



My
COWBOY
Boss

OLIVIA SAGE

My Cowboy Boss

Olivia Sage

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Dear reader,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *My Cowboy Boss*.

I hope you enjoy it! As a thank you and a special surprise...

I've included a section at the end of the book for **Cowboy Recipes**.

Tried and true family recipes shared around the family dinner table on the ranch.

Hardy enough to feed the all the tired ranch hands after a hard day's work. Enjoy!

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Chapter 1

Emily

“What do you mean *especially* not me?” I snap.

“Didn’t you just hear me?” This man’s smooth voice breaks and hollers, squaring off against me with a fury of his own, his face cold with frustration that hides the features worth compliment, is a tall, muscular man with short, gelled-back hair, the sides faded, and above it all—a nasty scowl. “We don’t need more hands around the farm, and, again, *especially* not you.”

“But why *me* especially?” I seethe, even if his innocent daughter is caught in the no man’s land between us.

He furrows his brows. “Whatever. You’ve got the wrong place. Are you sure you don’t mean Meredith Ferguson’s farm? I’m sure she’ll accept any slicker from the city if it pleases her. Did she send you to mess with me?”

What in the world is his problem? I’ve only been here like, two minutes. I’ve barely taken in the sights! The most I’ve gathered is that the farm does look pretty, but also a mess I can’t understand, but beyond it all is him, this man who “welcomes” me all because his little girl doesn’t know her manners.

“I don’t know who that is. Look, all I know is that my brother wanted us to come out here for my dad, okay?”

“Your brother?” he muses. “And who is that exactly? What makes you so special you can just turn up uninvited?”

“We *were* invited, I think,” I retort. “So, you can kiss my...” I look at his little girl. Should I do it? Should I curse? I see his cold gaze, smoldering and fierce, but frustrating right now all the same. It’s like his expression is saying, “*No, don’t do it!*” I grin anyway, and prepare to say it. “So why don’t you kiss my —”

“Hey, language,” the man hissed at me, his voice as sharp as the daggers he glares, and all because his rowdy little girl can’t hear the word I was going to say.

“Grow up. She’s eight. In the city, it’s a usual occurrence from those down the street on a night out.”

“This isn’t the city, is it?” he retorted calmly, pulling his little girl close. A little girl, who, now that I really look at her, I see her long, auburn hair is thick and straight, slightly damp as if she’s only recently bathed. She’s looking back at me, distraught from how terribly this introduction has gone. The impression had been made. Looking back at her, I also try to gaze into her soul through her light blue eyes the same way she does mine.

The man shakes his head. He places his focus on his little girl, looking behind him, down the sloped path to see his parents on fast approach, a giddy look to their wrinkled expressions, then looks up the sloped path to shoot another dagger my way. He takes a moment to pull her aside. Kneeling, he gives her a stern talking to, and I just stand here, unable to look away as she gives him an apology and a hug, his neatly trimmed beard brushing against her wet hair.

“That sorts that. Now, what is going on?” he says, looking at me for answers.

“How should I know? If anything, why don’t you know?”

He snarled. “Well, if I knew that, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, would we?” As he stands, towering over me, he brushes the dirt off his black jeans, and checks his blue shirt for creases. Under that, he wears a gray muscle top.

“We’ll know soon enough,” he mutters, turning to face an older man on fast approach.

“Play nice now, son,” the man calls out to him, so I take it that’s his father. They look both so different and so alike. In the face, they are the spitting image of the other, but in the body, it is this younger man with the broad, strong, and mature body. I catch a good look. All I’m going to say is, even if right now we’re off to a terrible start, I can admire what he’s got going on under the fabric all the same! Looking back at me, he offers no more than what could be considered a “friendly” smile, all to show his father he’s “playing nice.” What a—

“I’m Sophia,” the little girl suddenly chirps at me, and puts on an uneven smile, her odd teeth on display.

“Uh, random,” I say, and the little girl appears disheartened.

“Kids come out with random stuff,” her father says, glowering at me all the while.

“Yeah, but why’d she suddenly come out with that?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m guessing you’ve never really been around kids.”

“No, not really. None in the family.”

“Clearly,” he bites.

“Back off. It’s not my fault,” I utter under my breath.

“She’s a kid. Is it that surprising to you she’d suddenly come out with something?”

“Hey, she’s right there, man,” I mutter, and shake my head, grinding my foot into the dirt, smearing the earth across my sneakers. I nod. “Either way, yes, I guess...?” He doesn’t seem amused in the slightest. I guess I should reply nicer. I’m in a bad mood, sure, but I’m not cruel.

“Hi there, Sophia, I’m Emily,” I say as her dad takes her little hand in his own, engulfing hers.

“Sophia, be quiet for a minute,” he begins, and... did he just look me up and down?

“Good luck getting her to do that,” I say, and step aside.

“What was that?”

I look him up and down, and then reply, “She’s loud.”

“That’s my little girl you’re talking about,” he seethes, and holds Sophia close. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Someone who didn’t appreciate being charged into the moment I stepped on the ranch,” I tell him, and he visibly softens at the mention. “What?”

“Oh,” he replies slowly, “she charged into you, did she?”

“Yeah, why?”

“When did it happen?” he asks.

“Before you got here.” I cross my arms, and look at Sophia, whose face appears as innocent as ever. “You weren’t there until after.”

“I see.” The man sighs. His father is closing in. Where is my own? And my brother, too? Why is everyone taking an eternity to get here? “Sorry about her, Sophia is always running off every chance she gets.”

“I just wanted to see who was here,” Sophia murmurs sadly.

“I know, but I don’t want you too close to the road, okay?”

Sophia pouts and looks away, flustered with this turn of events.

“She’s too curious for her own good,” the man explains. I’d say off-putting too, but hey, I was probably like that when I was eight as well, dashing ahead and charging into random people. Oh, wait, I wasn’t. My mom taught me good manners, at least.

“Anyway, I’m Brandon,” he states, and looks over me, distracted as a bellowing of noise comes from behind. I know that noise anywhere—the noise of my annoying brother, specifically. I turn to face him, and I see him set his sights on Brandon. I expect them to not get on well either, considering how nastily I’ve been treated.

Michael closes in, in a bad mood as well, having his own slew of struggles with leaving the city and the life he once had. The car journey was tricky as it is, as he made this all happen

for our dad, and then there is us, who've been given no consideration. I know he lives his life with secrecy, keeping himself to himself, but come on. What about me...?

His sharp eyes with thick eyelashes widen at the sight of Brandon. I'm not sure what his expression is, but if he exclaimed non-verbally any louder, then his brown eyes might just pop out of his skull. What is going on?

Michael's arched eyebrows rise, pushing his forehead wrinkles into existence, and in the sun, then, I see just how much paler I am compared to his bronze tan. At least I'm not as flaky as he is—a good moisturizer routine will do that for you.

“Well, if it isn't the square-faced half-wit,” Brandon insults. Wait, is he joking? I rush to look at my brother. He's smiling?

“Oh, look at you, with as broad a forehead as ever, and, oh my, that cleft chin, too?” Michael jests in return, and he's smiling—they're *both* smiling.

“Nothing wrong with a cleft chin,” Brandon says, shrugging as he itches his strong nose, and lets loose a chuckle through his thin lips, and his smile after that, toothy and revealing his straight, gleaming white teeth that make it harder and harder for me to continue to dislike him.

Brandon, smooth-shaven, with that short hair in the wind, is making this very hard for me. Then, there is my crackling, windblown brother, as unkempt as ever, and his side-parting, like our dad's, does his face no justice at all.

The two men meet in the middle, one tall and brawny and the other gangling but lean. Clapping their hands together, one side being sturdy and large, and the other smaller, and delicate, the two men ended this introduction at last. My brother Michael eagerly exclaims loudly, laughing, and claps Brandon on the back.

“What is going on?” I have to ask, because this had gone on long enough. “Didn’t you hear how rude he was being to me?”

Michael looks at me like I’m the one in the wrong. “What? Brandon? He’s not the type to be rude unless there was good reason for it.” He looks at Brandon. “Was there?”

Brandon looks at me. “It’s complicated.”

“Michael, are you serious?” I bark. “He—”

“You’re his sister?” Brandon asked, having caught on.

“Yes, why?”

Brandon nodded. “Oh, right.”

“What?” I persist.

“Emily, don’t you remember Brandon?” Michael asks, confused. “Remember, he’s the guy I was friends with growing up?”

“Not a clue,” I admit. “I’m not even sure I’ve heard of you...I think.”

Some bells are ringing in my head. We’ve never met, I know that much for sure. Still, now, more than ever, I desperately need an explanation. Is my exasperated expression

not enough of a hint? My brother is all buddy-buddy with Brandon, which makes sense. So, they've been friends since childhood, which isn't helping my situation whatsoever.

I think I understand why Michael went out of his way to make this happen. We're visiting because we've had no choice but to leave our life behind us. So, with Mom gone, why not take Dad back to his roots? Back to the days when our dad worked the farm life too. But we're not about that life anymore, and yet, as my dad greets John, Brandon's dad, with a half-heartedness, and offers a hug to John's wife, Mary, it is quickly becoming apparent that this is it, isn't it? This is my life now, and nothing will change that because Michael worked this out with John and Mary in advance; they were expecting us. But Brandon clearly doesn't know. And deep down, I am already aware of what the truth really is, even if I wasn't consulted—we're going to live here, with them, so my dad can reignite some happiness in his soul.

My brother has a big heart for what he is doing, but it doesn't mean my life hasn't been upturned any less by it.

They all share such happy chats, the greetings come and go, and I stand here idly, unable to make sense of it all. It's almost overwhelming, but I can just about keep my wits. In fact, Brandon doesn't seem any better, and his little girl is very forward with introducing herself. Sweet, but not entirely polite. Still, that doesn't excuse the lack of anything from Brandon.

