letter that week.”

“What did he write in it?”

“He said that it didn’t matter how much money Samson had, he was about to learn what real wealth was because he had me.” A few tears ran down her cheeks and I rushed to wipe them away.

“Smart man.”

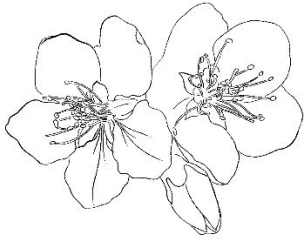
“I wish I had more time with him.”

I had no idea how we ended up talking about Eddi, but the sadness in her voice was crushing. It was unfair for someone with a heart as pure as Caroline to feel that. I wanted to take it all upon me and spare her the bitterness. I knew sadness and hurt, but she didn't and she didn't deserve to learn about it today – in the empty E.R of a small hospital, hooked up on pain killers.

“Don't cry, little lady.”

“I don't think I can stop.”

“Then I'll hold you until you're done.”



## *Chapter 16*

# Caroline

When the meds wore off, I was left groggy, hungry, and with my leg hurting which Jax seemed to find extremely funny. He was smiling like an idiot while I hopped to the car.

“Instead of watching me with that stupid grin on your face, you could help me.”

“Nah.” He shrugged and leaned into the car with his hands in his pockets. “I carried you around all day.”

“What do you find so damn amusing?”

“I’m just glad you’re fine.”

“Yeah, well, you’re glad for no reason because you are not getting laid any time soon.”

Jax chuckled and opened my door. When I climbed into my seat, he bowed and kissed me.

“Don’t worry, baby. Tonight, I’ll keep your legs hanging over my shoulders, so you won’t get hurt.”

“Keep on dreaming.”

I don’t know why I was so pissed off all of a sudden, but I was. All the adrenaline and drugs were drained from my body and this was all there was left. Poor Jax had no choice but deal with my mood, even if I knew it was the last thing he deserved. Today was a mess and he made it all right.

Every time I remembered how scared he was for me, my heart flipped in my chest. I saw things in his eyes – *hope* – things he said he could never feel. I knew that if I said too much, he’d spook, but for now it was enough.

“I’m hungry.” I declared when he backed out of the parking lot. “Let’s stop by Val’s and get some food.”

“Absolutely fucking not. You heard Dr. Garcia. You are going straight to bed for twenty-four hours.”

“But I want a damn burger!”

“I’ll call Val and she’ll send one over, but we are getting to bed. I need a fucking nap after this.”

“Ok.” I peeled my eyes away from him. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“My burger. For bringing me here, for taking care of me. For not mentioning how I threw up in a trash can in front of you.”

“Oh, that was something to watch. Not your sexiest moment, to be honest.”

“Shut up. I was bitten by a snake.”

“Yeah. A bitch of a snake, that’s what you said.” He stretched his hand over and put it on my knee. “So what do you want to eat? Just a burger?”

“And onion rings.”

“Done.”

“I didn’t know the Purple Moose delivered food.”

“They don’t, but Phil will bring you that burger or I’ll go there and put my boot so far up his ass, he’ll choke on it.”

Jax was so serious, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Jax, really, thank you.”

“Stop. You have nothing to thank me for.” But I did and the list kept growing.

We got home and Jax took me straight to bed, fed me, took the dogs out for a walk, and helped me shower. I was too tired to take advantage of his naked body while he washed my hair, but the view was very much appreciated. After he decided I was clean enough, I was tucked into bed by two very strong arms and he made me watch a movie while he went to see to the ranch and lock everything up.

Jax was gone for a couple of hours and I was in no mood for watching TV, so I pulled out one of Eddi’s journals and read through it. Reading his thoughts became one of my favorite things to do. It made his absence feel less real, like I still had time to know the man that never stopped looking out for me, even when I was too busy to notice. I picked a notebook that was dated only four years ago and grinned like an idiot when I found a few pages about Jax. Eddi wrote about him with warmth and appreciation, and often expressed his regret that Jax was not willing to find a good girl and settle down.

*Good man, he wrote, kind heart and sharp mind, but I’m afraid he’ll never build a life like he deserves. He can’t do it alone, no one can. And what’s the point of having everything if your house is empty? If there’s no one at your door? Jax looks at me and sees a free man. I look in the mirror and see a lonely, old guy who made one too many mistakes. If he is half as smart as I believe he is, he’ll learn from my mistakes. It’s not the women that are the problem, they come to him like bears to honey, but he’s too much of a chicken shit to stick with one. Just you wait, boy. Just you wait. One day she’ll come –*



*the one that's for you – and you will kneel at her feet begging her not to go.*

Reading that put a smile on my face and that's how I fell asleep – smiling – and sharing a little inside joke with Eddi. He too saw Jax was untamable, but unlike me, Eddi held out hope.

The next thing I knew I was slipping into a sleep so deep, I didn't even feel when Jax came back and crawled in bed with me. It didn't matter, though, because he was ever present in my dreams, even if I didn't know his arms were around me.



I woke up late and Jax was already gone, so I had breakfast alone by the pool while Regina and Rusty were running around playing with a ball. My mom called to check if I was still doing great out in the wild and we chatted for a while. After we were done, I wasn't sure of what to do exactly. Usually, I would take a long walk with Regina exploring the surroundings, but I wasn't ready to go back into those damn woods, not after what happened yesterday.

Luckily, Val texted me and since she had the day off, she wanted to take me to the mall to make me feel better after wrestling a rattlesnake and losing. I had no plans and I never turned down a shopping trip, so I asked her to come and pick me up as soon as possible.

I found a white pant suit and put a cute silky top underneath the jacket to make it look more casual and paired it with red stiletto shoes. Maybe it was too formal for a trip to the Kalispell mall, but I felt like dressing up. I rapidly gathered my phone and wallet and went downstairs to have time to feed Regina and fill her water bowl before leaving. To my surprise, I found Jax downstairs too, petting the dogs and my girl

enjoyed it. She was on her back, giving him access to her belly.

“Hey.” I said to make my presence known and his charcoal eyes jumped to me.

“Hello, baby...” he saw I was dressed and ready to go out, and came to me. “Where are you going?”

“Shopping. Val is taking me.”

“Aha. Where the hell did you find those shoes?”

“In my closet. Why?”

“Caroline, your ankle is still sore. You’re going to limp all day on those heels.”

To be honest, yes, I felt some discomfort, but I was used to spending ten hours a day in stilettos. *Some* discomfort was nothing.

“Don’t be dramatic.”

“You should be in bed. The doctor said...”

“The doctor said I’ll be fine today and I am. Nothing hurts and I’m going out.”

“I liked you way more when you were sedated. Can you at least change your shoes?”

“No. I like them.”

He sighed, annoyed. “Just put on some running sneakers.”

“Not a chance.” Jax rubbed the back of his head and mumbled something about impossible women, so I circled his waist with my arms. “Why are you so cranky today?”

“I just don’t want you to break your legs.”

“Jax, I wore high heels every day. I could run a marathon in these shoes.”

“Mhm. Whatever you say.”

“Come on, don’t give me that attitude.” I said, looking up at him with big doe eyes, but it didn’t work, so I slid down to my knees in front of him with no warning.

“What the hell are you doing?”

He tried to step back, but I hooked my fingers under his belt and kept him in place.

“I’m cheering you up before I go.”

I didn’t have much time, so I unbuckled his pants with dexterity and pulled down his briefs to release his cock. I think Jax wanted to protest, but his mouth shut when I fisted his shaft and he let his head back, growling.

“Damn it, Caroline.”

He was horny and worked up and I knew a few tricks to make all that go away. Once he was fully erect, I leaned down and licked his entire length which made Jax shiver. I sucked on the tip, slowly teasing him while massaging his testicles in my palm. I could already feel tension in his body.

Jax’s hand got tangled in my hair and he pushed his cock deep inside my mouth until he hit the back of my throat. My eyes started watering, but I didn’t gag, so I swallowed to suck him in a little more.

“Fucking hell, Caroline! Where the hell did you learn... never mind, I don’t need to know that. Keep sucking me, baby.”

I did as he said while my hands were rubbing his base. I used my tongue to swirl around the tip, feeling the salty taste of his precum. His masculine flavor turned me on to no end and I felt my panties soaking. It was a special kind of addiction and I fell victim to it.

“This mouth of yours is too damn dangerous. I’m losing my mind.” His growl vibrated through me.

Feeling encouraged, I took it to the next level and brought my teeth out to play, softly scraping the skin of his dick. I was careful not to hurt him, but the sensation was

enough to make Jax buck and roar my name. When he jerked his shoulders, I choked on his cock, but he didn't stop fucking my mouth. He was losing control of his body and I loved to watch.

I kept sucking him, intoxicated on his masculine taste, until Jax completely crumbled. He came, pulling at my hair, and cursing like I've never heard him do before. I swallowed and waited for him to stop convulsing before getting up on my feet.

“Are you happier now, cowboy?”

He snatched me up and threw me on the couch so hard, I lost my breath.

“What the hell am I going to do with you?”

I had a few ideas, but we were interrupted by the persistent sound of a car horn.

“I'm sure you'll think about something while I'm out. Do you want me to pick something up for dinner?”

“Pizza will be great.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “Take care of that leg, little lady. I mean it.”

“I promise I'll be fine. See you tonight, baby.”

I walked out the house, but not before Jax kissed me breathless, and jumped into Val's car.

“I've been waiting for you for an eternity.” She whined.

“Dramatic much? You've been here for five minutes.”

“What were you doing?”

“Saying goodbye to Jax.”

“Uhhhhhhh.” That sound was so over the top, it made me roll my eyes. Imagine what she'd say if she'd knew how I said goodbye to Jax.

“Just drive, woman.”



Have you ever heard the saying *shop until you drop*? Val and I were almost there. I hated to say that Jax was right, but after all the marching up and down the mall, my feet were killing me. It was his fault anyways, half of the things I bought were for him – a couple of shirts, a hunting vest, and some other clothing items he never asked for. I wasn't sure how he'd react when he sees me come home with a bunch of stuff for him, but it was too late now. Everything was already in the bags.

“Caroline, do you need help with all of that?”

“No, it's ok. Are there any stores left?”

“Not many. Girl, I had no idea you are such a hardcore shopper. I'm so sad Stephanie had to work and couldn't come with us.”

“We can do it another day.”

“Can we?” She threw me a side look. “I mean, how long are you staying in Montana?”

Oh right, I was just a visitor and my time here was running out fast.

“Oh, umm... another week, I think. We can arrange something.”

“That would be great.” Val took a few more steps and out of nowhere threw her arms in the air. “You know what, no. That's not the answer I wanted from you. You can't leave us.”

“Val,” I laughed, “I have to return to my life, to my career. I promise I'll call you.”

“You're leaving me *and* you are leaving Jax.”

Now that was laughable.

“You have no idea how relieved he is knowing that we have a clear expiration date. We talked about it, Val. Our sex is

great, but we're fine with ending it."

"Yeah, right. That's why you spent the day buying shit for him, because you're fine with ending it."

"I saw some things I thought he'd like. It means nothing."

"You forget we just had a cookout. You two can't keep your hands off each other. That's love."

"You are completely insane, my dear. I'm going to go into that jewelry store over there and give you a moment to cool down." I deflected and walked away in a rush.

The shop was small, but very chic, and it was the perfect place for me to run away from the too-real conversation Val was trying to have.

A young boy came from the back and smiled at me.

"Hello and welcome to The Velvet Box. Can I show you anything in particular?"

"Hi! Umm, I was just looking. I don't really wear that much gold, my mother thinks it makes me too pale. Do you have anything made of silver?"

"We just got some new silver rings with pink quartz stones." He pulled out an entire tray of beautifully crafted rings. "Everything is hand carved."

"They look very nice."

"You can try whatever you want and if it doesn't fit, I can have it adjusted to your size in two days."

He helped going through a few models and complimented the way every single one looked on my hand. He was obviously young, maybe sixteen, but he had mad selling skills. I was already fixed on buying two rings and a bracelet when I heard the screeching laugh coming from behind me.

"Looking for a ring already? You might be more stupid than I thought." Sheila was standing in the entrance with her

hands on her hips and a mocking grimace on her face.

Ignoring her seemed like the best option, but I was not one to just shut up when called stupid.

“Keep walking, Sheila. They don’t keep gold teeth here.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t listen to a word I said to you. I was trying to be a nice person, you know? Jax is not the man to put a ring on it, get that through your head. Soon he’ll be on the free market again and I just got a new mattress. I’ll be more than happy to test it with him.”

Oh, that hit a spot. Just the thought of him with someone else – especially the venomous bitch standing in front of me – was enough to send me into blind rage.

Dropping the rigs back on the counter I stepped into Sheila’s face.

“Why don’t you take all that frustration and leave, Sheila?”

“Aww, did the little rich girl get mad because her boyfriend is a certified whore? Too bad, I tried to warn you, didn’t I?”

“Listen to me, you dark-rooted-fake-blonde-trashy bitch, I will make sure Jax never touches you ever again if it’s the last thing I do. I have no fucking idea why he got close to you in the first place, maybe he was drunk, or out of options, but you and him are done.”

Sheila laughed in my face, trying to pretend my over-the-top, carefully crafted insult didn’t affect her, but her cheeks were rapidly turning bright red.

“Well, word around town is he’s bored already. Actually, he stopped by my job to see me this morning so...” she shrugged. I wanted to scream in her face that she was a stinking liar, but I had no idea where Jax was.

“Not going to happen, dollar store Pamela Anderson. Get that through *your* head.”

“Once a whore, always a whore. He’ll come back to me.”

My arm flinched and before I could stop myself, I was hitting Sheila with my shopping bags.

“Stop calling him that!”

“What the fuck is your problem, bitch?”

“Sheila, take the advice. Keep your mouth shut and stop talking about Jax like that if you don’t want me to drag you up and down this store.”

The boy behind the counter tried to say something to defuse the situation and no one listened, but when I looked back to him, Sheila took advantage and pushed me. That’s when all hell broke loose. I’m not sure who threw the first punch but we were straight up cat-fighting like two mad women.

Sheila tried to scratch me with her fake nails, but I pulled back and smashed my fist straight into her nose. She fell down, but dragged me along with her. Before I knew it, we were rolling on the floor.

“Stupid bitch.” She hissed and slapped me hard enough to split my lip open. Now both of our faces were bleeding. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

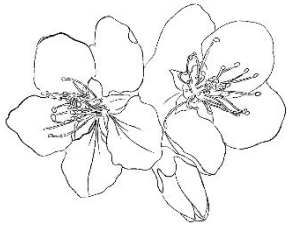
“I won’t let you speak about him like that.”

“He is nothing! You want to know the truth, Caroline? Jax keeps saying he doesn’t want to tie himself down, but who the fuck would want a homeless asshole who has nothing to his name? Definitely not you! You’d be ashamed to show him to anyone!”

“Oh, fuck you, Sheila!”

The rage kept flowing through my blood. The voices around us got louder. The fight kept going. Until we ended up in handcuffs.





## *Chapter 17*

# Caroline

The door of the detention room made a buzzing sound and deputy Berrigan pointed his finger at me.

“You’re free to go, Miss Douglas. No charges.”

They kept Sheila and I in separate places so they wouldn’t have to keep us handcuffed, so I had no idea why she decided not to press charges. When we got escorted out of the mall, she was shouting something about ending me.

Val was waiting for me in the hallway and she exhaled when she saw I was ok.