Brandon stands there as idly as me, casting quick, uncertain glances from person to person as if this is some puzzle to figure out. What interactions take place between his sickly-sweet parents' kindness and my father's distant solemnness baffles him. None of us have seen each other in years. I don't think I ever met or even knew Brandon. I was aware of Dad's old farm friends, though, from his youth when Grandpa knew them. Michael, being much older than me, has a life I've never really been connected to. Brandon is part of that mystery that is my brother, I suppose.

Ah, what does any of it matter? We're here now. The farm life is here for everyone—me, particularly. Although, I have no intention of getting to know it. Give me a room and good Wi-Fi, and I'll be fine.

“What is going on?” Brandon says at last, exerting some effort to retrieve an answer.

“Well, they've arrived with my helpful invitation,” John makes clear as if it were common knowledge.

Brandon raises an eyebrow at his father. “But why?”

“Oh, I don't think I told you,” Michael mutters glumly.

Brandon shoots toward him. “Told me what?”

Michael sheepishly smiled.

“What?” Brandon urged, unsure if he should be happy, neutral, or angry. He can't make up his mind. I don't blame him. He clearly hasn't been consulted. Huh, kind of like me. Well, we're both in the same sinking ship now!

“Hello,” my father begins, and extends his hand sloppily to meet Brandon’s hesitant, but firm shake. “You might not remember me, but—”

“Steven,” Brandon answered. They finished shaking the other’s hand. “I remember.”

My dad faintly smiled. “I’m glad I haven’t been forgotten.”

“I could never. Especially with, uh...” He furrowed his brows. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember her name.”

“Whose?”

“Your wife.”

Oh. Awkward. Silence governs over us all. The distant aroma of the rural pastures, fields, barns, stables, and farmland beyond are all blind to us. It’s like our every sense suddenly cut out, and we’ve been blocked off from reality. At least, that’s how I feel.

Michael, did you not tell Brandon anything at all? Stupid. That’s what you are, brother. Stupid.

“We’re here to stay,” Michael begins at last, cracking the ice that metaphorically formed. I swear I even felt a chill at how uneasy that quietness was. It’s not his fault, though. I’ll give him that much. “I got in contact with your dad because I hoped to get my dad back out to his roots, you know? It’s been difficult since Mom passed away. And our life in the city kind of fell apart. But I know our dads were childhood friends, so... when we were on the phone call, if you remember that, Brandon, a few weeks back?”

“I do...”

“You made a joke about getting ‘back to the roots.’ I don’t remember the context. I don’t think I had the heart to tell you what was going on at the time as I know you’ve struggled yourself with that kind of grief, so...” Michael stands with his head high and a smile on his face, just like Mom would’ve wanted, and he does it so easily too. “So, your dad offered us a place to stay, and work, and to help my dad get back on his feet. At least until we can figure out something more permanent.”

Brandon’s lips form a thin, straight line. He says nothing. I bet he’s understanding the implications now. All these pleasant, surprising introductions, and only now does he seem to catch on to what has happened to us. “I...”

Michael mumbles, “She passed away recently.”

Brandon’s eyes flash with shock. “I’m so sorry, all I intended to say was that I love her cooking,” he finishes, trying to use a compliment to fill the void of my father’s heart.

“I loved her cooking as well.” Dad looks away. It hurts to see him like this. The mention is made, and it comes and goes.

“Daddy, what’s happening?” Sophia asks aloud, and the conversation rapidly shifts. Brandon isn’t stupid like my brother at least. My brother tends to act half his life on a whim, I swear. He does everything on the fly, winging everything, but he’s got good intentions at heart.

I spot my father's expression—the miserableness unable to hide itself. He's breaking, and John and Mary are quick to comfort him, offer up their help, and give Brandon the mission of lugging the luggage to the cozy, spacious-looking house in the distance.

Sophia, shy, clings to her father who finishes a small, blunt chat with Michael. There are no hard feelings, but Brandon's frustration is clear.

"A warning would've been nice," Brandon says.

Trust me, I know.

I feel that way.

Just like you.

"I haven't seen you in years. Can you imagine how confused I am?"

"I bet, man. I'm sorry."

"Nah, it's fine. Don't ya worry. But it's even stranger when you suddenly turn up with your sister and dad. I haven't seen them in even longer."

"Well, we're here to stay and live with you and your family," Michael concludes, crossing his arms. "I don't get how you've not been told?"

"You tell me."

"I'm guessing it came down to me?"

"Obviously," I mutter, bringing both of their attention to me. Did they get a taste of my distasteful attitude?

“Have you got a problem?” Brandon mutters in kind and tries to pry Sophia away to no avail. He huffs and lets her carry on with her sudden shyness. “Do you not want to be here or something?”

“No.”

He raises an eyebrow. I’d wager he is almost impressed by my bluntness.

My brother speaks up. “Emily has been like this from the moment we packed everything up and came out here—”

“Not like we had a choice,” I utter.

“What are you so scared of?” Brandon challenges lowly.

“I’m not scared of anything,” I tell him, and he sneers at me, as if to say he doesn’t believe me in the slightest. “The farm life isn’t for me. As soon as my dad is better, we’re going back to the city—”

“Oh, stop being such a brat.” Brandon tried to step forward, his warpath halted by an eight-year-old clinging to his legs. “Sophia, can you...”

“You don’t mean me, do you, Daddy?” Sophia asks sweetly.

“No, sweetheart, I don’t mean you, I mean her.” He shakes his head, his face weakening. At last, he looks at me. “Look, don’t say things like that. You have no idea what your dad is going through, okay?”

“Oh, and you do?” I snap back.

He freezes, silent.

“What?”

Brandon moves on, going toward Michael’s car and offering no more than a wave to Michael to catch up so he can help unpack.

“What?” I turn to Michael. “Seriously, what?”

Michael sighs. “You couldn’t just keep your mouth shut, could you? Let’s just say... he’s got a lot of baggage himself to carry.”

Chapter 2

Brandon

“You aren’t good enough to work on a farm,” I tell her, and I know she’s going to go and get all prissy about it. But if I have to say it, then I will, because she won’t get off my back about my comments from before. Still, she won’t admit it, but she knows she’s overpacked it. She’s a city girl, and she’s tried to bring her whole life with her.

Honestly, if she hadn’t said what she said about her dad, and then everything else... I don’t know. I don’t want to think too much into it. It makes me think too much about the past.

“I can do it,” she screeches, not that it’s going to get her anywhere.

“Okay, go on then.” We’ve barely gotten two steps from her brother’s Toyota Prius. This is going to be a long day.

“What?” she barks.

“Lift it.” I look at her, then the luggage, and then back at her. “All the way to the house if you think you can.”

“Okay.” She expectantly passes a look to Michael. That explains more than words could say. She wants her brother to do all the heavy work, but he’s preoccupied trying to handle both his and his dad’s luggage. So, where does that leave her but with her own strength to call on?

I wait, and she goes to wrap her hand around the handle of a suitcase one size too large, and bulky compared to the minimalist nature of her father and brother.

“See,” she says, and tugs with all her might until an unappealing grunt slips out her mouth. She lurches back, using every muscle she can to help her walk her suitcase down the slight slope, where she drops it in the dirt path and pants for air.

I carry a certain “*I told you so*” attitude in my stride.

“I. Am. Fine,” she grunts.

“You can barely breathe.” I reach out, and she—did she just swat my hand away?

“Just let him help, sis!” Michael calls out as he passes by us.

“I’m fine!” she yells at him, and he carries on his way.

“Come on,” I urge. “I respect the attitude, all right?” Her face lightens. “But,” I continue, and her defensive scowl returns. “You’re not good enough to work on the farm.”

“Why does it matter?”

I steal her suitcase away from her despite her protest. “Get a move on already.”

She glares at me, and in those eyes is a fierceness that might’ve burned me to cinders if I even remotely cared.

“Stop it, city slicker.” I move on. “Oh, and Sophia—” I capture her attention, my little girl off to the side roaming near some American basswood trees. “Please don’t collect anymore bugs. We don’t need another infestation.”

Sophia huffs but silently does as I ask.

“What little girl enjoys collecting bugs?” the city slicker comments. She’s all about sticking her opinion in places, isn’t she?

“What is wrong with that?” I contend.

She shrugs partly and looks away, her focus on the scenery. “I dunno, just not very... girly?”

“It shouldn’t matter.”

Her mouth drops and shuts just as fast. “Uh, yeah. It doesn’t.”

I nod. Moving on, at last.

“Seriously, I can carry it myself. Also, why should it matter if I’m not cut out to work on a farm? I’m not going to.”

“I assumed.”

“Don’t. It’s for my dad.”

“Right.” So, she’s just going to freeload? Well, that doesn’t sit right with me. I mean, I don’t want her getting in my way, but seeing her try to keep up would be... humbling, for her.

“Give it,” she persists.

Whatever. I place the suitcase down gently.

“Thanks,” she grumbles, bending down until her brunette hair falls in front of her face.

I carry on alone this time. Until Sophia joins my side, that is.

“See you in an hour,” I tell her.

“Oh, yeah, funny!” she shouts.

“She’s mean,” Sophia whispers.

“I know.” I guess I understand her frustration. She’s a city slicker, born and raised, after all. But she’s such a brat. Maybe I’m just getting old?

“Daddy?” Sophia says softly. “She needs help.”

“Hey, do you need help?” I’ve offered Emily one more chance. It’s all she’s going to get.

“I don’t need your—” Her shriek fills the air, and the following collapse of her suitcase and leap to safety would be amusing if I wasn’t already at my patience’s limit.

She’s pale in the face as she points with fear at the invader. A cricket. I’m not sure where it came from. Must’ve hopped on her suitcase when we were distracted.

“It’s just a cricket,” I tell her.

“Just?” she squeaks at me. “Get rid of it!”

Oh, Lord, she’s not going to make it far here.

Sophia marches forward and does the deed despite her amusement and disappointment, scooping up the little insect.

“Wow, you won’t last long in our home!” my little wonder of a girl declares, and happily walks off, a cricket in her palm that doesn’t so much as budge from its statue-like stance.

Emily says nothing, but I can see that how easily Sophia dealt with the insect irritated her.