“God, Caroline.” She pulled me into a hug. “I can’t believe you let that bitch bust your lip. I hope you know a good plastic surgeon.”

“It will heal, don’t worry. I can talk, so it’s not that deep.”

“Girl, you’re a wild cat. I am literally your biggest fan. I’m not joking, Steph is printing t-shirts with your face on

them right now.”

“Stop. Do you have any idea what happened with my shopping bags?”

“Everything is packed in my car. That kid from the jewelry store – the one whom you completely terrified for life – had gathered everything for you.”

“Ah, good. Hey, Val, do you have any idea why Sheila didn’t press charges? I was ready to call my legal team?”

“Of course you have a legal team.” Yeah, in my work you kinda need one. “Jax talked her down.”

Now that was the hardest hit I’ve got today.

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t get all nuclear again. This is a good thing. I called him and he came over, talked to Sheila and convinced her to let this one go.”

“H-he... he is here? With... talking to Sheila? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Look...”

“I just got into a fight with her, Val. A fight. I have never resorted to violence in my whole entire life, but I did it when she started talking shit about him.”

The deputy made me sign a whole lot of paperwork, I was served a fine for public disturbance, and then I was free to go. When I walked out the front of the police station I saw Sheila, who now had her nose bandaged, talking to Jax who had his hands on her shoulders, stroking them.

“Oh, Jax,” she whimpered, “you always make me feel so good.”

Really?

“Thank you for being so cool about this, Sheila. I really appreciate it.” He said back.

“Anything for you, Jax.”

They sounded like a bad soap opera and I had to make it stop. I cleared my throat to make my presence known and Jax looked up. His eyes were hard like steel.

“Caroline.” He nodded. What the hell was going on?

“Are you two done here?” I raised a mocking eyebrow to accentuate my words and Jax stepped in front of me.

“If I were you, I’d lose that tone right now, Caroline.”

“Excuse me?” Did I hear him right?

“And you should apologize to Sheila.”

I *know* I didn’t hear *that* right.

“I will not, but thanks for the advice, Jax. Instead, I will go home and put some ice on my lip.”

“Then get to the car.” He pointed to his mustang.

“I’ll have Val drive me. I’m done.”

“Caroline.” He warned in a low growl.

“I said I’m done, Jax. With you. With Sheila. With this damn place. I. Am. Done.”

He couldn’t even see what happened. The way I acted today? I was ashamed of it, but I couldn’t control myself when Jax was involved. Meanwhile, he was too busy cuddling with the woman who called him a whore more times than I could count.

“Caroline.” He called, but I was already climbing in Val’s car. She drove me and was nice enough to not say a word when tears started streaming down my face. I appreciated her silent support and the reassuring hand she kept over mine more than a long talk, because right now I didn’t feel like talking. All I wanted was to cry until my eyes got red, my face was puffy, and I was no longer angry. Preferably in silence, but that wasn’t an option because when we made it to the ranch and I was gathering my bags from the trunk, Jax parked his car behind us.

“Caroline, we need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“You...” he stopped when he got a glimpse at my face.  
“Are you crying?”

“Leave, Jax.” I yelled at him before sending Val on her way.

“I’m not going anywhere. Why are you crying?”

We walked inside the house screaming at each other and the dogs started barking when they heard us. I threw all the bags on the floor, Jax started pacing around. It was madness. Everything seemed out of control.

“Jax, how could you... no, you know what. I don’t care. I’ve told you, I am done.”

“How could I what? And what the hell do you mean you’re *done*?”

“I mean, I’m not having this fight, and after today, I don’t want to see you anymore.”

His jaw fell. “I came to collect you from the police station, worried sick because you got into a fucking brawl with a crazy woman who is often hooked on pills, and you’re telling me you’re done with me?”

“Yeah, you really did look worried. So worried in fact, your tongue almost slipped into Sheila’s mouth.”

“All of this because you’re *jealous*?”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” I pointed at him. “If you give me the speech about how ‘we’re not about this’ and ‘we’re just fucking’ so I can’t throw a tantrum, I’m going to lose my mind, because guess what, Jax? I’ve just broke someone’s nose because she called you a man whore and five minutes later, I found you massaging her shoulders.” Reliving that moment made me start to cry harder, but I pushed through it.

“Caroline!” I tried to walk away, but he grabbed my arms to pin me in place. “I wasn’t massaging, Sheila. I had to

play nice to convince her to not charge you with aggravated assault! Now, I ain't smart enough to understand what you do for work, baby, but I'm sure that time served in a Montana jail would pretty much turn your reputation to shit."

"You told me to apologize."

"I wanted this thing to be over. Do you really think I give a shit about how Sheila feels? I wanted to ring her neck when Val told me what she did to you." He raised his hand and with infinite care, he touched my lip with his thumb. "If she was a man, I would have been the one in jail."

"That woman is despicable."

"I know, and I told you before, you should ignore her. I don't know you that well, Caroline, but getting into fights doesn't sound like you at all. I'm worried."

"No, it's not like me. I'm an educated, successful woman, and I don't speak with my fists. At least not until today, but when she said the things she said..."

"I have a colorful past when it comes to women. That's no secret."

"Not that, Jax." I sighed, debating if I should repeat the words. "She said you were a homeless whore that I should be ashamed of. I just... saw red. I don't even remember most of it."

Jax looked at me and then he let his head fall.

"Damn it. I need a glass of whiskey. Do you want some?"

"No."

He poured himself a generous glass and emptied it in one gulp.

"Did you..." I started a question, but couldn't bring myself to finish it.

"I lived on the streets, yes. Does it bother you?"

“That you were homeless at one point in your life? No. What bothers me is that your trashy ex knows that, but you never mentioned it to me.”

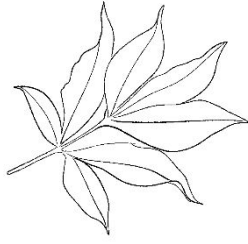
“I don’t like talking about my past, Caroline.”

“With me, but you had no problem pouring your heart out to *her*?”

“Jesus, would you stop with the petty jealousy? It’s not a secret and in a small town everyone knows everybody else’s shit. No, Sheila and I didn’t stay up late and exchange sob stories. Does that make you feel better?”

“Can you stop being so sarcastic for a moment? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t like talking about my past. It’s...” he looked away. “It doesn’t matter, you were right. I’m done talking. I need a shower.” He walked past me without one look and went up the stairs. When I followed, Jax was already locked in the bathroom taking the world’s longest shower. It became obvious that he wanted to avoid me more than he wanted to feel clean, so I changed into a nightgown and burrowed under the covers.



## *Chapter 18*

### **Jax**

I watched my reflection in the mirror for several seconds. My nose was crooked, my beard was scruffy, and there were one too many scars on my forehead from the times I've cracked my skull. The signs didn't stop there, but they continued down on my arms and torso. Cuts, scars, burns, stab wounds, there was a very ugly story written on my skin, one that I didn't like to think about. What was the point in dwelling on the past?

I had to get out of the bathroom eventually and face Caroline. The best thing right now would be to put my clothes back on and go back to my house, get some space, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. My empty, cold bed seemed like the bigger of two evils, so I cracked my neck to relive some tension and opened the door to the bedroom.

The room was drowned in darkness. It was still early, a few minutes past eight, but the drapes were drawn and Caroline's little body was hidden by the bedcovers. She must

have been exhausted after the day she had, so I moved as silently as my brutish body allowed, and slipped next to her. For a while, I believed she was asleep, but then I heard her sob. She was wide awake. Crying.

“Caroline?” I put my hand on her shoulder softly, but she pushed it away. “Look at me.”

“I’m fine.”

She surely wasn’t. Seeing her tears earlier was enough to last me a life time.

“Come on, little lady. Talk to me.”

“What do you want me to say? I’m hurt.”

There were many reasons I didn’t want to get too involved with women all these years; the first being I can’t understand them. Why was she hurt? I did nothing.

“Caroline, I’m sorry, but you have to tell me what I did to hurt you.”

“Are you being obtuse on purpose?” She spit over her shoulder.

“I just... damn it.” I mumbled. “I have no idea why you’re crying, but I want to make it stop.”

She turned to me in one brisk move, her face red and eyes furious.

“You know what, Jax, I’m a grown woman. I understand this is just sex, you’re just scratching an itch, but I thought we were at least friends.”

We moved past scratching itches the moment she made her way under my skin, but this wasn’t the time to dissect that.

“What makes you say we aren’t?” I asked instead of telling her that friends don’t fuck like we do.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe the fact that your ex knows more about you than I do.”

“Caroline, I’ve just told you...”



“I don’t care you didn’t tell her, Jax, all I care is you don’t want to share it with me. It’s fine.”

She turned her back to me again and covered her head with the sheet. I sat there a few long minutes – maybe the longest of my life – deciding what the fuck I should do. We were not married, we were not dating, and I didn’t owe anyone an explanation, but her sadness was like a punch in my gut.

Sharing that part of my life with Caroline meant crossing into a territory I’ve never been before and admitting that the things I’ve been feeling for her were real. Admitting that she awakened something in me that I never wished for.

When she sobbed again, the decision was made. I dragged myself closer and pulled her to my chest.

“I grew up in Idaho, close to Boise. Dad died when I was two in a mining accident, mom was a raging alcoholic. I had two older siblings, one sister and one brother. My sister is also dead and I was too young to remember her.”

“Oh, my God.” She turned to look at my face. “Jax, that’s terrible.”

No shit? There was a reason I didn’t like to relive those times. “I’m not even started.”

“You have a brother.”

“Unfortunately, yes. Glen is six years older than me and a sociopathic piece of shit.”

“What happened?” The softness in her voice was almost painful, but I couldn’t back down now.

“I’m not going to give you the detailed play by play, baby. All you have to know is that my mom was too busy nursing bottles to give a shit if we lived or died and I grew up dodging Glen’s fists.” She didn’t need to know how many times he broke my ribs, how he made me sleep on the floor and beat me until he was too damn tired to do it anymore. She didn’t need to know how he left me in a pool of blood when I was seven because I didn’t want to give him the last slice of

bread left in the house and how I couldn't get up for hours because my legs were weak and the blood was slippery. That darkness had no place near someone as innocent as Caroline.

"Jax..." she put her palm on my face and I could feel she was shaking.

"Don't worry. I grew up, gained some muscle, and hit the motherfucker back. About ten years ago we got into an argument about something, I don't remember what it was. Glen doesn't need much to lose his temper. He came at me again and I beat him to within an inch of his life." I waited for her to say something, but all I got was silence. "I'm not proud, Caroline."

"You... he beat you when you were kids? Why?"

"I couldn't even tell you. We didn't have much food, so he would take whatever was left and smash my face if I refused to give it to him and sometimes he just did it for the fun of it."

"Jesus."

"After I dropped him in front of a hospital, I left. I couldn't live there anymore. Glen didn't stand a chance to take me in a fight anymore, but I was so angry, I was scared that next time he'd try something, there wouldn't be anything left to be brought to the hospital." Involuntarily, I looked down at my hands. "I've almost killed a man with the same hands I've touched you."

"You protected yourself from an abuser."

"Nah, don't make it seem less than it was. I knew what I was doing."

"And you stopped."

"Yeah." To this day, I had no idea how I found the strength to do it. "Anyway, I packed a bag and twenty dollars and left."

"Where?"

“I wandered around Idaho for a while, then up north to Montana. I had no plan, Caroline, so I just went from one town to another looking for work and something to eat.”

“You had no home.”

“No, I didn’t.” I fought through life the best way I knew how. “I slept on the streets, then I learned that some summer ranch jobs come with a free bed, so I did that. I raised as much money as I could working summers, then returned to the streets when the harvest was over. The money got me through the winters, which are pretty fucking rough in Montana, so I had no choice but find a roof.”

“Dear God, Jax.” She held me tight, putting all her limbs around my body. “That’s horrible.”

“It is what it is. Eddi found me when he tripped over my sleeping bag in an alley in Billings five years ago. He got me some food, we got to talking, and by the end of the day, he brought me here giving me a chance at a fresh start.”

“You have no idea how grateful I feel to Grandpa for doing that.”

“Me too.” Old Eddi saved my life, I was sure of it. When he found me, I was dirty, hungry, and sick. I wouldn’t have made it another year out there. “I was homeless, Caroline, and I don’t like to talk about it. I’m a much bigger fan of my present than my past.”

“Jax, I didn’t know, I’m so...”

“Shhh!” I kissed her forehead. “You know now. Next time Sheila says something to you, just ignore her.”

“Ignore her? If she, or anyone, ever talks about you like that, I will unleash hell on them.”

“Where is this rage coming from?”

“I’m not just a pretty face.”

“Sheila was right, Caroline. You shouldn’t be with me. You’re... an heiress or whatever, and I’m just a guy. You

should be with men like that fucker with a fancy name that gave you a rock so big, it could drag you down. I knew you were not for me the moment I saw you, but I was selfish. I couldn't keep my hands away."

"Jax." She squeezed me tighter. "You had a horrible life, but it's not who you are. You've turned into this amazing man. No one should feel any shame to be with you, and if they do, fuck them."

"Fuck them, indeed. Are we good?"

"Oh, baby!" Caroline let her head fell on my chest. "I feel horrible for making you talk about this. Do you... umm... what happened to your family?"

"Mom is in a home and Glen only comes around when he needs something."

"He... he has the nerve to ask you for help?"

"It's easier to give him some money and see him leave than smash his face in."

"I hate that man." She said with burning passion. "I hate everyone who ever hurt you." Her words were so determined, so terrifyingly true, it made my heart shiver. How could she? *Why* would she? I've never had anyone in my corner and I was used to hate on my own.

"Caroline, you're not one to hate. You're too damn good for that."

"I thought so too, but I hate *him*. Who would torment a child like that?"

"It's over. Everything is good now."

"Yeah. Now you're here with me." All the beatings were worth it if this was my reward. "Jax, can I ask you something else?"

"I can't stop you."

"Is this why... I mean, you've never been with a woman long term because of your past?"

“More or less. I never had anything of my own before Eddi helped me build some kind of life, I’m used to being alone and I’m not...” I choked on my own words. “I don’t know how to be with someone and I don’t want to learn. The stupid problems, the jealousy, the lousy fights? They irk me. I had real fucking problems, I have no patience for a woman to nag me.”

“I see.”

“I’m not talking about you, you know that, right?”

She giggled. “Yes.”

“You’re the most amazing person I’ve ever met.”

“Jax,” she looked at me with doe eyes and there was a smile on her face, but no happiness, “I’m... so different from you. We could never work, could we?”

My throat dried up.

“What?” Was all I could say.

“You and I, Jax. I’m... pampered, and soft, and have more shoes than any human needs. I only sleep on a pure silk pillow case. I don’t let my dog eat anything if it’s not approved by her nutritionist. We’re too different to stand a chance.”

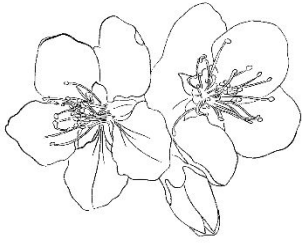
“Stand a... Caroline, why are we talking about this?”

“You’re right, it doesn’t matter. You don’t want to learn how to be with someone and I’m leaving soon, anyway. Let’s go to sleep, Jax.”

There were three words left unsaid, but I could hear them. I could read them on her face and my very soul froze. I was trapped between desperation to hear her say it and a visceral fear that she would.