Sadly, for you, Emily, this won't be the last of her teasing you.



What a welcoming house tour we've provided. There's something about our two families coming together that makes for quite a sight. We've not properly gotten together in years. Honestly, it might've been a decade.

I'm thirty now. I have a daughter. Time marches on. I guess time really doesn't stop for anyone. And yet, time comes for us all... Okay, enough of that. It's normally not like me to be so downcast. I need to keep my head high. If anyone should understand Steven, it should be me.

That man has lost the love of his life. I can see it in his eyes, no matter how sweet this reunion is now that we're coming together at last. He's lost, and empty inside.

I don't know what happened to them, or how, but it must've hit hard. Each one of them carries themselves in a certain way. They're all hiding just how much they are hurting. What can I possibly make of it?

Michael is as peppy as ever. Always keeping his head high—a smile on his face, stretching from ear to ear. Yet, there's sadness in it.

Then there is Emily. Hm. The brat who not only required me to carry all her luggage, but shows no hint of gratefulness that my family let her into our home. We'll be providing not just for her, but her brother and her father. They're in luck, too. They'll be taking the spare guest section. Normally, it's reserved for people on the road, like a little hotel.

So, the little hotel business is closed and they're in, but it isn't like they can pay their way for staying here. So, they need to work, right?

They're all so happy with one another. Then there's me. I'm the outcast here, somehow. I'm the one who has had to learn that my parents worked it all out with Michael, and somehow, it is all because *I* proposed the idea. I didn't mean it seriously. It was a single phone call. On that call, he didn't even mention his mom had passed. I suppose, if I had more information, I'd have maybe acted on it, but at the time, what I said about them coming back to the farm life was a joke. Michael takes my innocent joke seriously, and now *this* is all happening. I guess, in a way, it is nice that I was his inspiration for everything happening now.

"I worked hard to get you out here and back to your roots!" Michael boasted, proud he made the right choice. His dad looks pleased, albeit uncertain. This is a major change to his life, other than the whole, er, love of his life passing...

Why do I still feel like I'm in the dark with all of this? Why am I the one getting so upset with how this affects me—my family?

“Ooo, look, it’s a—” I don’t let Sophia finish. I’ve already swatted away the millipede that climbed into the lounge through the slightest of a crack in the window. Better I get her away before she oh-so-eagerly makes Emily’s life a living hell. She’s decided to try and help Emily get used to bugs and insects. Well, ha, I don’t see that happening anytime soon.

Even if I am as quiet as I am, and our families share this reunion in our cozy home, its rich history open and inviting with the warmth we cultivated, I see Emily not doing so great, either. She’s upset as well. She’s a brat, but I understand. She knows nothing else other than her city slicker life. Now, she’s out here, thrust into the unknown. And, I said it earlier, and I’d say it again: She will have to get used to this gorgeous, picturesque small town out west—my words. The words she used were less nice.

“What’s wrong with you?” Michael asks her, and that moment in which silence falls over all of us gives her that chance. Oh, I bet she was just itching to contort her dulled expression into a nasty snarl.

“We’ve left everything behind to live on a ranch,” she says as if it is the worst thing in the world.

“Emily, no,” her father begins, his voice weak, his words failing him.

She grumbles, “I want to go home.”

“Yeah, you’ve made it clear you want to go back to the city,” I mutter, but no one hears me. Maybe that is for the best.

“Why didn’t you stay?” my dad asks her, and it is an open, honest question. He means no harm.

“I can’t,” she snaps back. Right, enough of this, she’s so—
“Not without my dad. I can’t manage it.”

I frown. It’s all I have to offer. We’re all struggling in our own way, you know, Emily? Who isn’t? We’ve all got issues. Sometimes, all we can do is adapt to the hand played to us. That’s life. Only, her father is hurting, and she’s... what’s the right word? Insensitive.

“Whatever the case, you’re here now,” I tell her bluntly. “Sooner or later, you’ll change your mind about the farm life —” I reach out and swat the same millipede from Sophia’s hand before she throws it at Emily. “Don’t throw bugs at her.” Sophia pouts, defeated. But the look of disgust is amusing, Emily.

“I’ll just never leave this house,” she says defiantly, as if she’s got this all figured out, in front of everyone who tries to move aside and act like everything is fine and normal.

Her refusal doesn’t get far. I see the glint in her father’s smile from the corner of my eye. “Oh? I expected you to work on the ranch.”

This is going to be good. “Well, if she feels so strongly about it, then maybe she shouldn’t be on the farm at all, including this warm, heated house? I’m sure the pigs’ll take her.”

Emily lurches at me but refrains for as long as Sophia innocently waddles about in front of us, doing her own thing.

“Oh,” my father says. “I expected you to be the one to take her on.”

Hold on. “What?”

“Yeah, teach her an’ all.”

I furrow my brows. How has this happened? Did I miss a beat in this conversation or something? “Ha, no.”

“Uh, yes?”

I shake my head. “Remember what happened last time I took someone on under me?”

“Boy, you’re thirty now, and what happened with Meredith is in the past. Enough of that, I don’t want any more problems with her father. The bond with the Fergusons doesn’t need to be damaged more than it already is. How can I do business when you’ve made enemies? We make business, not war.” My father steps toward me. “Now, make it so I can help out ol’ Steven over there?”

Ah, I understand, Dad. You’re calling in a favor. “Fine.” Purely because of my father and hers, I’ll do it.

“Nah,” Emily asserts.

Her father makes it clear at last, frustrated with her attitude. “How else do you expect us to possibly repay the kindness given to us?”

Chapter 3

Emily

This is my life now. Lounging about. Refusing to get out of bed. It wouldn't be so bad if, day after day, I wasn't being made to feel like an outcast for it. I can't help it, can I? I just don't want to be here. Is it so hard to understand?

I'm not being forced to work. Or even help. I mean, I don't want to help, but they make me feel like I should be. I swear the mental manipulation has thrown me through enough hoops to make me want to get out of bed and work on the stupid farm.

Yesterday at dinner, they all laughed and joked about my dad falling face-first in the mud—a horrible thing, I'd say. I'd scream. To be all dirty and sloppy with mud? No thanks! And yet, they turned it into a funny thing. A game. He took a handful in his palm and flung it at John, and then Brandon and Michael got involved.

Laughing, playing, fighting. All after a long day's hard work. It all only stopped when Sophia tried to join and was at risk of getting absolutely trampled by one of the four larger, burlier players.

I don't get to understand the fun things they talk about at dinner. I don't think they do it purposefully. They all share the same job day in and day out. What do I do? I laze in my room—their guest room, as nice as it is—and I mope, hoping Dad will just move on, and we can go home.

So, I'm an outcast. I never thought I'd feel less at home. And it isn't even my fault. Brandon has made that awfully clear.

I need to stop this. Maybe I'll have a shower? I've not actually bathed properly since getting here... If my hair sticks anymore to my head, then the bugs will likely find a new home to nest in, if it even works that way. What has this farm done to me? Okay. Enough. Time to shower.

The room in which I have barely unpacked, nice but bland to try and suit a balance of all possible tastes, has my personal belongings chucked about—only the essentials. The rest remains half-emptied on a sofa by the window, pooling out from the confines of my suitcase.

Just have the shower. You'll feel better for it.

I open my door.

“What timing, the gremlin leaves her den—”

I have not even stepped outside the door. Yet, he's there. He just so happens to be walking down the corridor. To where? Who cares? But he's here, and he stands tall, broad, and has a musky scent about him. I can't help but... like it. Wait, no, Emily, snap out of it!

“Swear, then?” he challenges and pauses. “You normally swear?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that because I scared you, I thought you'd jump and swear, and I'd have to remind you again to not swear.”

“Oh, yeah, because you hate swearing...” I shy away. It was awkward enough that his mom had to tell me off for swearing too close to Sophia’s bedroom the other night...

“What are you doing anyway?” he pesters.

“I’m taking a shower,” I tell him, and prepare to move on.

“With what?” He looks me up and down with a keen, curious eye, his gaze lingering far too long on places they shouldn’t be. I know I’m not the curviest, most busty girl around, but... man, get your eyes off me! I appreciate the thought, though.

Anyway, what was he saying? Oh, right. “I...” I’ve got nothing.

He smirks. “To think my dad would have me training you as well. You don’t even know how to take a shower properly.”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, do you really want to be scolded again?” He crosses his arms.

“Yes please, berate me and make me feel like...” Don’t say the word, Emily. It’s not worth it. Not with these uptight country folk.

“Well, luckily for you, I’m not taking you on, so you haven’t got to worry. Go back to your room. Sulk a little more.” He turns away, taking his leave, and as much as I want to lash out, I think it has become clear that he has every reason to hate me, but he has also made me his personal punching bag

and I refuse to take it. But this time... I did. I took it. I accepted it.

I'll go grab my things, then. He's like a curse in my mind. His every word. Smirk. Glower.

I leave my room, and as my door closes, another opens. Michael steps out of his room, looks at me, and smiles half-heartedly.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey."

"Are you okay?"

Someone's woken up with a caring heart today. He's somewhat ignored me to an extent with how difficult I've been. I don't blame him.

"Peachy."

"It's Brandon, isn't it?"

I turn, and I meet him face to face. "What?"

"He gets under your skin, doesn't he? Or do you like him?"

I sigh. "No, Michael—"

"He's a good-looking guy, to be fair—"

"Michael, no! And it is the circumstances. The circumstances have made an impact." He's not wrong. Brandon is a good-looking guy. Sadly, doesn't make up for how he treats me.

He nods, looking at the smooth, wooden floor, his bare feet pressing into its cold feel. “Well, don’t let him live rent-free in your head. He values a person’s actions. So, let me remind you since you’ve forgotten...” He stops, checks the surroundings. Our little section—the mini hotel, connected to the main house and this corridor acting as a walkway—is empty. “What Mom said. You know, before she passed?”

Oh, that. That’s a bit harsh to hold over my head now of all times. It’s not even that big of a deal. It’s just the same thing she said all the time when we were being difficult, but it especially hurts to think about it now. I almost don’t want to talk about it.