Caroline went to sleep on my chest, but I just sat there holding her, wishing to get up and leave, but not wanting to let her go. She was right, we didn’t stand a chance, because faith never gave me many chances, but she’d never know all the things she made me feel and all the ways she changed me.





## *Chapter 19*

# Caroline

We had a great few days after the whole Sheila incident. Weirdly enough, realizing how huge the gap between us was made me feel closer to Jax than ever before. Maybe because he opened himself up enough to tell me the truth, or maybe because the way he held me while I sobbed on his chest. For whatever reason, I felt like something changed between us.

My days at the farm became more and more ordinary, like it was a normal thing for me to live at the edge of a mountain. Regina was thriving with all the fresh air and constant running she was getting and having Rusty around made her very happy. I started getting used to the rest of the animals; the horses, the cows, and even the chickens, and I've learned everything there was to know about Eddi's farm. The other day Steph and Val came by for a glass of wine and Jax cooked for us which was a very nice way of spending an evening. Yeah, I was getting comfortable here, maybe a little too much.

After such a nice time, today was weird for me. It was grandpa Eddi's birthday, the first one since he had passed. I was here at his farm, in his house, finally seeing why he made the choices he made, and Eddi wasn't. I had so many things to tell him, but my chance of doing that was long gone. The realization made me feel a bitter taste on my tongue and I couldn't just sit around and think about it until Jax would come back, or I'd lose my mind, so I went to the kitchen to cook something for lunch. I was almost done when my phone rang and a foreign number I didn't recognize appeared on the screen.

"This is Caroline Douglas."

"Miss Douglas," the woman at the other end had a thick Middle Eastern accent, "can you hold for Mr. Rashid Al-Faiq?"

"Sure." Damn it. I completely forgot to get in touch with Rashid after our last video call a month ago. He was the new CEO of one of the biggest energy companies in the world, Grand World Petroleum, and my biggest client to date. We've only had some preliminary talks but since he only got the CEO chair this year, Rashid knew he needed someone like me to take his company to the next level, and I knew I was the best for the job. Not to mention, the commission check was hefty.

"Caroline!" He laughed into the phone. "You're the hardest person to get in contact with."

"Oh, Rashid, I'm so sorry for going AWOL on you. A lot has happened since we talked."

"Don't worry about it, Caroline. You're not under contract yet. I was just calling to see if you made all the arrangements for your trip. I'm afraid I'm stuck in London, but I will be there to meet you three days after your arrival."

"I..." *completely forgot about Abu Dhabi.* "Rashid, I'm so sorry to come back to you so late about this, but I really need to reschedule our meeting."

"Excuse me?"



“Look, your company is still my top priority, but a lot has happened in my personal life and I just can’t leave the country right now.”

The words left my mouth before I had the time to analyze them. This deal with Rashid wasn’t just another one in the books, it was a career maker. Successfully improving the performance of a company such as Grand World Petroleum in a time of transition, when the energy market was extremely unstable, would make me an international A-lister. I knew that very well since Rashid was the type of client I’ve been chasing all my life, but I needed a little more time to finish my business here. I wasn’t done *here*.

“Don’t do this to me, Caroline. It’s my first year in charge since *Baba* retired and I’m having a bad quarter. I need your help.”

“And I will help you. Let’s just push our meeting for next month, and I will work diligently to diagnose your company remotely.”

“I would feel much more comfortable with having you here, on site, actually getting a feel of the company. I mean, this is what I’m paying you for.” *Ouch!*

“I know, but I can do all my analysis from here, all I need is access to your database and a few key people to coordinate with me through Skype. Look, I’m not doing this to breach our contract before it’s even started, but I’m in a tough spot right now. My grandfather just passed.” I couldn’t believe I was playing this card and on Eddi’s birthday no less.

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you. I’m trying to manage his estate, figure out what to do next. It’s just more time consuming than I anticipated.”

“I get it. Family is important. I guess that’s one thing we have in common with Americans.” He sighed into the phone. “Promise me you’ll be at my corporate headquarters this time next month.”

“You have my word.”

“I’m buying you a non-refundable ticket.” He joked and I laughed.

“I’ll see you then. Please tell your Chief of Financial Operations and head of HR to email me. I need some documentation from them.”

“Will do.”

“Oh, and Rashid, I need you to give me full clearance and tell your employees to answer all my questions truthfully. This won’t work without transparency.”

“We have nothing to hide, Caroline. You’ll get access to anything you need.”

We spent another twenty minutes on the phone where I instructed him on the materials I needed and we discussed about secure communication for him to deliver all the private information I needed. Somehow I managed to make him agree to this deal, but deep down I knew that if Rashid would have given me an ultimatum, I would have passed. I wasn’t ready to leave yet.

How ironic. I dreaded coming to Montana and thought that Eddi’s legacy was just a very disruptive, very uncomfortable obstacle, and now there wasn’t any other place I’d rather be. My dad would fall on his knees and cry if he’d hear something like that. His own blood, preferring the country instead of a fancy job in one of the most luxurious cities in the world. Yeah, Dad would definitely cry.

Jax wasn’t part of my decision to stay longer at the ranch. I mean, sure, even if he didn’t want it, my heart was in his hands and I’d spend ten or so years missing him once I’d be gone. Jax was one of a kind, *a man’s man*, a force of nature and he made me feel more beautiful and amazing that I’ve ever felt before, but I wouldn’t have given up on myself for him. I decided to stay because of Eddi. Because I owed him a lot. He left this place to me for a reason – he trusted me, just

me, and I couldn't leave until I was sure everything was in order.

Knowing Jax was working to prepare the grain barn for the harvest today with a few men, I packed a generous lunch and a picnic basket and went to see how they were doing. I left Regina and Rusty inside because they've spent the entire morning running in the grass, so I was on my own.

Jax was with Billy Joe and Mike, looking over some prints when I found them.

"Hey, guys! What are you doing?"

Jax's head snapped up when he heard me. "Oh, hey. We're looking over the plan for the new water reservoir. The guys will start installing it tomorrow."

"Do you need anything from me?"

"A few signatures, but we can see to that later. What are you doing here?"

"I brought lunch for you guys." I showed them the bag and Billy Joe and Mike cheered.

Mike gladly took it from my hands. "Thank you so much, Miss D."

"You're welcome, Mike. Do you mind if I steal Jax for a few moments?"

"Go ahead. Billy and I were about to take a break anyway. Jax has been working us like we owe him money all morning." He spoke, but the entire time he looked in the bag. "Miss D, what's this? A sandwich?"

"It's a Croque Monsieur. Don't worry you'll like it. There's also water and soda."

"Awesome. Hey, Billy!" He yelled. "Lunch time, let's go." He grabbed the old man by the arm and dragged him along under a maple tree so they could share the meal.

"Jax, I know you're busy, but can you share lunch with me?"

“I really appreciate you doing this for us, baby, but I have a lot of things to do.”

“Jax, please.”

“Hey, let me see your eyes.” He grabbed my face, so he could see my features. “What’s wrong? You’re sad.”

“Today’s Eddi’s birthday. I just don’t want to eat alone.”

“Oh, that’s right. Damn it, baby, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“Don’t apologize. Until this year, I forgot his birthday almost every time. God, I was really the worst granddaughter.”

“No, you were not. I’ve never seen anyone prouder than Eddi was of you. Never think differently.” Jax pulled me to his chest and kissed the top of my head. “How do you feel about getting on Dove’s back today?”

“Oh. Umm, why?”

“I want to take you somewhere. It’s a nice spot and we can have lunch there. Plus, it would be a nice way to honor Eddi on his birthday since he bought the mare for you and all.”

“Yeah, ok. I can do it.”

“Come on.”

“Didn’t you say you’re busy?”

“Never too busy for my little lady.”

He took my hand and walked me to the stables where I stayed back while Jax saddled the horses. I would have helped, but he ordered me to stay put. Dove was very gentle when I went to pet her and she put her big head close to mine looking for love. A few days ago, Jax let me feed her and ever since, I thought about us as best friends. I was still scared of riding her, but he was right, it was the perfect thing to do to honor Eddi.

“Ok, little lady, come here.” He pulled me to Dove’s side. “I’ll help you get up. Just throw your leg over the

saddle.”

“Ok.” I’ve seen people doing it before and it looked easy enough. Ok, in reality it was nowhere as effortless as when I’ve seen Jax jumping on the back of Virgil, but I managed. When Dove made a step forward, I let out a sharp scream and held tight on her neck. “Oh, my God, Jax.”

“Relax, baby. Dove is a sweetheart. She’s not going to throw you out of the saddle.”

“What? Horses do that?”

“Sometimes, but it won’t happen. I showed you the last time we rode on Virgil how to handle the reins. Do you remember?”

“Yes. Most of it.”

“Ok. I’ll ride by your side. Just try to relax and Dove will do the rest of it.”

“Ok.” I took a deep breath. “Ok, I think I can do that.”

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Jax brought Virgil forward and got on his back. The picnic basket was attached to his saddle and he also grabbed a few blankets for us to sit on.

“What now, Jax?”

“We’ll go slowly. It’s an easy track and we’ll get there in a half an hour. It will be fine as long as you don’t panic.”

“Where is ‘there’ exactly?”

“Swan lake. It’s deep in the woods at the edge of the mountains.”

“Swan lake? That’s not the same one you took me when we went to the Purple Moose.”

“No, it’s not. Eddi really liked that place. I want to take you to his favorite fishing spot.”

“Jax,” I smiled, “that’s very sweet.”

“Come on, let’s go.”

Jax made Virgil keep a slow and steady pace, so I could keep up and he kept a very careful eye on me. At first, I was stiff like someone stuck something up my ass and not in a fun way, but the further we went, the easier it got. Dove was calm and intuitive and that made me relax. It took me a while to get used to all the bouncing, but when we made it out of the ranch and onto the forest path, I got familiar with the feeling of being on the back of a horse.

“Jax, I think I’m doing it.”

“Yeah, baby, you are. We’re almost there.”

We rode for another fifteen minutes and I could finally enjoy our surroundings now that I wasn’t scared for my life. The deeper we went, the lush and more beautiful the woods were. The pine trees seemed taller than any sky scraper I’ve ever see and the sky was infinitely blue above them. I took a deep breath, inhaling the strong mountain air. I never thought I’d ever feel so good in nature, or anywhere without a Starbucks in sight, but I was grateful of being able to see these woods and how glorious they were. Montana turned out to be so much more amazing that I could ever imagine with its great mountains and rapid waters. I found peace here and I found Jax too. I had Eddi to thank for everything. If it wasn’t for him, I would have never come here.

*Thank you, Grandpa.* I wasn’t a religious person. I wasn’t even sure I believed there was anything after death, but I really – *really* – hoped he could hear me. It was something I should have said to him long ago. Not for the house or the money he left me, but for never giving up on me. Not even when his own son refused to speak to him. Not even when I didn’t care that much if he came to see me or not. Eddi never gave up even when everyone else gave up on him.

“We’re here.” Jax said, pulling my attention.

“Oh.” The edge of the lake was only a few feet away.  
“It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah.” He jumped off Virgil with ease like he’d done it a thousand times before and came to help me do it too. “Wait here while I tie the horses somewhere where they can graze.”

I grabbed the picnic basket and the blankets, and waited for Jax to come back.

“Should we stay by the water?” I asked when he came back.

“No, come with me.”

We walked along the shore line for a while until we found a nice and cozy place.

“Are the horses going to be ok?”

“Yeah, don’t worry. I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“Right there.” He pointed to the trees and I saw a gravestone. “This was Eddi’s favorite fishing spot.”

“He put that up?”

“No.” He cleared his throat. “I did. I’ll set the blankets. You go take a look.”

I got closer to the stone and saw it looked very similar to a tombstone, but it was clearly hand carved by someone who wasn’t very good at carving. There was a message spelled on it too.

*In the memory of Edward  
Douglas. A great man and even  
greater mentor. His ashes were  
sent to rest next to his wife, but a*

*part of his soul will forever stay  
here.*

It wasn't much, but it was very heart warming. Jax was not a man that showed his feelings, that much was obvious, but he was more attached to Eddi than I'd realized. I found quite a few passages in Eddi's journals about Jax, all filled with praise about how hard working he was and one about how he was a good man who almost wandered on a very bad path. Eddi cared for Jax, maybe even looked at him like he was the closest thing to the son who never granted him forgiveness. It was mutual. I wasn't the only one having a hard day today. Jax was too.

When I turned, I saw him sitting down, looking over the water and my heart swelled in my chest. I loved him so damn much, how could I not? He was good, and thoughtful, and strong. Not only physically, but strong enough to turn his life around and beat the odds. He said he was not willing to give his heart but the way he was with me made me feel like I wasn't the only one losing my heart in this battle, so I ran to him and threw my arms around his neck.

"Thank you, baby, for bringing me here. And thank you for doing that for Eddi. He was lucky to have you."

"Old Eddi was a good man. He deserved it. I owe him so much, Caroline."

"I do too."

"He gave me a life."

"He gave me... this." I gestured at the scenery around us. "He gave me you!" If it was a competition, then I was winning.

"I'd like to think that Eddi hired me because of how hard and efficiently I work, not just to be gifted to his



granddaughter.” He joked and I laughed, lowering my face to kiss him.

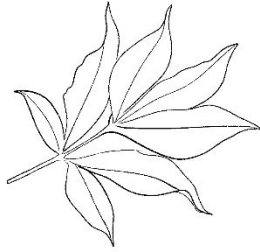
“Are you complaining, Maverick? I thought you had fun being my play thing.”

“Oh, hell yeah!”

“Anyway, what I meant to say was that when Mr. McFee called to inform me that Eddi passed away and I was the only one named in his will, I felt... inconvenienced. I knew I had to come here, deal with the farm, the land, the animals. What the hell do I know about any of that?” The look on Jax’s face answered that question. I would have made a terrible rancher. “That’s not what Eddi wanted to do. He just wanted me to come and see this place that he built for our family. That’s why he made sure everything was in order and paid for. Plus, you’re here to run everything. Jax, if it wasn’t for you, I would have turned back to DC days ago and this place would have been run into the ground by now. What a shame that would have been.”

Before I knew it, I was on my back and Jax was over me, pinning both my wrists above my head.

“Damn it, Caroline Douglas. The things you do to me...”



## Chapter 20

### Jax

*The things she did to me...*

I couldn't even name them all, but I could feel every single one. My heart was beating so damn fast, for a second I thought it might be a heart attack or something, but it was just the effect this woman had on me. This woman that was so damn different than any other I have ever met, that was living a completely different life than I did, was messing with my brain. I couldn't think straight. All I could focus on was her and making her smile.

The things she said... Caroline would never know how much they meant. Gratitude and praise were never things I've expected, but damn it felt good to hear them and coming from her, it shattered my world. I wasn't just the guy getting his hands dirty in the field all day, or *just* the guy who was screwing her. I meant something to her and – *fuck!* – she meant something to me.

This was the one thing I've never wanted, but I was so drunk on it, I couldn't see straight. Something shifted, something changed. I looked into her infinite blue eyes and it was like my heart started beating for the first time.

"You're so beautiful." I whispered with admiration.

"So are you, Jax Maverick."

"Why did you do this to me, Caroline?"

"What?"

"You made me..." I swallowed the knot in my throat. "I lied to you. At the hospital, when I said I care about you? That was a fucking lie. I was too much of a coward to say everything I wanted to."

"Jax..."