“Well,” he carries on, voice low. “Her final wishes to us are fresh in my head, every day. When I wake up. When I go to sleep. Now, Dad didn’t make it in time, but we did. We heard her final wish.”

I tilt my head to the side. I wish I could avoid this. He’s really going to hold this over my head. All right, fine. He’s got me.

“Daddy, why are you standing there?” a sweet, but loud voice bellows, and the openly said statement reveals enough. My brother and I turn, and who else but Brandon is awkwardly standing there, idly biding his time as he shuffles Sophia along and acts all innocent. He was eavesdropping, wasn’t he?

“I didn’t take him for a snooper,” I mumble.

Michael hums. “Either way, just think about it, yeah? It’s not even that difficult. Just keep your head high and—”

“Smile,” I cut in, and finish, and sigh deeper. “It’s so stupid. Mom made us promise the most stupid thing.”

“I know, but it is a good motivation when she’s tied herself into one of her sayings.” Michael pats me on the back once. Ow. Twice. Ow. And a third time. Ow.

“Okay. Sure.”

That gets him off my back. And then I have my shower, and I soak up the warm water, and I dry off. What else is there to do? I’m clean, fresh, and I smell good. My hair isn’t sticking to me. There’s not a hint of greasiness to me either. Then the same question remains: what now?

Day after day of nothing at all, being an outcast. I’ve had enough.



“You want your first day out on the ranch?” John says, surprised.

“I’ll probably be terrible,” I warn, while Brandon stands beside me, somewhat disturbed by this turn of events. I want to believe it is because I stopped him from finishing his bedtime routine. He had barely gotten the toothbrush out of his mouth when I sprung on him that I want to try working on the ranch.

“Ah, we’ll shake that self-doubt out of ya sooner or later.”

I nod, and I smile. I feel bad that I had to catch him off-guard while he was finally sitting down to relax and watch his late-night game shows.

“You will be terrible,” Brandon whispers as we turn away and let his dad enjoy his quiet time in the lounge. I can’t believe I went out of my way like that. This is it. I’m going to have my first day on the ranch.

“I’ll show you.” That is all I need to say.

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

“What’s your problem?” I mutter and turn on him.

He directs me to one side, and whispers, “It isn’t anything to do with the lifestyle.”

“Well, yeah, I knew I’d be terrible at this lifestyle either way. I can only try.”

He rolls his gorgeous azure eyes. How mature for an adult. “Emily, that isn’t the issue. The issue is your inability to accept learning and trying new things, being miserable about it all.”

Wow, he’s dropped my jaw. “And to think that the person I go to for help is you?”

“Yes, because you admitted you felt too intimidated by my father.”

I whip my head toward him. “Hey, now, come on...”

“Look,” he says, and pushes past me. “It is my responsibility to help you adjust if you are willing. So, that’s

enough for me.” He gives me a wave and goes on his way.

Ah... I’m not looking forward to work at all. I also kind of am. I can’t believe it. Maybe the isolation has driven me to it.

Since it is Friday, all I can do is be ready for the coming Monday. Let’s do this.



“Get up already!” Brandon shouts through the door.

Uh... so, someone could’ve warned me we work weekends? My god, what time is it?

“Don’t make me come in there! You better not hold us up!”

Reaching over, I grab my phone, and... have I actually been woken up on Saturday morning at 5AM?

“Don’t you fall back asleep for the third time—”

“All right, I’m up!” I can’t believe this! Fine. There, I’m up! I’ve thrown myself out of my warm bed, and into the cold early morning air, and I hate it, and—

The door opens. Why did he come in? Why did he—

“Hey!” I scream, as he has not only woken me up, but he’s stormed in while I’m not wearing much!

“Yes, the majority of people all over America are still sleeping comfortably, but we need to be up and getting to it.” His gaze doesn’t once wander, the light of the corridor behind

him bursting into the room. “Downstairs in ten.” He leaves, slamming the door behind him. “Make it five!”

By the time I get downstairs, everyone is already up other than Sophia, who is being looked after by Brandon’s mom. The comments come in that I had better shovel down breakfast, and I do, and I’m ready to go. And... everyone is looking at me?

“Well, you certainly shoveled your breakfast down fast,” Brandon mutters.

“Ha, ironic, as she’ll be shoveling things around this morning,” Michael jokes, and it’s all fun and games but seriously, what am I shoveling? I can only hope I’m not shoveling what Brandon implies. Everyone laughs, and the laughter fades, and my dad shakes his head.

Brandon smirks. “I was thinking more like having her help with cattle herding.”

Okay, I don’t know what *that* is, but it does not sound like my safest first-day activity. Lucky for me, Brandon’s father jumps in and makes it clear.

“We’re not doing that today.”

“Hold on, what?” Brandon retorts.

“At least, we’re not since it is her first day.”

“What does that mean?” Brandon asks, his smarmy attitude at an end. Not that I know what is going on either.

“Well, she can shovel manure, and you are going to supervise her.”

Brandon’s face drops. “But I love cattle herding. Why can’t she just do it alone? It’s just shoveling manure?”

“We’ll be working together to herd cattle, and you’ll be helping supervise Emily,” his father reiterates firmly, as if Brandon hadn’t heard him the first time around.

Brandon, frustrated, shoots a glare my way, and as the morning sun rises, and the few dim lamps we have on lose their usefulness, I see him better. I almost admire him, because he looks attractive. Uh, to my eye and... Am I really admitting it? I mean, he is dressed in dark jeans and a flannel shirt and he’s just...

“She’ll be fine to help herd cattle, Dad. It tests her character,” Brandon persists.

“I just said no.” John rolls his eyes, almost in the same way Brandon does. I guess that is where he gets it from.

I step in before a fight breaks out. It is too early for this, and I don’t care what I do. “Look, admittedly, I don’t know much about ranching, but I’m sure I’ll be fine herding cattle. It sounds pretty simple. You just move them.”

Everyone looks at me like I am crazy, except for Brandon.

“See, Dad? She’s ready to try—”

John slams his hand down. “Brandon, no. How many more times can I say no?” He looks at me directly. “Cattle herding is much harder and more dangerous for a first-timer than simply

shoveling manure. At least, doing that, you can't get in trouble or be in anyone's way."

Wow, I'm offended. I can't let Brandon lose here. This is like he said—it is my chance to test myself! I can't believe Brandon is taking my side. Does he believe in me? Or is he setting me up for failure? Either way, I'll prove him wrong.

"I can do it," I say. "As long as Brandon is supervising me either way, what is the issue?"

John frowns, and looks around for help, but finds none. "Steven, you remember the old days, don't you?"

My dad nods. "Well, we were young too, John, and we didn't have good hands around to help us back then. We just did it. If Emily really wants to test herself, then at least she has all of us to keep an eye on her, and with Brandon there, I'm sure she'll be fine. We'll just give her the easier parts."

John slowly nods. He's considering it. "Well, I can't argue with that, but then you might also remember how herding cattle can get you killed if you are not careful."

"Ah, she'll be fine!" Brandon suddenly says with a tone far louder than normal. "It'll test her."

"It is a good test," Michael agrees, though he seems far more uncertain.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I confirm. I want to try.

John rubs his chin and shakes his head. "Ah, fine. I do think her first day *should* be shoveling poo. It still shows character,"

he mutters, unsure, but looks his son in the eye with a fierce gaze. “I expect you to look after her.”

“It’s not like I’ll let her die,” Brandon rudely comments, and anything I was thinking no longer matters. Maybe he *is* setting me up for failure.

His father huffs, slaps his hands together, grabs a jacket, and prepares to head out. “You had better not treat her like you did Fred’s daughter.”

“That was different. Meredith was a piece of work,” Brandon retorts, grabbing his jacket as well.

“Well, the way you are now is what you did with Ferguson girl. See how that turned out?”

Meredith? Again? Is there something I don’t know?

“Working under the hot sun will teach plenty,” Brandon says, somewhat avoiding his father’s warnings.

“You look after her, promise?” John mutters before we go out the door.

“I will.”

“Good. I’m trusting you.” John leaves that as final.

“Why are we working on the weekend?” I ask before we all set out, even if I want to go back to bed. My comment makes everyone laugh, though.

“We’re ranchers,” Brandon replies dryly. “The term ‘weekend’ doesn’t mean much to us.”



“Where you see fields of grass, the cows are seeing an all-you-can eat buffet, and it is our job to tend to them,” Brandon explains to me as he drives. He has been tasked with overseeing me. He’s like a teacher. I hate him already. It’s already 6AM, we’re not even at the field yet, and this heavy-duty Ford pickup is so bumpy I might be sick.

We get to the pastureland the family uses for the cattle herd and while everyone else is rearing to go, I’m struggling with car sickness, as if I’m getting off a rollercoaster.

And there is still a long day ahead. Kill me now.



Ah, my head...

Maybe, this is far more difficult than just shoveling manure...

I hear shouting...

John and Brandon...

“Did you do it on purpose? I told you to look after her!”

“I was, she—”

“No, I am not having another situation like you did with Meredith, Brandon!”

“That’s exactly what I am trying to avoid!”

My head is spinning...

“What?”

I feel faint.

“I don’t want another situation like that. I want her to back off. I don’t want to babysit her—”

“I don’t care if your thirteen or thirty, boy, I will smack you upside the head for what you’ve done!”

The sky is blue, then black, then blue, then black...

“She’s probably got a damn concussion!” John shouts.

I see my father standing over me. And Michael. They’re worried. Ah, I’m sure I’m fine. I think.

“You had best be working on a big apology,” John roars, and Brandon, at last, falls silent. “You convinced me to agree to letting her do this. You promised, an’ I trusted you.”

I’m going to sleep for a bit...

“Let’s get her back,” Michael yells.

“Come on, go,” my dad mumbles, helping move me.

My head hurts.

And John won’t stop shouting at Brandon.

And Brandon? Well, he’s gone very quiet.

Chapter 4

Brandon

“I’m trying my best, Mom,” the city slicker whispers to herself, her voice just one volume notch too high. She has no idea she left the bedroom door open a crack or that I’m standing outside.

I never thought this would be so difficult. I owe her an apology, but why can’t I find the words nor the courage? And my timing is terrible as well. After hours of rest, she’s been up and at it without a hitch, and despite all I say, my father won’t talk to me until we’ve smoothed whatever issue I have with her out. So, here I am, and honestly, I do feel bad. It’s not like me to do what I did. One minute, she was doing just fine, and then the next, when I should’ve been there to “supervise” her like I promised, I hesitated.

Still, I only just got here, and I can’t help but listen in on what she talks to herself about. For all that she is, I never expected to find her both grieving and reassuring herself all at once.

What am I doing? I stand here like some kind of agent on a mission. Maybe I am, considering how Michael won’t open up to me. I have the general gist of what happened to their family, but not the details.

This, right now, is like that delicious topping to the cake—the cherry on top. I overhear her doubtful mutterings, and in them is her own sadness. She’s hurting.

“I will keep my head high,” she whispers, and I peek, catching her clutch the sides of the bathroom sink and look deeply into her reflection in the mirror on the wall. “And a smile on my face.”

Was that a wish? Or a promise? Michael and Emily got to see their mom not long before she passed, and she departed with some final wishes for them to uphold. Was that it? Nothing more than a simple moral value to be headstrong and happy? It makes sense. I would wish the same for Sophia. Either way, it seems like an important thing for them both, albeit, if it is something they want to keep a secret, they do a terrible job at it. Maybe it is only important to them because their dying mother said it? Otherwise, I guess it could be any old parental phrase.

“Okay, get a move on,” I hear her say, and now is my chance to not appear like a creep. I honestly just wanted to brush my teeth before bed, that’s all. Instead, I really am acting like some teenager desperate for information to fit my worldview, trying to use brushing my teeth as a reason why I am here and not because I want to apologize.

Okay, deep breath, and cough loudly, knock, and make the announcement. “Hey, city slicker, you left the door open.”

“Oh, sorry.” The tap runs, stops, and a moment later, the door opens. “I was just finishing up.”

“Okay, good. Get some rest, you’ll need it for tomorrow. My dad wants me to teach you about horses before we go back

to cattle herding anytime soon. Especially after how much you were knocked around today.”

“Well, it was my first time, and next time, I’ll crush it.” Emily swerves by me.

“Hey,” I say on impulse, and she stops.

“Yeah?”

“I want to take this chance to say that—”

“Did you really, like, intercept me or something to talk?”

I furrow my brows. “Do you always cut people off like that?”

“Well—”

“Don’t answer that,” I say sternly, “Today is just another day of training, city slicker. Don’t go and get all excited to be working with horses. It was my dad’s idea.”

“Sure,” she says glumly. Is that really all she has to say? “Maybe I’ll be a little nicer if you remember my name?” Ah, there it is. Well, after today, I owe her that much. Plus, she’s being too polite. Maybe she feels nervous about what happened. It probably feels personal, which it is and isn’t. Was I always this complex?

“At this point, I’m not even sure I know your actual name.” I know it’s Emily. The nickname is fine for now. “I do know that you’re a menace helping herd cattle. We’ll be doing that again soon, before we know it, and next time, you’ll be more involved.” She stares at me with such empty eyes, then, and I

see the bruise on her head where she was knocked about and hit into a wooden fence. “And, Emily, I’m sorry for not looking after you. Trust me, my dad was right, you should’ve shoveled manure.”

She shrugs lazily. “It’s fine. I just want to understand all this ‘Meredith’ stuff one day.”

“It’s complicated...”

“Clearly,” she mutters, rubbing her head. “Michael says you’re not a bad guy, and even my dad despite what happened...”

I nod and lean on the doorframe. I look down at the floor. I see her bare feet: small, smooth, and cute. “I still owe you an apology, and any anger you feel is completely warranted.”

“It’s fine—”

“No, I promised to look after you. You came to me for help. You asked me to help get you out on the ranch. I will do what I can!”

Emily, red in the cheeks, turns away. “Oh, give me a break, it was my first day and it was *such a long* day.” She, for the first time, bows her head. Is she accepting whatever harsh, mature reality I’m putting on her? Because I’m not. This is meant to be an apology. Why is she the mature one now? All the same, she lifts her head up, and for some reason, that claws its way under my skin even more.

The next day of tough work comes soon enough, and she is let off easy today. As her... teacher? I guess I am her teacher

—trainer—I don't know, she seemed happy to learn at breakfast we weren't working until later in the day. She thought I was being nice. I did it because I'm worried; she shouldn't be learning to ride horses with a possible concussion, but she seems well enough.

“Are you excited?” I asked, because her lack of excitement to work with the horses at the stables today is frustrating me.

“Meh.”

“What?”

“Just meh,” she says, tying her brunette hair into a ponytail. “I'm not bothered.”

“Oh, come on, a droplet of awe would do.” And I thought it couldn't get any worse. It was strange enough that once we got to the stables, the smell of hay wafting under our noses, the warm sun up above, that she had never seen a horse in the flesh. Not once. I guess that's what happens when you spend all your time in the city?

I would judge her, but I've never seen the sea, so we're even. She and her family come from the coast, so it only makes sense.

“Now, the first thing to learn is that there is no such thing as a typical day on the ranch,” my dad says proudly, and looks to me for supportive agreement. I'm all for it. I can't help but chuckle as she tries to grasp that there really isn't a “typical” day of work. Every day is different, and in many ways, that is the beauty of it. Nothing ever gets stagnant around here.

“So, you don’t have a set routine?” she asks as we give her a tour of the stables, introducing her to the animals she’ll be working with today alongside us.

“Brandon, you can explain this one,” my dad says as he sets off to prepare something. I turn to her.

“To us, when you live where you work, and work where you live, manage animals and grass for a living, life gets hectic,” I explain.

“It is pretty crazy around here,” she agrees, and shifts from one foot to the other. I look her up and down and the casual city clothing she chose to wear for what we’ll be doing. It’s fine, I shouldn’t expect anything more impressive from a city girl. Or I should say woman. She’s a *woman*... Eyes up, Brandon, jeez...

“Ah,” Dad declares as he rejoins us, “there was once a day Brandon and I spent sixteen hours branding calves!”

“Oh, don’t remind me,” I tell him, because seriously, *that* day was painful by the time it was done. And he *still* had me up at the crack of dawn the next day.

“Are we branding horses?” she asks innocently. Wow, she’s actually asking questions?

“No, today we’ll be focused on unsaddling our horses to focus on halter-breaking our colts,” my dad tells her, and the blank look on her face is more than enough to get this lesson off to a bad start.

She's curious, but not at all over-the-top like some outsiders are when they visit for tours to see all the animals. I will have to consider her a fast learner once we get her up to speed on what exactly halter-breaking is, and then the rest is teaching.

I am going to say that I prefer the term "ordering" because there's some fun in that. She has her miserable moments, and her impatient nature still gets under my skin. Even as my dad tries to cool the tension between us, I find I take my shots.

"As a city girl, I thought you'd go crazy about working with the horses," I tell her distantly.

"Uh, they're just animals?" she replies, and I swear that even struck a chord with my dad. Ouch. We move on, anyway, teaching her how to unsaddle a horse, introducing her, and my teasing goes on in small, but frequent ways, then we move on to preparing the colts.

"Brandon," my dad says, and drags me to one side. Here he goes defending her again. If I was acting the way she does, I'd get a slap upside my head. "You're distracted."

"I know—"

"You didn't fasten that saddle properly, son. Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Hold on—"

"I've checked them over. Don't make me go giving you a terrible job as punishment," he threatens coolly.

"What?"

“Emily went and got your mother’s old horse’s saddle perfect.”

Emily chirps in the background, “I did?”

Oh, great, she’s going to hold this over my head now, isn’t she? According to my dad, she’s done it better than me? Honestly, she’s the problem. She’s just getting in the way is what it is. I don’t care. Even after my dad leaves, I’ll show her just how much she has to learn if she wants to survive here!

Then again, I find myself at odds with this headstrong young woman trying to find a sense of order and stability in the chaos of the ranch life. She’s failing, but through me, she is learning to adjust bit by bit. Each time, I also learn more about her, how she is a city slicker born and raised—that much was clear. But her comfortable, idyllic life has been upturned by her mother’s sudden passing—also clear. So, what am I missing?

Oh—

“Sorry,” I grumble, and shove back against the colt on my side. How awkward, we’ve ended up sandwiched between two of the rebellious colts.

“Hey, get off, Brandon—”

“I’m trying. Stop fussing.” We break free, neither of us wanting to endure being shoved up against the other at the front. God, how embarrassing. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine, thanks,” she says, keeping a jolly tone despite the irritation in her expression. But is that a tinge of red I see?

“Let’s keep it formal. Don’t blush,” I tell her, exposing her, and her honest but humiliated reaction is understandable.

“I’m not blushing,” she says, trying to avoid the colt who seems a little bit too friendly with her.

“Looks like he’ll make you blush. He’s young, you see, and doesn’t know you’re out of his league.” I laugh, and she lightly laughs. And then I realize what I’ve said. I should correct it or make another joke to hide the fact I just made out like she was good-looking. Then again, the joke is that she is too good-looking for the horse.

Am I overthinking this?

“I am definitely out of his league,” she says, and nervously holds her hand out to the colt who nuzzles her chest, pressing against her until the outline of her bra is visible. “Maybe not out of yours.”

“Ha, you wish.” I can’t believe it. We’re talking like this is nothing. Like, it wasn’t long ago she nearly died herding cattle...

“I don’t have to.” She escapes the colt, rushing to one side. “I just know it.”

“It’s not a fact,” I counter, and try to calm the young horse.

“It is.”

“It isn’t—” I hold on to him. “Oh, we definitely need to break you in!”

“Feisty, is he?” she shouts, giggling away as I struggle to grapple and out-wrestle a young, male horse.