"I've fallen for you, Caroline Douglas." Hearing my own words made me burst out laughing. "I was worried you'd start following me around like a lost puppy and make my life hell and look at me now. I'm fucking crazy about you."

"Oh, God."

"You don't have to say anything."

"But I want to." To my surprise and horror, I saw a few small tears gathering in the corner of her eyes. "Jax, you have my heart. It's been yours for a while now."

"You shouldn't give it to me, baby. I don't deserve something so fragile. I have no idea how to take care of it."

"We'll figure it out."

She kissed me slowly, twisting her tongue around mine for a long minute before we were left breathless. Tasting her was the best damn thing in this whole world.

"The first time I saw you, it was like the bull escaped and hit me in the chest." I said, remembering that first day she came to the farm. "The most beautiful woman I have ever

seen, sitting on expensive leather shoes in the middle of a corn field. You have no idea what that image has done to me.”

“Good things?”

“It depends. Is a four day erection good?”

Her laugh echoed through the trees. “Well, that sounds impressive.”

“I wanted you like crazy.”

“You pulled back after we kissed.”

“Yeah. I’ve never wanted anyone with such intensity, Caroline. It made me wanna bolt and I did.”

“I’m glad you came back.”

“You showed up at my door in a bikini. I had no chance.”

“What happens now, Jax?”

“I have no idea. This is new to me.” I crooked my neck and kissed the soft skin on her chest. “But until we figure it out, I know a few things that we can do.”

“Jax.” The way she whispered my name turned my cock into steel.

“I need to be inside you, baby. It’s been too long.”

“We had sex last night. *Twice.*”

I licked her collarbone and she purred. “It’s not enough. I can’t get enough of you.”

“Jax, wait.” When I didn’t, she pushed me. “Jax.”

“Let me fuck you, baby. I know you want it.”

She was always ready for me – always drenched – and I needed to mark this moment somehow. I needed to make her mine once again.

“I do, baby, trust me, but I can’t do it next to a monument that commemorates my late grandfather.”

“Damn it, I forgot about that.” I growled. “You’re right. Let’s just have lunch. What’s the name of that fancy sandwich you made?”

“Oh, you’re going to love it.” She started pulling food out of the picnic basket. “It’s a Croque Monsieur. It’s a French grilled cheese. Very delicious.”

“Why am I not surprised you eat fancy grilled cheese?”

“I just like quality things. Stop judging me.”

“I’m not judging you.”

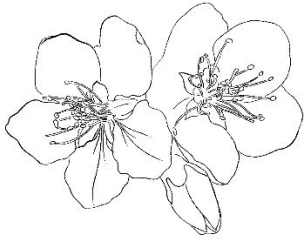
“You kinda are. But you love me.” Her teasing smile was serene.

“That I do, little lady.” Each time I said it, it got easier. It felt natural, like she was always meant for me. Like loving Caroline was what I was supposed to do this whole time.

Now, how the hell was I supposed to wrap my head around that?

My eyes glanced to the stone I put up for Eddi. That old crook always had a plan and it made me wonder if he planned this. He of all people must have known I wasn’t good enough for his granddaughter, but I liked to think that if he could see us, he wouldn’t bring out his handgun.

I was sure of one thing, I would never let anything happen to Caroline. I loved her and she was Eddi’s favorite girl. I owed him that much and I’ve never broken a promise I’ve made to him. I won’t let it happen when the stakes are so high.



## *Chapter 21*

# Caroline

Busy. Busy. Busy. Since I've promised Rashid results even if my trip was postponed, I had to work some ungodly hours to stay in contact with his team that was halfway around the world. Most of the calls were scheduled in the middle of the night and I didn't want to keep Jax awake, so for the past couple of days I've set up camp in the living room and covered the entire table in files, documents, two phones and my laptop. The homey place started to look more like a conference room, but I actually felt good resuming my work. The little break that I've had since I came here was good for me. My head was clear and calm for the first time in forever, but not doing anything would have drove me crazy eventually. The Grand World Petroleum account was exactly the type of challenge I needed to keep me on my toes and I was determined to get stellar results. Rashid expected that from me because of the reputation that I've built. People don't just pay the commissions I charge and *not* get something good in return.

I was halfway through reading a financial report when I heard my mom's ringtone. I kinda neglected calling her lately, so this should be an interesting conversation.

"Hello, mom."

"Caroline, you're alive. How nice to hear that." Yeah, she'd noticed my lack of communication.

"I'm sorry. I know I should have called you more often."

"I will forgive you because I've got the present you sent for my birthday. Fabulous. Where did you get it?"

"You're not going to believe this, but I found a very chic fashion boutique here in Kalispell and I knew you'd like that dress."

"Oh, honey, I love it. Your father is taking me out tonight and I'm going to wear that."

"Send pictures, please."

"I will. Tell me about you. Should I worry that you've been so distant since you went to visit Montana?"

I sighed, not sure on how to approach this conversation. "Mom, is daddy around?"

"No." Her tone was suspicious. "He's still in the office. Why?"

"I'm not sure I'm ready to tell him this." I took a deep breath. "I love this place. The ranch, the people, everything is so beautiful. I know he's reluctant to even think about it, but you should see it. Eddi's life was... you should see it."

"That's good. Your father might not see it that way at first, but it's a good thing. Have you decided what to do next?"

"Not yet. Initially my plan was to fly out and meet a client next Monday, but I've rescheduled that for next month. I'm working remote until then."

"I see. That's interesting. I've never known you to pass on a work trip before."

“I’m not passing, I’m just delaying things. I need some more time here to figure out a plan on how to keep this ranch working while I’m away. I’ve been trying to understand how things work around here, but the fall harvest doesn’t start till next week. I’d like to be here to see what’s going on and line up a plan for next year.”

My mom was silent at the other end, almost like she was unsure of what to say next, something I’d never seen Monica Douglas do before.

“Next year?”

“Umm, yes.”

“I see. Well, Eddi left it to you, so it’s your decision. If you want to keep the ranch then do it, but don’t bite off more than you can chew. You have a very demanding career.”

“I know, but I think I can make it work. Jax is so good at taking care of this place and I’m sure he’s going to do amazing even if I’m not here.”

“Who?”

Oh, damn it.

“I... well... he’s kinda... the ranch hand. The cowboy I’ve told you about.” I could have gotten away with it if I wouldn’t have lost my composure like a blushing school girl.

“Caroline, are you stuttering?”

“Sorry. Let me try this again. Jax Maverick worked for grandpa Eddi for a few years. He’s the one who keeps this place holding up as well as it does. He’s a very hard working, extraordinary man.” My voice turned soft at the end and mom picked up on that right away.

“Do go on, dear.”

“What do you want me to say, mom?”

“What exactly is the relationship between you and this very hard working, *extraordinary* man? Last time we spoke you left me wondering.”



“I’m almost thirty, mom. I don’t need to give you a report on my private life.”

“Do it anyway.”

Stubborn woman.

“We’ve been seeing each other, in a way. It’s not... I’m not sure it will work, but it’s going great for now.”

“You are your father’s daughter, always thinking about the worst. If it’s working, then it’s working.”

“We’re very different. He had a hard life and I don’t think we’re compatible. Jax is a very wild creature, used to doing whatever he wants, exactly the way he wants it, and you know me. I’m a control freak. He loves his life here and most of the time my work keeps me abroad. I don’t know. Too many things don’t add up.”

“That sounds like an interesting combination. He definitely sounds more fun than Samson was.” Well *that* was shocking. My parents loved Samson. His impeccable pedigree and unparalleled charm made them – especially my dad – eat straight from his palm. Dad actually urged me to reconsider breaking up my engagement and I knew he was looking forward to doing business with the Kissinger family.

“I thought you liked Sam.”

“Honey, from a status point of view, a woman can’t do much better than him, but he was always too... perfect.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Perfect can get boring really fast. Why do you think I like fighting with your dad? It keeps things interesting.” Her words reminded me of the few but very intense fights I had with Jax. We were definitely not lacking on that department.

“Jax keeps me on my toes.” I wasn’t going to tell my mom I got into a cat fight and got arrested, but looking back, I didn’t regret a thing. “He’s a very intense guy.”

“Then make it work. If there’s someone who can do it, it’s you.”

“Mom, are you suggesting that I move to Montana?” I said jokingly.

“God, no. Your dad would have my neck, but if this man really cares about you, maybe you’ll find a compromise.”

“It’s not that simple. I want to, but I’m not sure how to do it.” Suddenly, the discussion turned very real. There was something I’ve left unsaid that was eating at me. “Dad would be a problem.”

“Your father wants you to be happy.”

“He also wants bragging rights. Mom, he threw a damn ball to introduce Sam to his friends. Something tells me he won’t do the same for Jax, even if he’s ten times the man Samson was.”

“Give your dad some credit.”

I wished I could have done that. I loved my father and he was always my biggest supporter growing up, but he was also the same man who refused to talk to his father because of a business. He wasn’t greedy, or evil, but he was proud to the point it became his biggest flaw. I would never stand for anyone looking down on Jax for any reason, not even daddy.

“You know what, Mom, let’s cross that bridge when we get there.” I was about to change the subject, but luckily didn’t have to because I heard someone outside. “Can we talk more later? I think there’s someone at the door.”

“Sure thing, honey. Make sure you do call me. I’m not done talking about this.”

“I will.”

“Caroline, you know whatever you decide to do, I’m always here for you, right?”

Now that was something I knew I could count on. Mom always made a point of telling me there wasn’t anything I

could do that would make her stop having my back. I guess the situation between Eddi and dad had a lot to do with that.

“I know. Love you, mom. Tell daddy I’ll call him soon.”

I got up from the couch and went to the front door. Indeed, there was someone out there. Stephanie’s face was glued to the window and I hurried to let her in.

“Hello!” She smiled at me.

“Hello to you too. What are you doing here, Steph?”

“A little bird told me you’ve been working very hard for the past few days and I’m here to make sure you catch a break.”

“A little bird?” I raised one eyebrow and crossed my arms. “Did Jax send you here?”

“He said he’s really busy with the ranch and can’t keep an eye on you, so Val and I are on duty. It’s almost six, so I declare your work day is over.”

“What a ridiculous man. I’m fine.”

“He told me you’ve been working nights.”

“Yes. My client is in the Middle East. Since I’m here instead of there, I have to accommodate them and work on that time zone.”

“Girl, you have the best job. You’re like one of those fancy lawyers on TV who always fly from one place to another.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, “Except I’m not a lawyer. I’m a performance consultant.”

“I have no idea what that means, but it’s still super fancy.”

“Come in. I’ll make you some coffee since you drove all the way here to babysit me.”

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Stephanie stayed for a few hours and we talked about everything and nothing. She mentioned she had to go to a party at Vic's workplace, so I let her pick a dress and some shoes from my closet which gave me unlimited praise, plus she promised to send me fresh flowers every day even when I insisted there was no need for that. It was already dark when I walked her to her car and I saw Regina and Rusty coming home alone.

"Where have you two been?"

They've both barked in response. I looked up expecting to see Jax, but there was no trace of him anywhere. It was late and he didn't come by the house the entire day. I got that there were a lot of things to do, but I was also sure he didn't eat anything, so I let the dogs inside and then started making my way to the stables to look for him.

Billy Joe was just loading his things in his pickup when I got there.

"Billy, is Jax around?"

"He's with the horses. Virgil didn't have a great day and we had the vet come by to look at him."

"Oh, is everything alright?"

"Doc said it's just a stomach thing, but we have to isolate him for a few days so he won't pass it to the other horses."

"Poor guy." Billy himself looked exhausted, so I didn't stretch the conversation. "Ok, I'll go look for Jax inside."

"Good night, Caroline."

"Good night."

Jax was in a box in the corner, pretty far from all the other horses, trying to make Virgil eat a carrot. The horse looked very uninterested in the offer and when Jax's shoulders slumped, I walked behind him and hugged his waist.

“I’ve heard our boy is not doing well.”

“Yeah, he picked up something. He’s out for the week.”

“You can ride Dove, I don’t mind.”

“No offence, baby, but Dove is too slow for me. Buck will do.” He turned to me and pulled me into a kiss. I could feel how tired and tense he was.

“Jax, you overworked yourself.”

“You’re one to talk. You haven’t slept three nights in a row.”

“That’s different. Stephanie came to see me, by the way.” I pinched his chest. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I just mentioned you might need a break. I’m glad she listened.”

“Well, now I’m saying you need a break and some dinner. What did you eat today?”

He rubbed the back of his head, looking very guilty. “Not much.” Ha, I knew it!

“Get your ass home. I need to feed you.”

I tried to walk away and drag him along, but instead, I was picked up and trapped between his body and a wall.

“You’re too damn beautiful.”

“Thank you. I love when you look at me like that.”

His lips touched mine. “Every time I come in here, I remember the way you moaned when I took you in that box. It’s torture.”

“Let’s go home and you can make me moan there too.”

“Deal, baby.”

He walked out with me in his arms and I didn’t mind. Feeling Jax between my legs in any circumstances was my favorite thing.

He whispered something insanely filthy in my ear and I laughed, challenging him again to take me to bed and do all of those things to me and we were on our way to the house when I noticed the headlights coming down from the gate of the farm.

I looked down at Jax. “Are you expecting someone?”

“No. Maybe Billy forgot something.”

When the car got closer, it wasn't Billy's pickup truck, but a small green Honda that I've never seen before. I had no guess on who that might be until I recognized Nora's friendly face when she got out from the driver's seat. I haven't spoken to her since I visited her real estate agency the first time I got here. Actually, so many things have changed since then, I wasn't sure I needed her services anymore.

“Caroline, hello, lovely!” She was much more exuberant than the last time we talked. “Hey, Jax.”

“Nora.” He nodded briskly and finally let me back on the ground.

“Nora, this is a surprise.”

“I know, I know. It's almost the middle of the night. Trust me when I say I'm much more professional than that, but I just stumbled on such good news, I couldn't wait to share it with you.” She rubbed her hands together. “We have an offer for the ranch.”

“What?” I told her I was in no hurry to sell.

“You're not going to believe this, but I was at a convention in Helena yesterday and I bumped into this developer. He's looking to expand his business into agrotourism and the Douglas ranch is exactly the type of property he's looking for. We have an offer – get this – above asking, and he's looking forward to a fast sale. From what I gathered, he wants to start remodeling by the end of next month.”

“End of... Nora, wait a second. You said the listing wouldn't be public until I figured things out. We agreed on

that.”

“I know, but this deal was just too good not to mention your ranch. I have a lot of experience, Caroline, and I don’t think you’re going to get a better one than this. I haven’t told the client about all your conditions yet, but I’m sure we can talk him into accepting everything.” My head was spinning. “This solves all your problems. You don’t have to worry about this place and can go back to your life, just like you wished. Plus, wait ‘till you see the offer on the table. It’s a lot of money.”

I looked over my shoulder to Jax and saw he was frozen, not a muscle on his body moving. He wasn’t looking at Nora or I, but somewhere in the distance, and even if he was silent, I could tell he was mad. I bit my lip feeling guilty that he was blindsided by this conversation.

“Nora,” I turned to the other woman, “Can we talk about this another time?”

“But... aren’t you happy? This is a great thing.”

“Just go. I’ll call you.”

I watched her climb into her car, obviously bothered that I wasn’t jumping up and down about her offer and turned around, leaving me alone with Jax. For the longest time we just stood there looking at each other.

“Jax, listen...” That’s all I got to say.

“It’s none of my business.”