“Uh, yeah, just a little bit,” I reply, grunting as I gain control. “Sorry, this lesson is out of control. It is because normally I work with someone more experienced, and we work as a team, but I am trying to do this singlehandedly.”

“Oh, you can’t blame it all on me,” she says, gasping as she moves back into assist, only to dart away, laughing as she goes. “Nope!” she shouts, avoiding the colt. “How is John handling all the others?”

“He’s keeping them busy, besides, this one is clearly a touch too friendly.” I finally get the colt into submission. “Let’s try and get this lesson on, shall we?”

“Yeah, sure, teacher.”

And we work together, the lesson flows smoothly. It has its hiccups, but nothing concerning. She’s learning quickly. She’s good at this, almost a natural, I’d say. We’re actually working together?

“So, enough of the supervising for one minute,” she says once we get a spare moment away from work. We take a break to one side, and we wipe the sweat from our foreheads so in sync that we burst out laughing. “So, what I was trying to say is...”

“Yeah?”

She goes quiet.

“What?” I ask, looking at her carefully now.

“You got really upset with me. On the first day I came, I mean. That is, uh, when I said those things about my dad. I shouldn’t have. He’s struggling, and I can’t lie, he’s been better since we got out here.”

Ah, I see. I nod, and step closer to her. “It’s okay.”

Emily shrugs me off. “We don’t have to talk about it, but I’m guessing you understand how he feels?”

“What?”

She looks up at me with a desperate look in her eyes. “You lost your life partner, right? That is why Sophia doesn’t have a...”

I step away. “Let’s not go there.”

“I... I am sorry.”

I sigh. “It’s fine.” I place my hands on my hips and peer into the distance where Steven and Michael swoop by, distracting my dad and the colts long enough for us to continue talking. “But it is difficult for your dad. More than you know...” I look over my shoulder at her, my eyes narrowed onto her sadness swept expression. “And you as well.”

Her head perks up. “I didn’t spiral like my dad. I guess I kind of got my closure. So did Michael. Dad didn’t. He went downhill very slowly, and then all at once.”

I nod. I understand. “He was trying to be strong.”

“Yeah, he was. But then he collapsed, you know? His mind and heart just went. He wasn’t the same. He lost his job, his

savings—everything.”

I slowly turn to face her. “What?”

“When I say we lost everything, we really did. And we left it all behind. My dad has nothing left in the city. I don’t either, really. I think Michael had more of a life there than me, but to be honest, I was always kind of a hermit. I didn’t have many friends. Not real friends, anyway.”

I can’t help but stare in shock as she spills all this information so freely. I get it all now. I understand, from one point to the next, how she ended up on the ranch. At last, this is all more detail, but it is mostly what I already know from Michael, just not with her added point of view.

“So, Michael tells me it all began with an idea you gave him on a phone call?”

I groan and walk toward where my dad says goodbye to Steven and Michael, the two leaving to move onto the next job, giving Emily and me a distant wave as we stand on the other side of the large, spacious fenced-in pen. “I didn’t give him any ideas. I just joked about his dad returning to his roots.”

“And then he took it and made it something more?” she questions curiously.

“Yeah. And that is why you’re here, and I’m your supervisor.”

“Oh.” She laughs softly. “So, Michael is to blame for this?”

“Yeah.”

“So, it was a joke on your part?” She laughs more, turning curious as I show her a mistake she made with prepping another saddle before my dad sees it.

“Yeah. It was just that at the time, he had gone over my head and went straight to my father instead of asking me. It isn’t an issue; it was just odd as to why he didn’t at least let me know.” She’s gone quiet. “You all right?”

“Yeah, just fine.” She looks away.

“Is it really?” I pry. Is she okay?

“Yeah, yeah... See, my mother... She left me a, er, passing wish? And working on the ranch under you is difficult. We clash.”

“Tell me about it,” I grumble as my father slowly returns to finish with the halter-breaking for today.

“I want to uphold my mother’s wishes... and today has been much, much better. I feel like *I* am, too.”

“Hey, Emily, before we get back into work, let me just say I have kind of overheard this before between you and Michael. So, if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay.”

“Thanks, but I’d like to. It’s because the wish and promise is simply for me to be happy, something I’m just not. But it is a strong motivator to get out of my comfort zone. I hope that isn’t too confusing. I don’t want to make it sound like it’s something bigger than it is.”

“Oh? That’s okay, it sounds pretty big to you.”

“Yeah. Anyway, don’t worry about it.” She forces a faint smile and lies through her teeth. “I’m trying my best. I just... don’t get this life. It’s kind of... I don’t know, it doesn’t appeal to me. None of this does. You don’t help either, being so grumpy all the time.”

“Hey, don’t make me give you a terrible job. So, stop your yapping already,” I threaten, and... oh, God, I sound like my father!

Chapter 5

Emily

“Okay, final warning,” Brandon tells me as he checks his silver watch, eyeing it for a moment. “Keep complaining, and I’ll give you a terrible job shoveling manure, and trust me, Sophia will want to be there to witness it.”

“Oh, come on, just tell me the time already,” I protest as his dad, my dad, and Michael prepare for our focus today—finally herding the cattle to completion.

“Ten AM,” he tells me, and moves on. We’ve got a job to do. But how is it already 10AM? I could’ve never imagined moving cattle to a different field would be so difficult. All the while, Brandon rattles down my ears how we must in order to fertilize the field and give the cattle fresh grass to munch on.

I’ve got the worst of it. I swear he’s positioned me here on purpose. Even Michael picked up on that, and John is so lost in the work that he is no longer looking out for me. I’ve gotten knocked over three times!

“Stop being too soft!” Brandon shouts.

“Tell that to the nine-hundred-pound cow!” I yell back as I’m shoved again in the chaotic madness of noise and burly lumps of white, black, and brown cows.

Brandon is getting on my nerves... oh no, he’s coming toward me! He looks me in the eyes, the sun beating down on us and adding more sweat to the nasty mess that I already am, my clothes ruined entirely.

“My dad is a bit of a perfectionist. *Don't* screw this up.”

“I’m trying not to die, isn’t that enough!” I tell him hopelessly. He doesn’t care.

John shouts orders all the while, Michael is lost in the chaos, and my father is the lucky one. He gets to prepare paperwork nearby. He seems brighter already compared to when we got here. I wish I felt the same way.



Bolting past me is a blur of brown. The sound of the hooves is so powerful.

Brandon rides his horse with ease, and he looks good doing it. I never thought I’d see something like that, and right now, he’s off on the hunt to herd the few rebels that broke out of line and started an uprising. He’s quick to get them back in order.

Then there is me, covered in bumps and bruises as I watch this man do his job, and he does it well. Again, there is me, gasping like I’m about ready to keel over from exhaustion.

Am I jealous? I think I am. I’m doing all this work, and now that I’ve seen such a powerful beast in all its glory, well...

“Hey,” I call out, and shuffle toward the back of the herd.

“Don’t get out of the formation,” Brandon warns me.

“I just wanted to ask if I can ride a horse?”

He slows, cautious, and then grins. “Do you know how?”

“Uh, I don’t.”

“Then for now, do the tough work.”

“Oh, come on. Can’t you be nice to me for two minutes? I’ve been working my hardest all week!”

“Hey, drop that devil face, I’m just seeing if you city people have what it takes,” he jokes.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I bark back, and now he’s distracted, and I can already hear John’s perfectionist rage swooping toward us.

“It was a joke, city girl,” he explains, and moves on.

We’re approaching the next field, and the gates through to them are in view.

“You had better not lose that formation again in Annabella Field!” John shouts as he rides beside us both. I say nothing, but Brandon? He jolts, like he’s registering the pain from something his father said. Time to ask—

“Sorry, son, I know it’s difficult to hear her name even after so she passed so long ago.”

“It’s fine.” Brandon focuses on the herding in silence.

Uh, I won’t ask.



“All right, we can do this!” Michael yells as the influx of noise from a cattle herd charge our way. We’ve been given the responsibility of opening the gates and thinning out the line as the cattle are herded into the next field.

The gate is opened. They charge on through. It isn’t as neat as John would’ve liked, but I can’t hear what he shouts. All I see is the blur of cows. I lose my spot. I’m nearly swept off my feet. I hear shouting.

Should I be worried?

“Take my hand, city slicker,” Brandon shouts, and I hesitate. That doesn’t stop him. He drags me onto the back of his horse before moving us both out of the way. “What were you thinking!”

What happened? John and my dad help Michael handling the herd. “I... I don’t know.”

“Did you not think to move!”

“I didn’t think much of it!”

Brandon dismounts, taking me with him, and moves us to one side. “You’ll be glad to learn you were about to get caught in a stampede!”

“Why would I be glad?”

“*About* to,” he clarifies.

I duck my head. He keeps me sidelined for the rest. I observe, and they keep it that way, probably thinking I’ve got a concussion from the beating I’ve taken today. The rest of the

herding goes smoothly. The gate is closed, and they're allowed to call it a good day's work. John doesn't take the time to school me. He leaves that to Brandon.

And, I shouldn't have expected any less from Brandon. As my self-proclaimed "boss," we're at odds with one another, and my protest is fair! But looking to my dad to get me out of this doesn't work. Not only is Brandon working with Michael more, which is frustrating, as clearly, Brandon wants nothing to do with me unless it's making my life a living hell.

"Can we just go back to the city already?" I beg my father, and I meet the same, sad answer every time.

"Listen to your boss," he warns, and takes his leave, and I'm stuck here, already exhausted, with my "boss." Ugh.

We go to the stables. Brandon stands in the doorway. "City slicker, do the job or you're not having dinner tonight."

"You can't do that!"

"So harsh, Daddy!" Sophia yelps.

He smirks. "I'll see to it that you don't. And if you do anyway, I'll make sure you don't sleep a wink tonight."

"Uh... w-what?" Why did my mind go there! Why did I think he meant that threat like *that*! Now I'm all flustered, misinterpreting what he says, and the tension only continues to grow but now it is awkward!

It takes him a moment to catch on to what exactly is meant by what he said, until he realizes in what context I *thought* he meant.