“I can tell that you’re angry. We need to talk about this.”

“Caroline,” his kept his voice low, but my name was harsh on his tongue, “you were right before. It’s late, I’m tired, and I’m hungry. I’m just gonna go to my house tonight.”

“What?” My mouth dropped when he turned his back to me and started walking to his place. “Jax, seriously?”

“Just go.” He told me without looking or stopping. “I don’t want to fight. I don’t have it in me.”

“Fight? We have no reason to fight. Why are you doing this?” A minute ago we were on our way to bed and now he was giving me the cold shoulder. Not willing to leave things like this, I ran and caught up to him. “Damn it, Jax, listen to me.”

“What? What the hell do you want now?!” The shout echoed through the fields. His voice was so harsh, I made a step back.

“Don’t speak to me like that.”

“I didn’t want to, but you kept pushing me. Say your piece so I can go.”

“I get that Nora’s offer bothers you, but there’s no need to snap at me. We can talk like adults.”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Caroline. It’s your ranch, it’s your land, so sell.”

“Nora and I had a talk when I first came to Kalispell, but...”

“But what? Nothing’s changed. You heard her, it’s once in a lifetime offer, above asking, whatever. Sign the papers and go back to whatever fancy hotel room you call home.”

“Jesus Christ!” I threw my hands in the air, exasperated with his behavior. “Why are you behaving like this? Because I talked to Nora? Because I didn’t tell you? I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t, Caroline. You don’t understand anything!” I’ve never seen his face so red or his eyes so angry. “You don’t understand how Eddi put his blood and sweat into this place and what it meant to him because you were never here. You didn’t come once when he was wasting away in a hospital bed alone, so of course you don’t care. Why the fuck would you? This ranch is just an inconvenience for you. You don’t give a damn that someone would buy it and tear everything to pieces, shit on everything Eddi Douglas built. You don’t care how they’re going to sell the cattle and send the horses to the slaughter house.”



“What are you...?”

“There are people depending on this place. Workers and farmers that need the jobs. There are businesses in this town that need some kind of notice that their main supplier is going out of business. Val and Phil? Their bar is buying almost all their beef from us which cuts their transportation cost to almost nothing and you’re screwing them, but you didn’t give a damn. All you wanted was to get out of an obligation your dead grandfather dumped on you.” His rant was cutting and I could feel the tears gathering in my eyes, but I’d be damned if I’d cry in front of him when he was trying to hurt me on purpose. “Your buyer wants to start remodeling by the end the month? Fine, go sign the papers. I’ll be out of the house by next week.”

I gawked at him shaken to the core by his words. I could forgive anger, but not his cruelty. He was trying to put me down and kick me in the gut and it worked. I felt sick to my stomach.

“You can’t talk to me like that! I don’t need a lecture when I did nothing wrong. Nora and I had a conversation – a *theoretical* conversation – and this offer came much faster than anyone expected.” My voice didn’t crack and I was proud of that small victory. “Nothing is changing and you don’t have to leave your house or give up your horse.”

“It’s not my house, Caroline, and it’s not my damn horse. They’re yours, so go ahead and sell everything.” He started walking again and I was left behind.

“Jax.” No answer. “Jax!”

“And send my damn dog home.”

That was it, the discussion was over. Maybe it was better this way. Jax was clearly not in a good frame of mind and I was furious and wounded. Nothing good could come out of that.

Returning to the path that led to the big house, I told myself that tomorrow we’d figure it out. Tomorrow he was

going to apologize and we were going to move on from this.

Everything came down on me while I was walking home and all I wanted was to get to bed and curl up into a ball. I still couldn't comprehend all the things he said to me, him of all people. I've told him I had regrets. I've told him that I felt like I screwed things up with Eddi and he threw it in my face. It was a low thing to do.

Jax wanted to hurt me and he succeeded, so I hoped he could sleep knowing that because I wasn't going to be able to.

When I walked into the house Rusty and Regina came to my feet looking for cuddles, so I scratched their heads.

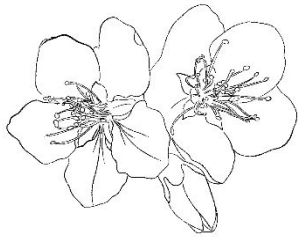
"Hey, boy. I think Jax wants you to return home." What was I supposed to do? Kick Rusty out and hope he makes it to Jax? No way. "Screw him, Rusty. You're sleeping here."

I fed them and then took both upstairs to occupy Jax's side of the bed and snuggle with me. I needed something warm and fluffy to keep me company.

I sat there with two dogs in my arms, staring into the darkness until the sun came up. I couldn't sleep, but I didn't want to get up either. I just wanted to be left alone.

The fact that I gave Jax enough power to make me feel like that was deplorable. I was no one's doormat and I wasn't going to let this just slide by. I wasn't even guilty of anything. Eddi died and left behind this farm that I had no idea what to do with, but it was growing on me. Jax didn't give me chance to say my piece and that wasn't fair. It wasn't fair and I didn't deserve that, especially from him.

I sighed and stretched, hoping to release some of the tension that gathered in my shoulders, but it was useless. All I could do now was wait for the morning to come and wait for Jax's apology.



## *Chapter 22*

# Caroline

I couldn't eat anything at breakfast. I couldn't even drink my coffee so the mug was abandoned on the kitchen table. There was commotion outside. I could hear some distant voices, but Jax didn't show. If he wanted to act childish and stubbornly hold on to a grudge, I should have let it go and move on, but I couldn't. Before I could stop myself, I was marching across the fertile fields, going towards the noises.

The first person I saw was Mike who was fighting with a burlap sack while Jax was overlooking some papers attached to a clip board. They were too focused to see me coming, so I walked behind Jax and touched him on the shoulder. He jumped like something had burned him.

"Can we talk?" I tried to keep my voice as leveled as possible and not give Mike a first-row ticket to our mess.

Jax, on the other hand, didn't care about an audience. "What the hell are you doing here?"

“Can you just stop with this attitude and come with me to talk like adults.”

“I think we said everything last night.”

Was he serious? Last night was a joke – a cruel, humorless joke – not a discussion. I’ve met some pigheaded people in my life, but none as infuriating as the one standing before me.

“Jax, I don’t even understand why are you so angry with me.”

“Look, I have things to do. You might not give a shit, but I do, so go back and let me work.”

“Wow.” A bitter smile settled on my lips. “I didn’t sleep because all I could do last night was think about the way you talked to me, trying to find excuses for you. I stayed up all night telling myself that it was just a stupid reaction, that you’re not the type of asshole to that would throw my grandfather’s memory in my face, that you were just angry. I can’t keep making up excuses for you, Jax.”

Something flashed across his face and for a second I saw regret in those beautiful black eyes that I loved, but it was quickly overcome by anger. I waited for Jax’s response, bracing myself for another shouting match, but it never came. Instead, just like last night, he chose to run away. His muscular back turned to me and he walked, leaving me behind.

“Seriously, Jax?” I raised my voice behind him. “This isn’t how you treat the people you love!”

*That* didn’t remain unanswered. “Maybe I was wrong about that.”

I would have much rather have Dove kick me in the stomach with her back hooves. His words left me with no air in my lungs and no strength in my legs, so I dragged myself over to the closest tree and slid down to the ground. Oddly enough, I didn’t feel like crying. I was numb with anger and resignation. Part of me kept wanting to look for an explanation to pardon his actions, but as I told him, I was done doing that.

Mike hovered around, shifting from one leg to another for a while before working up the courage to talk to me.

“Are you ok, Miss D?”

“Hmm?” I looked and saw how uncomfortable Jax and I made the poor boy. “Yes, Mike, don’t worry. We’re just having a bad day.”

“Don’t take it to heart, ma’am. Most of his days are bad ones. Get him a beer and a burger and he’ll get nicer.”

“Right.” I raised to my feet and cleaned the soil stains on my jeans. “I have to go back to the house, Mike. Are you ok here until Jax comes back?”

“Yes, ma’am. Don’t worry about a thing.”

I ruffled his hair when I passed by him. Mike was a few years past the age when kids have their cheeks stroked and hair ruffled, but he was a good guy and I was really fond of him.

When I returned to the house, I wasn’t sure what to do, so I buried myself in work for as long as I could, going through every page the HR manager of World Grand Petroleum had sent over. A task that I thought would take me at least three days was done in six hours, and then the only thing I had to keep me preoccupied was a bottle of chilled white wine. I poured some in a glass over a few ice cubes and went to sit on the couch, ready to drink myself to sleep. My phone stopped me before I had a chance to take the first sip. Val was calling.

“What, Val?” I was harsher than I intended.

“Ok, so you’re in a mood too.” I could tell she was at the Purple Moose by the music in the background. “Do me a favor and come and collect your man.”

“What?”

“Jax is sleeping on my bar. He is drunk, acting up, and doesn’t want to leave. Phil offered to drive him home, but he threw a tantrum.”

“Look, Val, it’s nice of you to call, but Jax is really not my problem.”

“Caroline, he’s looking for trouble. I don’t know what happened with you two, but I think that if you don’t come and get him now, then it will be your turn to pick him up from the police station. He’s been picking fights all night and I can’t sit with him. The bar is packed.”

I sighed, my shoulders slumping.

“Fine, I’ll come and take him.” I told her, knowing damn well it was a bad idea. If he was in a foul mood, then he’d try to pick a fight with me and I might end up strangling the idiot.

I threw a cardigan on top of my short satin pajamas and found my car keys. Regina wanted to come too, so I had to close her in the bedroom because she kept trying to run out of the house. Not having Rusty around anymore was really tough on her.

The entire drive to Val’s bar I cursed Jax out – for talking to me the way he did, for getting drunk like an idiot, for every single thing that pissed me off about him. It was my fault for letting my heart get sucked into this affair. Jax tried to warn me. He told me to not expect much from him, but like a stupid girl, I got my hopes up.

The parking lot at the Purple Moose was full. Val must have had a hell of a night juggling this crowd *and* Jax. She was right by the door when I walked in, bringing some peanuts to one of the tables.

“Val!” I called her name as loud as I could to cover the music.

“Hey!” She eyed my satin shorts and fluffy slippers. “Girl, now *this* is an outfit.”

“I was in a hurry. Where is he?”

“By the bar, but be warned. Sheila was rubbing herself on his leg.”

“Oh, great.”

“I love you and your hot fists, but please don’t fight in my bar.”

“I’m just here to take him off your hands. If he wants to go with Sheila, I can’t stop him.”

When I wanted to go to Jax, Val stepped in front of me and stopped me.

“What happened with you two? He didn’t want to talk about it, but I’ve never seen Jax in such a state.”

“We’re over.” There was no need to sugarcoat it.

“Oh, Caroline.”

“Don’t look at me like that. He cut me off.” I pointed at the bar, knowing Jax was somewhere around there. “He dumped me, so I don’t need a lecture.”

“Right. Go get him home. We can talk about this another time.”

Or never. It was nice of Val to care, but I wasn’t in any mood to dissect the mess he created. Why dig through the misery when there was no way back.

I spotted Jax at the end of the bar with his face on the flat top, nursing a bottle of Jack that was almost gone, and as Val said, Sheila was on the stool next to him, whispering something in his ear.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” I muttered to myself before stepping in to crash their party. “Jax!”

His head turned to me for a second, but he didn’t say anything. Sheila on the other hand, had quite a few things to say.

“Oh, no, you don’t get to ruin my business again.” She flapped her lips. “Jax just told me he’s done with you, so leave.”

“Sheila, I don’t want to fight with you, I really don’t.”

“We’re having a nice conversation.”

“Look at him!” I exploded. “He can’t even hold his head up and you think you can give him a hard on? Try again tomorrow, Sheila. I’m taking him home.”

She kept protesting, but I decided to ignore everything that left her mouth and go to Jax. He was so hammered, I wasn’t sure he could walk, but when I dragged him out of the chair, he stood on his own two feet.

“I’m taking you home, Maverick.”

“Wait. My b-b-bottle.” He stuttered.

“I think you had enough. Come on, help me out.” I made a few steps and he followed wobbly. I put his arm over my shoulders to help him stay up.

Jax looked down at me. “What are you wearing?”

“My pajamas.”

“You came... were you sleeping?”

“Almost. Val called me to come and get you.”

“*Mnhhmmnh.*” Whatever was that sound, I had no idea. “Pff, Val!”

“Yes, Val.”

“I don’t need you to take me any-any-anywhere.” He protested while I struggled to get him across the parking lot to my car and stuffed in the passenger seat. “Why do you take care of me? You don’t care.”

I jumped behind the wheel and turned on the engine.

“I wish I didn’t, Jax. Trust me, I *wish* I didn’t.”

“You cock blocked me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sheila wanted to put out and you got in the way.”

A better woman would have paid his drunk ass no mind, but I saw red and almost crashed the damn car into a tree.

“Oh, shut up, Jax. It’s better for everyone.”



We continued the drive in silence, but I was so angry, I could barely see the road we were on. In my pettiness, when I made it in front of Jax's house, I hit the brakes so hard, his forehead smashed on the dashboard.

"FUCK!" He screamed.

Whatever. He deserved that.

"Can you walk inside?"

"Pff. Like I need you for that." He pushed the door open and stepped out but only made it three steps before having to lean onto the hood of my car to not fall flat on his face.

I got out to help him.

"Just hold on to me, Jax."

"No."

"Stop being a child."

"Stop being so annoying."

"Annoying?"

"Yeah. Annoying. You came here all hot, put your... y-your... boobs in my face, tempted me, and then screwed me." He laughed. "Ok, I screwed you too, but that was different."

There was no fighting with him in this state so I kept my mouth shut and helped him get to the door.

"Where are your keys?"

"Dunno." He mumbled.

Damn it! I started roaming through his pockets until I found the keys in question which was damn hard since Jax kept moving around. When I opened the front door, Jax walked inside holding on to the walls and I followed him until he made it safely to the couch in his living room.

"My work here is done." I said and turned to leave, but I noticed a lot of boxes on the floor. "What is this?"

"I'm getting ready to move."

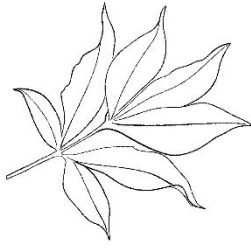
“Jax, you don’t have to...”

“N-no! This is not my house, it’s yours. I don’t... don’t even pay rent. You want me to leave, so I’m going. I h-h-have to.” No, he didn’t. I was very clear with Nora when I gave her the listing. The employees stay, or I’m not selling, but Jax never gave me a chance to say that much.

I shook my head and looked down at him. This was not the same man that made my toes curl with pleasure and kissed my lips with infinite softness. He was someone different, someone I didn’t want to get to know, so I turned around and left. I was almost out the door when I heard him.

“I didn’t lie, Caroline.” I stopped in the door frame, waiting. “I fell in love with you. The only one that ever made me feel that. And you did me dirty.” He laughed. It was the alcohol talking. I kept repeating that to fight my urge to run to him, nestle in his arms, and never walk away. Too much damage has been done already. We were through and the sooner I got used to it, the better.

When I returned back to my house, I started packing everything up back into my suitcase and started looking for airplane tickets. There was nothing left for me in Montana anymore.



## Chapter 23

### Jax

Someone must have thrown a grenade at my head, it was the only explanation for the booming pain I was feeling. Whiskey was a brutal mistress.