“I am your *boss*,” he clarifies sternly. “It is frowned upon for coworkers to do such a thing.”

“What about Meredith?” I snap, and... wait, where did that come from?

He narrows his gaze on me into a glare. “Don’t bring her up.”

I might as well push this now. “An ex?” I ask, ignoring the mountain of manure he wants me shoveling as punishment for part-complaining, part-not-listening-to-instruction during the cattle herding.

“We were never anything at all,” he makes clear. How certain of him, eh? Does he fancy himself as some kind of forbidden fruit? I mean, he *does* make for quite a treat for the eyes... After all, what’s the harm in imagining?

“Seriously,” I beg, raising my shovel at him in defiance, “who is this woman and what is the deal with you two, Brandon?”

He holds up his hands defensively. “Okay, lower the weapon, Rambo, jeez.”

“You keep bringing her up—”

“I don’t.”

“—And I think I’m owed some kind of gossip! Is she an enemy? What is the history here? Or should I ask your dad?”

“Okay, enough of that,” Brandon mutters. “I guess, in a way, she’s an enemy.”

“So... not an ex?”

“No,” he moans, annoyed. “Feel better, now?”

I don't answer. I just nod. But for some reason, yes, I do. My heart feels a little lighter.

“You want to know what the deal is?” he offers.

“I do.”

“She's a competitor to me and to my father's entire business, okay?”

I nod. I feel like there's so much more to this. “Go on. I want gossip!”

“I don't want to hear about the mean woman,” Sophia says, and Brandon nods.

“Neither do I.”

I raise an eyebrow. I can't help but look between them. Was she mean to Sophia? What? “Oh, come on, please tell me.”

“No,” Brandon says with a newfound fire in him. “I am not one of your girls from the city that you gossip with.”

“You'd make a good gossiper,” I compliment, and he only glares harder.

“Look,” he grumbles, and points to the shovel. “Start shoveling. Now.”

“I can do it,” Sophia says, and helps herself to a shovel. Despite being, what, eight, she lifts the shovel with ease, sets to the task, and has no problem whatsoever shoveling manure.

Oh my God. Is she really just... no, I refuse to be outdone by an eight-year-old!



It's done. The day is *done*. I'm *free*.

Everyone needs to get into town for the market where Mary, the head of the ranch's accounting, handles contractual business. John, Michael, and my dad went with her to help.

Brandon joins them in a rush as he has to take a form to Sophia's school for one of her school trips coming up.

And that leaves *me* in charge.

I shower, soaking in the warmth like my life depends on it. I love it, but my bed is calling, and I intend to sleep before my body wakes up and realizes just how sore it is.

Sometime later, a knock at the door sounds. Has it been one second? One hour? The house is full of life, whereas before it was silent. I hit my bed and must've gone out like a light switch.

"Hey, you in there, city slicker?" It's Brandon.

"Y-yeah..."

"I'm just checking up on you to make sure you're okay."

"Uh... you can come in." I crawl under the covers just in time as the door to my room opens. "How was your trip into

town?”

“Good, thank you.” He slowly approaches, leaving the bedroom door partly closed behind him. “I hoped to ask you something, city slicker.”

“I have a name.”

He nods. “*Emily*, I tried asking Michael, but he seems to avoid it, and I can’t ask my parents as it feels disrespectful. So, who better than you. You didn’t want to be here, after all.”

I yawn, sit upright, and stare at him. “What are you asking?”

“What happened to your dad?”

“Well, my mother—”

“I know it is more than just your mother. There’s more to it than that.”

I slowly nod. I see. He wants the fuller story. “He couldn’t make ends meet.”

Brandon’s chin lifts, and there’s a nervous hint in his eyes.

I continue soundly, “The life we had in the city was just not possible. Not anymore. Michael avoids it because he *does* have a proper life, unlike me. He’s got things to lose—people other than just us.”

“What happened, then?” he presses, and then steps back. “Sorry, I don’t mean to overstep.”

“No, it’s fine.” It’s good to get this off my chest. “Our father had to break the news that after everything with what

happened to our mom, he just couldn't do it anymore. Living. Working. Just basic stuff. He wasn't the same man he once was." My heart hurts saying it. "He lost everything after he lost her, and he almost lost us and we almost lost him. Michael made sure that didn't happen. It's why we're here." I turn away.

He takes a polite leave, thankful, and nothing more is said. That's for the best.

I had better get back to sleep. Ah, and there's the soreness, great.

Chapter 6

Brandon

That's eight haybales! And... nine. ... *Ten!* And, where I've stacked nearly ten, Emily managed... now, four.

"Come on, you're falling behind," I scold as I lift another small haybale to add to the growing fortress in the barn. "Anyway, Michael, what were you saying?"

"Oh, so that's how it is? I'm some employee whereas Michael gets treated with respect and friendliness?" Emily says aloud, wiping beads of sweat from her forehead. "But yes, Michael, say what you were saying," she finishes under her breath, but not quietly enough.

"Didn't you hear me?" I scold further, drop my haybale, and approach her. I'm going to get close enough to intimidate *and* fluster her.

"Yeah, I did, and I think if you two stopped talking, we'd have this done by now!"

"Aw, feeling left out, city slicker? Why don't you go and shovel some more of the horse manure?"

"No," she protests. "*No!*"

"I'm your boss!"

"You're taking advantage of me!"

Based on her tone, I'm guessing she hates my guts, and I'm so close I can smell her, and... she's got quite an allure. Wait,

no, we're just two coworkers on the ranch. Nothing more. Oh, God, Michael was witness to all of that fighting as well...

"You two have got quite the fire between you, huh?" Michael says thoughtfully, curious in a way that makes me worry what kind of ideas he has in mind.

A commotion sounds nearby, in the next section of the barn, and the rush of noise has me reactively sprinting in an instant. Michael follows and Emily does as well. The source? An animal escaped and, Sophia, standing by the lock to a pen's gate, is as guilty as anything I've ever seen.

Chaos ensues, and the hunt is on. We scour the farmland, searching high and low to capture the animal—a sheep, apparently, and I'm not sure how everyone missed it. Of course, it had to be Emily who finds the sheep, a sweet little fluffball of messy white named Dolly—Sophia's choice.

Dolly escaped to the outskirts, running amok in a small field until a dead end trapped her.

She doesn't notice me. I watch as Dolly warms up to Emily, gathering its trust, and before I know it, she's the one interacting with Dolly, this yappy little sheep, and it's cute. And it's so friendly, and happy, and bouncy. One moment, to her, I bet it is just a stupid farm animal, and the next, it's the sweetest, cutest, loving creature she's ever known.

"Hey!" I shout as I catch up, and the disbelief in my face at how Dolly trusts her without fault is worth a mocking laugh from her, apparently. As much as I refuse to accept it, I'll

entrust her to look after Dolly, as annoying as it is how I need to watch over her every step of the way back.

“Can’t you just get off my back?” she seethes at me for my constant judgments and careful observations of her obvious lack of experience handling sheep. Ah, here we go again. I see it in her face. Another incoming conflict.

“No,” she blurts, stopping me before I can speak. What’s the issue? What has her so wrapped up in her own thoughts as Dolly prances around her ankles?

“What?” I ask.

“Look, Brandon, my mother died and left me a final wish: keep my head high and a smile on my face. Now, I know you already know that, and it might not be a big deal to you, but it is to me.” Except, her head hangs low, and her lips are drawn in a thin, straight line. “I want to try to uphold her wish.”

“And I don’t make that easy for you, do I?”

She almost laughs. “N-no...”

“Well, we’ve got quite a walk to get back,” I say. With a quick double check to make sure the little, fluffy escape artist is following her without error, I can relax a little bit. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” she grumbles, her focus on Dolly.

“This private, direct talk on our way back is the best opportunity.”

She nods, holding her head high. “Okay, I’ll take the chance, as strange as this. I just don’t want it to become a confrontation. Not when I’m opening up, you know?”

“That’s fine.” I stroll a little closer to her. “Open up all you like.”

Nodding, she keeps her head, and puts on a faint smile, her gaze on the ranch in the far distance in all its beauty. “Well, for one, your grumpiness gets on my nerves.”

“Ah, that makes sense. I’ve been told I am the grumpy type —”

“But, like, *really* grumpy! And you always say and do things that annoy me.”

This already feels like a confrontation, but it only is if I fight back. I need to let her rant. She deserves that much. “Like a pet peeve?”

“Yeah, like a pet peeve.” She pauses, taking a moment to make sure Dolly is following, and lo and behold, she continues to happily prance along slightly behind us. “And also, there is something you do... I...”

“What?” I insist. “Go on, try me. I’ve got thick skin.”

“You just are always under my skin, and you frustrate me so much, making me feel all these different emotions and I think deep down, you feel threatened, because I am so different. And don’t say anything, just let me talk. I know there is something going on, and I think sometimes it is because we’re

just *both* so different. It is why we continue to clash. You just can't keep up with my street smarts."

"Street smarts?"

"My sass."

I nod. This hurts, but... I have thick skin. I think.

"They're like my weapons. I think it all starts with the whole swearing thing, which is fine, by the way, but you just have this well-mannered bluntness that... Aha! That is what gets under my skin!"

Yeah, this hurts a lot. No one has dug this deep into my personality in a long time. Not since... Annabella. But, whatever, who cares about my "well-mannered, bluntness." I'd call myself stoic.

"So, is that all clear enough to you, Brandon? For once, do you understand? Because you spend so much time making sure you drill your nonsense into my head, so how about I drill some of mine into you!" At last, she stops, and breathes, and laughs away the awkwardness. At the least, I'm going to presume she feels better.

If she wanted to feel good, then she should take pride in what she's done. Because she's left me silent.

I say nothing. Not until we're back, and I discipline my daughter, which I hope she understands, but I feel Emily's scathing judgment. I bet she feels Sophia needs a tender hand or something. I hear her mutterings.

“Shouldn’t you explain to her why what she did was wrong rather than just telling her it was wrong?” she points out—a fair judgment. But what does it matter? I refuse to talk to her now, let alone look at her.