I opened my eyes to take in my surroundings and saw I was lying face down on my old couch, with Rusty watching over me. It wasn't like him to act so nice and stick around, but Caroline turned him from a rogue into a house puppy. Damn her.

"What are you looking at?" The dog let his head fall to the side and squealed. "I'll feed you later, dude. I can't move right now." He'd better not expect a *pupsicle* from me.

I turned on my back slowly and the entire room turned with me. This was a hangover from hell. Maybe it was the punishment I had to endure for my bad decisions. I was an asshole to everyone yesterday and this was the consequence.

I owe Val and Phil an apology for making all that noise and giving them a hard time last night. Maybe I owed Caroline one too, but why would it matter. It was over.

Thinking about her made me feel hallow. *Again*. I was used to the emptiness in my chest. I was used to being alone and feeling nothing, but returning to this state after getting to taste life with a woman like her felt like hell. I felt a million times worse than when I was sleeping on hard, cold cement, because now she took my damn heart. I didn't know I had a heart to lose, but here we were.

Christ, I was such an idiot. Fragments from last night started to gather in my head, forming one hell of an ugly picture. I made a fool of myself and Caroline still came to pick me up and drag my sorry ass home.

Some of the anger I felt has passed, but not all of it. I regretted the words I'd said to her, but I still felt like little miss Douglas took a knife and pushed it in my back.

Eddi loved her. He trusted her enough to leave the ranch to her and now she was giving it away to some stranger who wasn't here when he built this place. Whoever that investor buyer was, he wasn't here when we brought in Virgil and Dove, he wasn't here when Billy Joe put up the fence, or when Eddi sold his first pound of steak.

Maybe it was because Caroline never got to see the joy in his eyes and the proud look on his face when he looked over his land, but she was turning her back to his legacy. And she was turning her back on me...

For a moment there I let myself be fooled and believed that we were building something. Our bubble was cozy and damn sexy, but for Caroline it was just that, a bubble. For me, this was real life. This place was everything I had.

Eddi was good to me in the past five years and I've managed to get some money in the bank. I know I won't be back on the streets this time, but it wasn't just about this damn house. I loved my work and the fields around, and the life I've

put together at this ranch. Too damn bad Caroline has put a price tag on everything without giving me a warning.

All the ugly feelings I was harboring for her right now came back. The fine whiskey Val gave me worked for a while but the numbness was gone now. All that was left behind was a broken heart, pain, anger, and a crushing headache.

I needed to work to keep my mind busy, but I was in no shape to spend the day in the field or get on the back of a horse, not with this hangover. I couldn't sit here either, and Rusty wasn't about to let it happen. The mutt brought his mouth next to my ear and barked.

"What the hell do you want, boy?" He ran to grab his bowl and showed it to me. "Fine." I muttered, dragging my wilted body off the couch to go and get him some food. I was so groggy, I almost tripped over some of the boxes that were scattered on the floor.

I really needed to get my act together and finish packing. I had no idea where I'd go from here, but that wasn't something to scare me. The unknown was familiar to me. One thing I was sure of, I won't be staying at the Douglas farm if it wasn't Douglas owned.

After feeding the dog, I got a jug of water out of the fridge and swallowed down two aspirins. They're not gonna do much, but I'd take any help I could get. I also brewed a cup of coffee and gulped it down waiting for my body to settle down.

There wasn't much to do around the house and I couldn't stand still, so I started walking towards the barns, looking for something to do. It was quiet on the ranch – too quiet – but I was grateful for the peaceful walk. The fresh air and the exercise helped my recovery significantly and when I made it to the horses' stables, I was no longer feeling like dying. I wasn't well, but my head was not throbbing anymore.

The only person around was Mike and he was brushing Dove when I got there.

“Hey, big boy.” I called from the door. “How’s going?” Mike was a good kid. Hard-working, honest, determined. We needed more like him around here, but soon he might not even have a place to work.

Mike answered with a nod which was out of character for him. The kid had a habit of talking too damn much. He continued to see to the mare like I wasn’t even there, so I got closer and leaned into the entrance of the stall.

“Mike, did you hear me, buddy?”

“Yeah.”

“Everything good?”

“The animals are fed. There’s not much for you to do.”

“What’s up with Dove?”

“Nothing.” One word again.

“So?”

“So what?” He snapped his head towards me.

I almost stepped back when I heard his tone. Mike was not the guy to give attitude to anyone.

“What’s wrong with you today, Mike? Are your balls blue or something.”

“No, but yours are about to be.”

That made me sit up straight.

“What did you just say?” Instead of answering, he started brushing Dove’s mane more aggressively. “Mike, I’m talking to you.”

He finally turned to face me and by the look in his eyes, he wanted me dead. I’ve seen it before. On Caroline.

“Why did you have to make her run away, man?” He yapped at me. “Miss D says all the workers are going to be taken care of, but I liked her. She could have taught me a lot, but now she’s leaving because you couldn’t keep it in your pants.”

“Slow down. You talked to Caroline?”

“She called Billy and I here for a meeting this morning.”

“About?”

“About the future of the farm. She’s probably going to sell.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t put that on me.” I muttered.

“Yes, I can, because she was thinking about staying, but you fucked things up.” He was really passionate about this. I had no idea Mike put Caroline on such a high pedestal.

“She was never going to stay, Mike. She talked to Nora a long time ago.”

“Yes, but since then, Miss D thought that maybe she had a *reason* to keep the ranch. Now you made a fool out of her in front of the whole town. She’s gone.”

Yeah, last night wasn’t my best moment. Wasn’t my worst either. Mike was right, I made Caroline a spectacle last night and for that I owed her an apology. Damn, the list of people I’ve wronged in one day was too damn long.

Something else that Mike said stuck with me. She wanted to stay? Well, maybe not stay but she was thinking about keeping the ranch. *Keeping me*. My cold, wounded heart contracted thinking about it. It didn’t matter how much I wanted to just be angry with her, all the other feelings were still there. Love, hope, and hints of betrayal were still floating in my chest making it hard for me to breathe every time I thought about her.

“Mike, what do you mean *she’s gone*?”

“Oh.” Oh? What the hell did that mean? “You didn’t hear?”

“What do you mean she’s gone?” I repeated myself.

“Miss D packed up her things this morning and came by to say goodbye. She said we have to be on our own until further notice. She really didn’t tell you?”

I scattered my brain for pieces of conversation from last night but nothing came to mind. Everything after she picked me up from the bar was blurry.

“No, she didn’t tell me shit. I’ll go find her.”

“Jax, man, I think she’s already gone.”

*No. She can’t be.*

Without saying another word to Mike, I turned around and started running to the house as fast as I could. I didn’t stop to catch my breath, not even when my legs started to ache. I just had to get to her in time to say my piece. I didn’t know if what I wanted was to apologize, or hear her say we meant enough for her to keep this land and stay with me, but we were not done yet. This story was not ended.

I ran, and I ran, and I ran through the fields, desperate to get to Caroline. The past few days rolled in my head and for the first time since Nora came to deliver her news, I could see how much of an asshole I was. The things I said? I deserved a kick in the balls for them, and I’d gladly take it.

When I made it to the house, nothing looked different, except from Billy Joe who was just locking up the front door.

“No.” I whispered through tempestuous breaths.

“Boy, you look like shit.” He said when he saw me struggling to breath. You could accuse Billy of anything, but not being honest wasn’t one of them.

“Where is she?”

“Jax...”

“Caroline. Where is she?” The place was quiet and her car wasn’t there, but I still refused to believe it.

“I’m sorry, boy. She left.”

“No.”

“Yes, I’m afraid. An hour ago.”

“An hour?!”



“She asked me to check if everything is in order with the house. I’m sorry, boy.”

Caroline Douglas was gone and because of me, it was forever. If one would stop to look inside of her suitcases, it wouldn’t be hard to spot the one thing she got from here. My heart. It was sitting on top of one of her cashmere blouses, never to be returned again.

The news paralyzed me. The only thing I could do was look down at my hands – my beat down, rough, working-man hands – and imagine how it would be to never feel her softness again. Never sleep with her in my arms. Never wake up with her perfume in my nostrils.

*Never.* This one word rang in my ears and it felt like a sentence. Like in TV shows when the judge slams the gavel down and it feels so permanent.

No, fuck this. No!

“Billy, give me the keys to your truck.”

“My keys?”

“Yes, man. My car is all the way back at the house and I have no time to spare.”

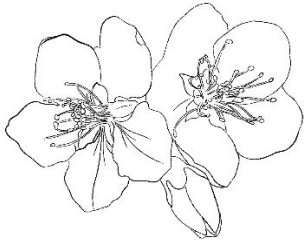
“Jax, she’s been gone a long time. She might be across state lines by now.”

“Billy, I don’t have the fucking time. Please, man, give me the damn keys.”

He looked for them in his pocket and threw the shiny things at me.

“Go get our lady boss back, boy.”

It was the only thing I needed to hear. Without thinking twice, I jumped in the car and pressed the gas paddle all the way down. I was on a mission, just like Billy said – bring *my* lady boss back.



## *Chapter 24*

# Caroline

The District was never one of my favorite places but it was the closest to what I could define as my home. I was born and raised in D.C, I went to school here, and my parents still lived here, in their impressive mansion in North Arlington. My condo was on the other side of the Potomac, in Georgetown, but in the three days I've been back in the city, I couldn't bring myself to go there. I just wasn't excited at the opportunity of going to an empty apartment that was cold, quiet, and dusty. At least at my parent's house, I had my mother to keep me company.

"Tell me, dear," she said while handing me cup of chamomile tea, "what do you think about some shopping?"

"Mom, no. Go with your friends."

"Caroline, you have to get out of the house at some point."

*Some point, but not today.*

“I’m just taking this time to recharge my batteries before returning to work.”

“Spare me the excuses, Caroline. You’re all recharged, you just want to sit in the guest bedroom and lick your wounds.” Was it so obvious? “A mother knows.” She answered to my silent question.

“I’m ok.”

“Are we ever going to talk about it?”

“I’ve just told you...”

“Your words don’t mean much if they’re not backed by actions.” She said and giggled. Those words were my father’s mantra and both of us were sick of hearing them.

“Mother.” I warned.

“Caroline, a few days ago you were thinking about changing your entire life for that mountain man of yours and now you’re here refusing to get out of the house. You can’t blame me for being worried. It’s very out of character.”

She was right. Moping around – especially for a man – *was* out of character for me. I was back at work two days after I’d kicked Sam out.

“He’s not my mountain man.”

“Interesting.”

“What?”

“I said a lot of things, but that’s the only part that stuck with you.”

“Mom, we had a thing and now it ended. Badly. That’s the all of it. We never talked about my love life before, we don’t have to start now.” As much as I loved my parents, we were not the type of family to talk about feelings too much.

“We didn’t talk about it before because it was boring.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, come on, dear. Samson? He was quite bland. And your boyfriend before him? What was his name? Marcus?”

“Matthew.”

“Right. That one was a kiss ass. But this new man sounds deliciously exciting.”

Jax was more amazing than anything my mother’s imagination could create. He was perfect until he decided to get vindictive and tear me down to pieces for a sin I didn’t commit.

Flashes of memories came rushing back to me and I felt tears stinging my eyes. I’ve done a phenomenal job keeping the crying behind the closed doors of the bedroom for the past few days, but now I was dangerously close to melting into a puddle of tears.

Jax turned everything we shared into bitterness and regret, but his claws were still very tight around my heart. I wasn’t sure I’d ever recover from the blow of falling in love like I’d never done before and losing him the way I did. We didn’t split up as friends, I ran because the man I loved was keen on hating me. That was too much pain for me to think one day I’d just forget it.

“Mom, I really don’t think I can talk about it. It was an ugly fight.” A little part of me was still defending Jax, and I didn’t want to say out loud all the shitty things he’d said to me.

“Fine, but whenever you’re ready, I’m here. So is your father.”

“I’ve barely seen him since I came back.”

“I know, dear, and I’m not pleased with that, but something is keeping him chained to the desk. You know how he is when it comes to the business.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “It wasn’t worth it mom. For dad to turn his back on grandpa just because of the choices he made.”

“I never agreed, Caroline, but I made vows to stand by your father. I tried to change his mind many times, especially for you. Eddi loved you so much, you deserved more time with him. Your father never listened.”

“He should have. Eddi didn’t give up on family. He just moved away from his pain.” Eddi lost his love and ran. I was doing the same right now. “His house was there all this time, waiting for us.”

Mom’s hand landed over mine.

“I’m sorry their feud cost you, honey, but I hope you’ve got some closure now that you got to see the ranch for yourself.”

I wasn’t sure closure was a good word, but something definitely shifted into place. I felt closer to Eddi now than I ever did before. At first, I had no idea why he thought it was a good idea to give me of all people a damn ranch in Montana, but now? He did it because I was his family and he wanted to share all that beauty with me. I was grateful and humbled.

“At least I got to see where he lived.”

“Did you decide what you want to do with the property yet?”

“No.” I could sell. Nora has slapped me with a better offer than I’d expected and her last email said that the potential buyer was ready to accept all my conditions regarding the staff. It was the out I needed, but something didn’t allow me to just say yes and move on.

Going back, seeing Jax again, seemed like more than my heart could take right now, but parting with the ranch felt so... definitive. My head needed to be clear in order for me to take that decision.

My mother could not read the signs and see that I really – really – didn’t want to talk about Montana or Jax anymore, but luckily, Regina came in the room to distract us. Just like me, she wasn’t her usual self. Ever since we arrived in D.C, I had problems making her eat. She didn’t want to play or run

around, and at first, I thought it was just the change of scenery, but she got worse by the day.

“Come here, girl.” I called her and she came to sit next to my leg with a sad look on her face.

“Another bad day?” Mom asked.

“Yeah, I really don’t know what to do with her. I think I should call the vet.”

“She hasn’t touched her bowl today.”

“I know.” I sighed. “Your wish is going to turn into reality after all. I’ll have to leave the house.”

“Maybe she just misses running outside all day.”

“No, I think she misses Rusty.”

“Who’s that?”

“A dog at the ranch. Jax’s dog.”

“Oh, so the four of you double dated?”

I would have laughed if my girl wouldn’t have let out a painful sound. *Oh, poor thing.*

“That’s it, I’m taking her to the vet. I can’t spend another night hand-feeding her.”

“Fine, I’ll come with you and we can grab lunch on our way out. Maybe stop and do some shopping.”

“Mother, I’m not in the mood for a lap around town.”

“Maybe not now, but if Regina will feel better after the vet sees her, maybe you will be.” Relentless, stubborn woman.

She offered to drive me to the vet’s office and I accepted even if that meant I’d be at her mercy, but I wanted to hold Regina. The vet made her nervous and her day was bad enough already.

Her regular doctor was booked for a solid week, but Mom found a clinic in Cardozo that agreed to see Regina right away. It was far, but their website had good references.

I told Mom that she could wait in the car, but she insisted to walk in with me and the dog, so all three of us marched into the waiting room until a nurse called my name. The place looked clean and professional enough for me not to worry about what this vet I've never met was going to do to my baby.

Dr. Herbert-Cass was his name. He was a pleasant man in his seventies, with kind eyes and a warm voice, and Regina liked him right away. She wasn't as enthusiastic as a few days ago, but she allowed the doc to examine her without any fuss.

"Well, well, Miss Douglas, Regina is definitely doted on, and I say this in the best way possible. Her fur looks pristine, she has no bites or lesions on the skin. Everything looks great."

"So she's just sad? Is that why she hasn't been eating?"

"I'll need some more information before making a diagnosis. Can I ask you some questions while I give her an ultrasound?"

"Sure."

"Aside from missing her appetite, has Regina been acting any different?"

"Yes. She's very energetic, but for the past couple of days, she's done nothing but lay down."

"Did you change her diet in any way?"

"No."

"Surroundings?"

"Yes. We've just returned from a trip to Montana, but Regina is used to traveling."

"I see." He looked at the screen and let out a *hmmm* sound. "Well, you can relax. Your dog is not sick."

"She's not?"

"No. When did you decide to breed her?"

“To what... oh, no!” My jaw fell. Some people say that in the metaphorical sense, but I was sure I heard the sound mine made when it hit the floor.

That sneaky mutt! How many times did I tell Jax this was exactly what I was afraid of and he assured me Rusty would be on his best behavior. Nope, it was stupid to blame the dog. This one was on me. I was the one to blame for leaving Regina unsupervised.

“Looks like you’re going to have some puppies in a few weeks.”

“Oh, God.”

“You look pale, Miss Douglas. This wasn’t planned?”

“No, damn it, it wasn’t. I... I don’t even know what to say.”

“You wait seven weeks, that’s all you can do. I’m going to give you some vitamins and a few pills to help her appetite kick in. The nutrition plan she’s on right now is good, but you should give her an extra meal now that she carries four puppies.”

*Four? What will I do with four?*

Ugh, I could kill Jax right now. What kind of irresponsible person doesn’t fix their dogs? Jax and I, that’s who...

The vet explained a few more things to me and suggested I should get Regina to another exam in a few weeks. After that, there wasn’t anything more to do except from wrapping my girl in her favorite blanket and go home.

Mom dropped her idea of a girl’s day when she saw the look on my face and we drove back to the house in silence where I spent the entire day around Regina. Dinner was quite nice, my father and I got into a fierce debate over the business strategy of a fast-growing retailer, which was very entertaining, but I was glad when we called it a night. I really wanted to lay in bed and hide under the covers.



Regina jumped in bed with me – something she never did before Jax taught her it was alright to sleep at our feet. This was yet another trace of him that I took with me to the city.

A shiver shook me even if I wasn't cold at all. Even if it's been a few days since I left the ranch, sleeping alone didn't get easier. At night, when I was alone in bed, I could feel his absence the most.

*Only if he'd have let me talk...*

He said he loved me, goddamn it! He said he loved me but he turned bitter when the first problem showed. How is that love? Maybe if he would have acted his age and sat down for a talk, we would have stood a chance.

Tears started rolling down on my cheeks again and Regina looked at me with her head crooked to the side.

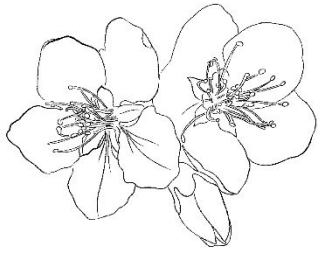
“Oh, don't judge me. You're the slut. Pregnant and no dad in the picture. I've raised you better than that, Regina.”

She raised her snout defying me.

Gosh, how did I get here? Crying in my parents' house over a man who didn't want anything to do with me anymore.

*He said he loved me.* A voice whispered into my ear, but that love meant nothing if he wasn't willing to give me an inch to screw up.

*It's over.* The same voice reinforced the reality. Jax was in the past and he could stay there with his bitterness for all I care. I had my broken heart to worry about. And puppies. Four puppies.



## *Chapter 25*

# Caroline

“I can’t believe you convinced me to do this.” I glared at my mother in the mirror.

“It’s just a fundraising gala. You’ve been to a million of them.”

“I don’t need you to make sure I have a social life.”

“Caroline, you don’t have a social life.” Touché. If it wasn’t work related, I rarely go out and the few people I would call friends were scattered around the world.

“I should have just gone to my apartment instead of coming here.” I’ve been in mom’s house for a week and if I was truthful, her company and my dad’s bad jokes at the dinner table helped a lot. Still, I wasn’t terribly excited to go out in the world and force a smile for hours on end.

My dress was gorgeous. Mom’s shopper picked it out and she did a hell of a job. The gown was long all the way to the floor, black, and showing one of my legs. From the top of

my blond head to the tip of my YSL sandal, I looked like a million bucks. This woman had nothing in common with the chick that ate pizza in the grass with Jax, wearing jeans and a sports bra. Well, we had one thing in common – same broken heart.

I shook my head to make the memories go back to the back of my mind where they belonged.

“I don’t know why you and daddy insisted I should attend.”

“Because you’ve been acting like a hermit for a week. This is not the Caroline that we know and love.”

“Couldn’t you wait a few more days? I’m leaving for Abu Dhabi next Monday.”

“Your father really wanted you to come with us tonight.”

He pretty much ordered me to be there. I don’t know why, but this low-profile gala seemed like a big deal for him.

“He’s working an angle, I just don’t know what is it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He is crazy proud of you and wants to show how amazing you are to our friends. It’s not like you’re around all the time like when you were little.”

“Friends? Do you even know who those people are?”

“Evelina VonPrie is the patron. I’m sure she’ll be delighted to see you.”

“Oh, I haven’t seen Evie in ages. Does she still drink?”

“Caroline!” My mother pinched me, but she couldn’t hide her smile. “She hates people calling her Evie.”

“I know, that’s why I do it.”

“Come on dear. Let’s be on our way. Your father is waiting for us downstairs.”

Dad was at the bottom of the wide stairs, looking sharp in his pressed smocking. His handkerchief was matching the

wine color of my mother's dress, and even if I knew it wasn't his idea, I thought it was terribly sweet.

"My lovely ladies." He bowed when we appeared.

"Daddy, no need for flattery. She married you already."

"I'm lucky for that. Let's go, we don't want to be late."

A stretched limo was waiting for us outside and I rolled my eyes discreetly. It was so like my father to try his best to impress everybody. He wasn't vain, he just wanted people to know that his hard work paid off.

When we made it to the VonPrie domain – yes, domain, not house – a small army of staffers were waiting in the driveway. Some were there to help me and my mom out, some to direct the cars, some to offer us drinks. Judging by the expensive cars in the parking designated area, I'd say that tonight wasn't a large event, but everyone in attendance had very large pockets.

I walked inside behind my parents, we said hello to our hostess and then it started – the mingling. A show I've been doing since I was fourteen. You go from one person to the next, chat, smile, network and repeat. It was almost like a dance; I went to find some familiar faces in the crowd, made small talk and listened to some gossip and some bragging, and when the conversation was slowing down, I'd spin around on my way to the next group. I was halfway across the room when I stepped away from Congresswoman Callaway and her husband to go to the bar and find a glass of champagne, but I didn't make it that far because a familiar face stopped me.

*Samson Samuel Kissinger the III*, standing right in front of me with a stupid smile spread all over his face.

"My beautiful Caroline." He murmured and took my hand to kiss it.

Beautiful? Definitely. His? Nope.

"Sam, what are you doing here?" The D.C social scene was not his favorite. Even though his father liked to rub

elbows with the political elite, Sam Sam was not such a big fan.

“I’m in the States with business and I didn’t want to attend, but when your father told me you’d be here...” he exhaled, “I couldn’t pass the opportunity to talk to you.”

“You could have called.” I wasn’t impressed. “When did you talk to my father?”

“Three days ago. He didn’t tell you?”

“No. He didn’t even tell me he wanted me to attend this gala until last night.” Things started to get clearer now, but I wasn’t going to play dad’s game. “It was nice seeing you, Sam.”

“Wow, hey, why the rush? Come on, Caro, you can’t possibly still be mad.”

Oh, but I was. Furious. With my father for staging this charade.

“I’m not.”

“Great, because I was hoping you’d let me take you out for coffee tomorrow.”

“Samson...”

“We still can reconcile, Caroline. We can pick it up right where we left it.”

“No, we can’t.”

“Listen.”

“Sam, you talked to my clients – *behind my back* – and told them I was going to step away from my career to focus on family and they shouldn’t hire me.” I tried my best to keep my cool, but just remembering that time of my life made my blood rush straight to my brain.

“I thought that’s what we were doing, Caroline.”

“Really? You thought a ring would turn me into a housewife?”

“No, I just thought that after the wedding you’d take it slow and I said it. What’s so bad about that?”

“We both know it wasn’t just that. You were pissed because in business my dick was just as big as yours.” *Maybe a few inches bigger.*

“Don’t be crass, it doesn’t suit you.”

“I’m just saying that we broke up because you didn’t like the competition in your bed. You want to be the big man and that’s fine, but it’s not something I want in my life.” Or need. I didn’t need him at all.

“You got to this conclusion all by yourself and it’s a wrong one. Come on, give me a chance. Let’s enjoy tonight, meet up tomorrow and talk at large, ok?”

What good would that do? I knew the truth and so did he. There was no point in meeting to talk about anything. I was in love with someone else and nothing Sam Sam would say could change that.

“Samson, we don’t need to meet for coffee. You’re here on business, so you should focus on that.”

“Caroline, we both know that I could have sent a proxy to D.C, but when your father mentioned you’d be around...” he left the sentence dangling and I felt an urge to slap my forehead. Why were all the males in my life so hard-headed and stupid?

Speaking of hard-headed males, my father appeared out of nowhere and placed his bear paw on Samson’s shoulder.

“Here you are, Sam Sam. It’s so damn good seeing you.”

“Likewise, Mr. Douglas. I was fortunate enough to find Caroline in this crowd.”

“I have to say,” Dad continued, “I’d hoped you two would run into each other. Don’t look at me like that, daughter of mine, I just want you to be happy.”

What in the world gave him the idea that Samson Kissinger was the key to my happiness?

“Dad, this wasn’t a good move on your side. You’ve bothered Sam for nothing.”

Dad frowned. “All I did was launch an invitation to a young man whose company I enjoy.”

“Well, daddy, since you two like to spend time together so much, don’t let me keep you. I’ll go get a drink.”

Sam Sam jumped forward. “I can fetch you a glass of champagne.”

“No need. I can walk.”

They both whisper-yelled my name, but I walked away as fast as I could. If I could be sure of one thing, it was that neither father nor Samson would risk following me and making a scene.

I found my mom next to the bar, took the Martini glass from her hand and emptied it in one long gulp.

“Did you know about this?” I hissed.

“About what, dear?”

“Samson is here.”

“Here?”

“Yes, Mother, here. Dad called and invited him.”

“Oh,” she was obviously surprised. “I’m sure he thought he was doing the right thing, helping you get over your bad mood.”

“Mom, any other day I would admire how devoted you are to daddy, but let’s not pretend he did this for me. He doesn’t care about my love life, ok? He just wants the social traction the Kissinger family brings.”

“He... he’s not a bad man.”

“I’m not saying he is, but he puts his status above everything. He is too proud, Mom. He meddles in my life, he

refused to speak with his father, all because of what? This life he loves so much?"

"Caroline, please. This is not the time."

"Yeah, well, I'm angry."

"You have every right to be, but we can talk more later."

"Right."

"What did Sam say to you?"

"Something about grabbing coffee, which won't happen, and something about talking to dad..." I lost my trail of thought because my attention was pulled to the front door where a few members of staff were rushing around. I couldn't tell what was going on, but there was definitely a commotion.

The guests were starting to turn their heads and my mom was no exception. She loved a little bit of drama.

"What do you think is going on out there, dear?"

"I don't know. It looks like they're trying to stop someone from coming in?"

Mom giggled. "I'm not saying Evie deserves to have her party crashed, but she told everyone in town how exclusive this is. I bet you someone was offended enough to show up without an invitation."

She was right, someone came without an invitation and they were trying to elbow their way through the staff to get inside, and that someone... was calling my name.

"Caroline!"

When I heard Jax's voice, my heart dropped to my feet. I was so stunned, I couldn't move, or answer his call. I just sat there, gawking at the image developing in front of me.

Jax fought his way through the people even when someone in the crowd very loudly threatened to call the police. He explained that – *quote* – he didn't give a shit about their



stupid party – and that – *quote* – he was just here to get his girl.

“Caroline!” He yelled my name again and even if my knees were weak and my chest was throbbing, I found it in me to make a step forward.

“Jax, I’m here.”

When I looked at my mom, I noticed her eyes were the size of dinner plates. “That’s your *ranch hand*?”

“Yeah.”

“What is he doing here?”

“I have no idea, but I’d rather go there before he gets arrested. Can you handle dad? He might have an aneurism.”

“Yes, go.”

Every single eye in the room watched me while I walked across the chandelier-lit room to meet the man who didn’t look like he was fitting the picture.

Jax was as handsome as ever, in his black jeans and a matching t-shirt. It didn’t matter that he was not wearing a suit and dress shoes, no man in this room stood a chance in front of his wild beauty.

I finally got to him, but still couldn’t believe my eyes.

“What in God’s name...”

“I’m sorry.” He cut me off. “I’m so, so sorry, baby. I was... asshole is too soft of a word, but I woke up now. I came to say I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Jax.” I shook my head.

“Tell me it’s not too late.”

“We’re in the middle of a gala.”

“Fuck the gala, baby. All I care about is you.” I pointed at the big poster that was announcing this was a charity event. “Oh, well, sorry ‘bout that, but I had to get to you.”

“How did you find me?”

“I tried to catch you when you left the ranch, but it was too late, so I called McFee and convinced him to give me your address.”

“Convinced?”

“Fine, I threatened the old man.” Jax shook his head and looked straight into my eyes. There were many things hiding in those onyx irises that compelled me every time. I could see the determination and the fire. I could see hints of love. I could see regret, but I wasn’t sure it was enough.

“We need to get out of here. The hosts are going to lose their mind. This is a private event.”

“Yeah, your butler said that much, but I’m not here to stay. I’m here to take you home, *little lady*.”

His words made it hard for me to stay up right, but I had to stay strong. An apology was not enough to just wipe everything away.

“We should go somewhere and talk, I guess.”

He stepped closer, filling my space with his vibrant energy. My wild stallion came all the way across the country for me.

I grabbed his wrist, ready to drag him away somewhere where I could scream and cuss him out, and maybe – just maybe – kiss his stupid face, but just when I was ready to make our escape, I heard my father furiously mumbling something.

“Caroline Douglas, explain this charade, please.” Even in his angry moments, daddy was still perfectly proper. The worst part was that Samson was not far behind him and he was the last person I wanted here.

“Dad, we’re sorry for the, umm, scene that was created. Jax was just impatient to... talk.”

“And who is this *gentleman*, if you don’t mind me asking?” I didn’t like his tone one bit, or the way he looked Jax up and down. There was nothing polite in his look, but I bit my tongue.

“*Father*,” I warned him, “This is Jax Maverick and he’s here to see me.”

Dad gave him another look.

“He’s definitely not one of your clients.” The way he just said that? It was one of my father specialties – he could insult someone without saying anything insulting. It made my hairs stand up and my stomach turn.

“We’re done here,” I said and turned my back on him, but to my surprise, Jax didn’t move.

“Not yet, baby. Is this your dad?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s mighty fine to meet you, sir.”

“I’d say likewise, but I still don’t know why you are here or why you are turning my daughter into a spectacle. This is a private event.”

“I’ve been told. I’m Jax. I worked for Eddi.”

Grandpa’s name made my father flinch and take a step back.

“Well, that explains your lack of respect for manners. My father was like that.”

“He was a great man.” Jax spit right back. “And he deserved better than to be ignored.”

Dad got red in the face. “Mind your own...”

“Your daughter is my business.”

Sam Sam made a step forward with his chest swollen, looking like a peacock. “Excuse me, but how do you now our Caro?”

Jax growled, low and threatening, his feeling of possession over me clashing with Sam's words. When would these man learn that I didn't belong to anyone?

"She's my girl." Jax said with no hesitation. "Who the hell are you?"

"Samson Samuel Kissinger the III."

I looked at Jax and his eyes found mine.

"Really?" He asked me, but I could see the amusement hiding in his eyes. "You're out with this guy."

"No. He just happened to be here."

"Did you give him his ring back yet?"

"Jax," I sighed.

"Ok, I'll play nice." But he didn't. He put his hands around my waist and pulled me to him. "Sorry, *Samson*, but she's moved on."

"With you?" Sam couldn't believe his eyes and I knew why. For someone like him, the idea of choosing Jax was alien. For me, it was a natural call.

"Don't look at me, man. I offered to teach her how to ride a horse, but she told me she prefers riding men. It's all her."

Jackass!

I slapped his arm to get his attention.

"Jax, my mother can hear you."

He looked up and somehow knew exactly where to find my mother in the crowd.

"Sorry, Mrs. Douglas."

"It's ok, Jax. You are even more interesting than how Caroline described you." Mother winked my way. "More handsome too."

This had to stop. Now. Right the hell now.

I stepped forward, knowing damn well that all the whispers floating around the room were about me, but not caring at all about that.

“Ok, Jax, you’ve found me. Time to go. We *need* to talk and we have to do it in private.”

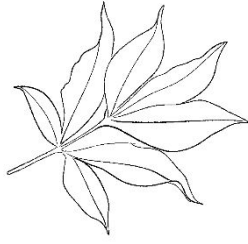
“Say goodbye to your parents, little lady. You might not see them so soon.”

“What?”

“I’m taking your ass back to Montana where you belong.”

“How about we just talk for now.” I turn to the rest of our group. “Mother, Father, I’ll see you later. Sam... goodbye.”

Those were my last words before I dragged him through the doors and all the way across Evie’s manicured lawn.



## *Chapter 26*

### **Jax**

She is furious and looking damn sexy. That dress on her should be prohibited by law because the erection it was giving me was so painful, it was definitely a crime.

“You are such a selfish asshole!”

Really? That was the response to my grand gesture?

“Baby...”

“Don’t!” She raised a slender finger to my face. “No baby, no sweet words. If it’s not an apology, I don’t want to hear it from your mouth.”

“I’ve already told you how sorry I am. I’ve been a shithead and I’ve hurt you.”

“Yes.” Her voice broke and so did something in me.

I knew that if she’d start crying, I’d be falling with her. Seeing her sad was one thing. Knowing all that pain was my

doing was some shitty form of torture I couldn't take. I'd rather have Glen break my ribs again.

"Caroline, listen, the things I said were cruel and stupid, and I don't expect you to just forgive and forget." I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. "All I'm asking is a chance to show you that I'm not that man anymore. That asshole is gone and you'll never have to see him again."

"Keep talking." She said and crossed her arms under her fabulous breasts, almost distracting me from the point.

"I was scared."

"To lose your job?"

"To lose the first woman I've ever loved!" I roared, the sound climbing high to the sky. "You know I've never... you're the first, Caroline, and you will be the last. I've said a lot of bullshit, but what I regret most is telling you I don't love you."

"Jax..."

"No," I walked to her and took her hands in mine, "don't speak, just look at me. When I faced the possibility of losing you forever, I was petrified. I snapped. It was a shitty thing to do and I'm sorry. I need you to give me another chance."

"I want to, but now I'm the scared one. You broke my heart."

"Let me put it back together."

Caroline's lower lip quivered, but she made no sound. I watched her breathing slowly and evenly, trying to get control over her emotions.

"One chance, Jax. That's all you get."

*One chance, Jax.*

Three words that meant more to me than anything I've ever heard before. Those three words were more important than *I love you*, than *I want you*, than everything.

When Eddi picked me up from the street and told me that he was going to put a roof over my head, he'd told me that *this was a new start and I had to make it count* and for the longest time, those words were my mantra. Until today, I thought those were the most beautiful words I could ever hear.

"It's all I'm asking for, baby. Give me one chance to love you again."

"I cannot be your punching bag every time you have a meltdown, Jax."

"Never again."

Her hesitation melted away slowly. I could see her blue eyes changing from hostile, to fearful, to hopeful. I promised myself that no matter the cost, I'd never risk shattering that hope ever again. It was time to grow the fuck up and act like a man. For her.

Without a warning, Caroline jumped in my arms and I caught her at the last second.

"Hello, little lady."

"Nice to see you again, cowboy."

I expected a kiss, but instead, she slapped me across the face.

"Ouch! Damn it, woman."

"You deserved that."

"I thought you forgave me."

"I do, but it doesn't change the fact that you spoke to me like you hated me, Jax. That was rough." In that moment, I wanted to slap myself too. Maybe worse. "And then you got drunk and tried to get lucky with Sheila."

"I wouldn't have..."

"You made me leave Montana, 'cuz I couldn't stand to look at you, and now we're expecting babies!"



That last word hit me so hard, I almost dropped Caroline on her ass. She didn't make much sense, but she said *babies*. I heard it. Loud and fucking clear.

Shock and cold, gripping fear settled in my throat.

"Babies?" I asked. "You're...?"

"What? No! Jax, breathe. I'm not pregnant."

"Then what in God's good name are you talking about?"

"Regina, jackass. Your stupid looking dog is going to be a father."

She almost gave me a heart attack over her dog.

"You don't know Rusty is the father. He's a good boy."

"Shut up, Maverick. The two of you are not getting out of this one. I'm going to ask for child support."

I laughed, feeling whole for the first time in days with my girl in my arms and her eyes care free again. The ugly has passed and now it was just... "Love." I whispered out loud.

"What?"

"I love you, little lady. I'm so goddamn in love with you."

"Right back at you."

Her lips found mine and the familiar taste of pure Caroline invaded my every cell. I devoured her mouth, not willing to let any part of this kiss escape me.

When we ran out of breath, the little minx bit my lip.

"Feeling playful, baby?"

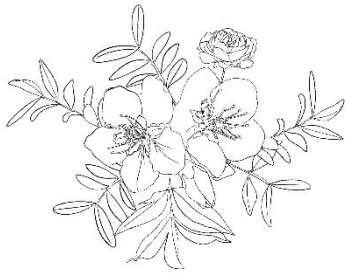
"Maybe I am. It's been a few days since I had a play date."

Smart and so damn sexy. I never stood a chance in front of her.

"How playful are we talking exactly?"

“Take me home and I’ll show you, Jax.”

I could tell by the way she said my name that I was about to get lucky. That was me, Jax Maverick, the luckiest son of a bitch in this world to have the sexiest woman in my arms. She almost left me once, but now I was sure of one thing – I was never going to let go of what’s mine ever again.



## *Epilogue*

# Caroline

Val and Stephanie were both in my bathroom, marching in front of the sink counter, waiting for the time to pass. Four pregnancy tests were neatly placed on that same counter and the girls took it upon themselves to check them, while I was losing my mind in the middle of the bedroom floor.

How did this happen?

*The stupid antibiotics you took last month fucked with your pill and you completely forgot about it, that's how! I should have made Jax wear a condom, but every time he's*

naked around me – which was very often in the past couple of years – it’s like someone unplugs my brain. I can’t focus on anything but him and his Viking warrior body.

I wanted kids with Jax, sure, at some point, but not now. He had his hands full with expanding the ranch and I was still traveling a lot for work. After turning Grand World Petroleum into a market leader, my name became head of the list in performance consulting and that allowed me to work on my own terms. My schedule was much less hectic than it was before, but I still had to hop on a plane once in a while and fix a crisis. I had six clients signed this year alone and I wasn’t sure I could handle all that and a baby! It wasn’t the right time.

Val’s scream brought me back to reality.

“Caroline!”

“Just tell me.” I said and covered my eyes.

“They’re positive!”

“You’re joking.”

Stephanie came to sit on the floor next to me. One thing I loved most about her was how she always managed to be a calming presence.

“I’ve seen it too, Caroline. All four are positive. You’re definitely pregnant.”

“Damn it, Steph.”

“Hey, stop that. This is a good thing. You and Jax are crazy in love, you’re financially stable, have this huge, beautiful house. A baby is good news.”

Val joined too. “What? Do you secretly hate kids?”

“No! It’s just... it’s too soon. Jax and I have only been dating for two years.”

Stephanie let her head down and laughed. “Dating? Girl, you two practically moved in together from day one.”

“We’re not married.” I pointed out and she gave me a side look.

“You don’t care about that. Caroline, you’re the one who dragged us to a three day female empowerment convention in Portland and now you want to sit here and tell me you’re freaking out because Jax didn’t pop the question.”

“I don’t know, Steph, I’m just worried.”

“Why? You should be happy!”

“About Jax.” I finally admitted. “The last time he thought I was trying to change his life, I had to leave him.”

Val made a sound, disregarding my concerns. “That’s old Jax. Your man loves you and he’s going to cry when you tell him you’re having his babies.” She paused. “I mean, umm, are you keeping it?”

It wasn’t the right time. My work was in the way. I wasn’t sure Jax would take the news well. All of those reasons become nothing when Val asked me that question.

My arms wrapped around my stomach protectively.

“Of course.”

“Then be happy about it.”

I was, once I allowed myself to breathe and relax. I freaked out when Regina had her puppies. Of course finding out *I’m* pregnant sent me into panic. I was scared, but also overwhelmed with a new type of love I’ve never felt before and I couldn’t wait to share it with Jax.

Speaking of my man, he just came running through the house when the girls and I were going downstairs.

“Jax!” I tried to catch his attention, but he seemed more interested in his wallet and car keys.

“Hey, beautiful. I have to run.”

“Wait, I need to talk to you.”

“Not now, baby. I really have to get to town and fast. I’ll talk to you when I get back, ok?”

“I... ok.”

He left before I could say anything else and the girls followed behind him once they made sure I was alright. I promised them we’d have a proper celebration of the news once Jax and I were done processing it ourselves.

Once I was left alone with my thoughts, I expected a new wave of overthinking and panic to come, but instead, all I could think about was how good things were about to be. I thought about what room I wanted to convert into a nursery and what colors would go nice on the walls, about names, maternity clothes and baby classes. All of that had put a stupid smile on my face.

I couldn’t focus on anything else while Jax was out, so I took the dogs – all six of them – out in the back yard and relaxed in one of the lounge chairs with some lemonade. Regina and Rusty had four very *interesting* looking puppies, but they were also the most loving dogs I’ve ever seen.

I sat back watching them play around and enjoy the view. In the two years since I moved here, the mountains never stopped being breathtaking. It didn’t matter how many mornings I came here on the back patio and saw this view, it never failed to take my breath away. I could sit just like this and stare into the sunset for hours and maybe I would have done if I wouldn’t have heard the front door opening.

Finally!

“Jax, can you come here? We need to... talk.” My last word faded in the air when I saw he wasn’t alone.

My parent’s familiar faces were on his side – Mom smiling from one ear to another, Dad *not* frowning. We were on good terms, my parents and I, but since Jax and daddy went head to head every time they were in the same room, I decided a while ago that unnecessary problems were not needed, so I

stopped trying to force any of them to spend time together. Usually, I was the one flying out to D.C to see them.

“So this is it, huh?” My dad asked, looking around.

It was his first time in Montana. It was his first time here, at a ranch that had his name on the door. His father’s house.

I walked to him and crossed my arms.

“Beautiful, isn’t it, Dad?”

“It’s something, that’s for sure.” He tried to keep his poker face, but I saw that shade of melancholy behind his eyes.

“What are you guys doing here?”

It was Mom’s time to step into the light. She came to hug me, kissed me on my cheeks, and smiled, lighting up the whole place.

“Jax invited us to visit and I’m so glad we did, dear. You were right. Eddi built such a beautiful home here.”

He did and now his son finally got to see it. It was my home now too and with every day that passed, I understood even more why Eddi never wanted to go back. I felt the exact same way. Two generations of Douglas people were charmed and seduced by this patch of land in Montana. *Soon, there will be a third*, I thought and discreetly touched my stomach.

“Oh. You flew here?”

“Yes. Jax picked us up from the airport.”

And he didn’t say a thing. That was strange.

“Ok, umm,” I wasn’t sure what to do now, “Mom, why don’t you go sit down. I’ll go pick out a bottle of wine and some snacks, ok?”

“That would be nice, dear.” She dragged father onto the sitting area on our back patio and I did the same thing to Jax, pushing him into the kitchen.

“What the hell did you do?”

“What? You said you don’t get to see them enough.”

“Yes, but...”

“But nothing. I told your father it’s time for him to grow a pair of fucking balls and come visit you.”

My jaw dropped.

“You did not.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Jax!” I laughed, imagining my father’s face when he heard that. “I can’t believe you called him. Last time you two talked it was a complete shitshow.”

“Yeah, well, I kinda had to call him.” He mumbled while I turned away to take out champagne flutes and a bottle of sparkling wine. “It’s tradition.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know...”

The sentence remained suspended between us and when I turned to put the glasses down and fill them up, I froze.

On the counter next to Jax was now a small velvet box with its lid opened to expose the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen. The sun was going through the windows, falling on the diamond.

“Jax.”

“I had to talk to your dad before asking you to marry me.”

“Are you asking?” I said, my eyes fixed on the ring.

“Yes! No. Damn it.” He flustered. “I was supposed to keep my mouth shut. Val is throwing us a party at the Moose and I was going to give you a big proposal with flowers and balloons, not a speech in our kitchen. I just... couldn’t wait.”



“Oh, baby.” Not able to contain my happiness, I ran to him, almost knocking the poor man down when I jumped in his arms. “This is perfect. You and me in our kitchen is perfect. You’re asking me to marry you?”

“Yes. You’re mine, baby, and I don’t need the papers to prove it, but I want you to be my bride. I want to see you dressed in white and all that. I know you’re too good for me, I’ve always known that, but please, give me a chance to love you for the rest of my life.”

Tears were starting to gather on the rim of my eyes – deliriously happy tears – and I lowered my lips over his. Jax Maverick would never understand the way my heart was beating just for him and my soul was in his hands, but I tried to tell him all of that with my kiss.

“Yes! Yes, Jax, yes, I will marry you.”

Cheering and laughing, he carried me around the room.

“I love you, little lady.”

“I love you, Maverick.”

“I will marry you.” He said with wide eyes, almost like he couldn’t believe it was true.

“Well, you kinda have to.” I told him and bit my lip. “You know, with the baby and all.”

“Is Regina knocked up again? You can’t blame that on Rusty, baby. I had him fixed.”

“No.”

“No?”

I went to the living room and got one of the tests from earlier, giving it to Jax with shaking hands.

“I took it this morning.”

“We’re going to have a baby?” I nodded, nibbling on my lip. “You knew this since this morning?”

“Are you happy, Jax?”

“What?”

“I know we didn’t talk about kids. You have to tell me how you’re feeling about this.”

“Happy?” He looked at me like another head started growing on my shoulders. “Happy doesn’t cover it.”

His hands were shaking when he placed them on my stomach. The air between us changed and when I looked back at Jax his black eyes swallowed me whole and the whole world around us disappeared. We were going to be ok. *Forever.*

# The End!

Also by Diane Portman-Ray

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