I’m hurt. Am I pathetic?

Why does what she says and does cut so deep?

Why do I care so much?

Chapter 7

Emily

“Don’t you see how hard I’m trying?” I tell him, but he just won’t listen. No matter what I do, where I corner him, Brandon finds a way to slip away from my grasp. There’s no hiding the guilt I feel about how I made him feel yesterday. I should’ve known something was off when he stopped talking to me. How can we get anything done if he ignores me?

So far, all I know is that it is because I was a bit tough on him. Okay, maybe just tough.

Brandon, in the middle of brushing his teeth, blankly looks at me. He makes a clear gesture to his toothpaste-foam-filled mouth, his statement clear without words that he is busy right now.

“Well, this is the only chance I can get to talk to you,” I tell him openly as I lean on the door frame. He tries to shut the door, but I stop it with my foot, and make sure he has no choice but to listen to me. “I have done everything in my power to try and apologize to you because I feel guilty about what happened yesterday.”

Giving up, he spits, rinses, and washes his toothbrush. He turns to face me, his mouth slightly wet, his lips glistening, and in the cramped bathroom, I can smell his minty breath. “I literally got Sophia to bed five minutes ago. I can’t afford five minutes of peace without someone bothering me?”

I narrow my eyes. “I’m trying to show how sorry I am.”

“I don’t want to hear it. Please, move.”

I stand my ground.

“You’ll make a scene,” he warns, and he’s right. I move, but this isn’t the end. No matter what, I’ll find a way to show how sorry I am, and at this point, I’m not entirely sure what I’m sorry for or if I am actually apologetic in any way. All I care about is showing him I *am* sorry. Maybe all I really want is some acknowledgment? Acceptance, even, would go a long way!

So, I was rude, and three days later, I have to transform my tactics. I have no choice but to adapt to him. My options are thin, and if there is one thing I’ve learned about Brandon, it is that actions speak louder than words.

I help in my own way, and I stop the pestering. When the third day turns to the fourth, I’m far better prepared than I ever was before. I work hard, I keep myself busy, and the ranch is as good as mine by the end of the day.

“Hey, Sophia, I could use a hand shoveling horse manure!” I call out to the odd little girl collecting bugs nearby.

“Really?” she asks me and tilts her head. “But you hate that?”

“I know, but... I’m feeling different today.”

Unsure, she looks at me from a distance with such suspicion I almost feel offended, but soon, she smiles, and we’re working together as a team. We’re in sync, flowing in our work, the job made effortless to the point that we share a chat,

a laugh, and honestly, I never thought it'd be so much fun working alongside an eight-year-old girl.

“What are you two doing?” Brandon asks slowly as he joins us.

“Shoveling,” Sophia states, and points.

“I can see that.” His eyes land on me. “What is going on?”

“We’re working together,” I tell him, and he looks at me in such a way that I can’t help but feel offended. “I’m not hurting her, am I?”

“What?” she gasps. “No, Dad, we’re having fun!” she claims, and I wouldn’t call this fun, and I do have ulterior motives, but sure, I have enjoyed working with her. It is less the work and more Sophia that made this worthwhile in the end.

“Are you trying to befriend her?” Brandon asks, seemingly out of the blue.

“What?” I process what he said. “Maybe. Why?”

He nods, crosses his arms, and slowly takes his leave. “Nothing.” Whoa, was his tone less gruff there? He even seemed impressed. “Sophia, don’t get messy, okay?”

“I won’t,” she says.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

I smile. “What about me?”

“I don’t care about you,” he replies plainly. “Besides, you’re not the one who is *meant* to be getting ready for school.” Sophia bows her head in shame. I didn’t mean to cause any mischief! “Also, don’t expect to be given extra pay or anything just for actually doing the bare *minimum* of what you are supposed to do in the first place.”

Oh, here we go again. No matter how hard I try, I can’t earn some forgiveness. This constant cycle between us continues. We’re getting nowhere. He’s like a wall of steel and I’m just hot air doing nothing to cool the tension between us.

Day after day, I try. I work. I learn from Brandon’s father, his mother, and I slowly build trust and reputation with Sophia—the voice of reason that he cannot ever ignore. And, day after day, I find myself slipping. My intentions are not what they were. I’m not sure who I am anymore, because I’ve gotten lost in it all.

I’m enjoying myself, is what it is. I don’t care about him anymore. The time has come and gone, and he treats me the same as ever, just with an added layer of distant indifference.

Then, a week after the sheep escape incident, we’ve circled back to the horses.

“You look good when you do that,” I tell him as he mounts his prized mare. He adjusts in the saddle and looks down at me with worried eyes.

“Excuse me?” he answers.

“You know, when you so easily climb into the saddle?” I shrug and take my leave. “You look good doing it.”

“Are you trying to flatter me?”

I spin toward him. “No?” I approach, and reach out, and stroke his mare’s mane. He doesn’t stop me. We’ve worked together long enough now for some walls of indifference between us to have broken down. “What would I have to gain?”

“That’s exactly it. What do you have to gain?”

“Nothing. You just look good. Take the compliment or leave it, jeez.”

He holds his hands up. “Hey, relax. You’re the one borderline flirting with your boss.”

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself.”

“I swear, every day now you try something new to try and make me like you.”

“Is it working?”

He cringes. “No.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not like I’m trying to bed the boss for a raise or something! I just want you to stop treating me like trash.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Bed the... boss?” he repeats, a strangeness to his tone, a muskiness to it that makes me turn away and wave him off.

I tell him bluntly, “Again, *don’t* flatter yourself.”

Day after day, gradually, he drops his guard around me. He still is my boss—teacher—and as the days all roll into one, he helps me learn how to tend to the animals and learn about the land around us.

Bit by bit, I break the walls he put up between us. I'm not sure if he accepts me, or if I am forgiven, but I don't care about either of those things anymore. I am here now, and I am finding a way to cope, and I can't survive here with him hanging over my head like some kind of rain cloud. The least we could do is smooth out our differences, and then the only issues are beyond the subtle war between us.

Sophia isn't making things any easier. At least, not anymore. I swear, that little girl is not just odd, but she's got some kind of unaddressed insecurity. The closer I get to smoothing things out with Brandon, the closer I come to, at last, making Sophia into some kind of enemy as well. It's like I am stuck trying to butter up both sides and I can't possibly do both.

She is starting to stalk me, and Brandon makes it clear that she's fine, and nothing is wrong, but I'm the one who sees this little girl with such evil eyes for me. It's only once I'm with her dad, of course. Now, that makes sense—we're smoothing things out, and Brandon is maybe getting a bit too chummy with me, something that does not sit well in her mind.

I can't blame the poor girl, though. She's only had her dad all her life and now that I am really starting to insert myself

into the picture, Sophia is getting jealous of how much time we're spending together.

Brandon isn't great with his words, but I know Sophia feels rejected by her father, and she'll gradually become upset, but because of how she was raised, she's direct but quiet, much like her father in the way she's handling problems. Being eight years old, no one is taking her seriously—no one but me. I see it. I understand it. But it isn't that simple. None of this is.

I'm sorry, Sophia, but you are only eight. I don't mean to write you off... I really mean that.

And the fateful day comes that Brandon pulls me aside, and those words drift from his mouth. "I'd like to apologize."

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

"Seriously, it's fine."

He grunts. "Just let me do this."

I turn toward him. "Okay."

"All right, now, I know I am difficult to be around, and we got off to the wrong start, but I do see how much effort you are putting in, and I want to say I'm sorry for causing you so much grief. I can't promise I'll go easy on you, as you irritate my soul from my body, but I can... *respect*... your efforts. It does mean something."

"Uh... thank you, Brandon."

"But you are difficult as well. You're too feisty."

“Oh, you were doing so well...”

He quickly goes to try and smooth things over. “But you—”

“Let’s call it quits while you’re ahead, yeah?”

He goes to protest, and just as fast, stops. “Fine. That’s probably for the best.”

So, we’re at a stalemate. It’s progress, and we both know we have things to work on. “I’ll get my anger under control, or as you called it, my feistiness. But I can explain that. I can’t explain you.”

He looks at me oddly. “Explain what?”

I gesture to all of him. “Why you are the way you are?”

“Life.”

“I don’t believe that. Not for one second. I know for a fact from your mom and dad that there is more to you than meets the eye.”

“Emily, I don’t want to get into this.”

“So, you refuse to talk despite pulling me aside purposefully so we could talk?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Then make it simple.”

He sighs. “I can’t.”

“Help me understand.”

“Why do you care?” He turns to leave, and the little clearing in the barn is left all the emptier.

“Ah! You’re so frustrating!” If I wasn’t empty and hopeless about him before, I am now.

“Leave Daddy alone!” shouts a distant voice. Sophia, nearby, glares.

Brandon sighs deeper now that he’s caught sight of Sophia. “I’m especially not going to talk while she is lurking. She’s as feisty as you are.”

“Well, your odd little bug lover is glaring at me for who knows what!”

“Ah, I’m sure she’s fine.”

I follow after him, the two of us stepping out into the cool air as sunset approaches. “Oh, so she does this all the time?”

“Well, no. It doesn’t matter. Sophia, go inside and help Nana prepare dinner!” She huffs and goes on her way without a word. “That was easy.”

“Yeah, too easy. Now, you know what wasn’t easy? Today’s work. Can I get some kind of time off for my hard work today?”

He chuckles heartily as we stroll toward the house. “You want a gift?”

“No. A bonus.”

“Right.” He looks at the dimming blue sky. “Uh, no.”

“But I managed half the jobs that were yours!”

“No, again,” he declines, and all over again, our conflict reignites, and prepares for another bout of mind games, verbal

warfare, and social endurance.

Chapter 8

Brandon

“Left side, Emily,” I tell her, and she listens, following my instructions. All the practice amounts to this moment; at last, she’ll mount a horse.

Standing on the horse’s left side, she angles the stirrup toward her left foot. Swiftly, she gathers the reins and a bit of the mane with her left hand and places her foot in the stirrup.

“Uh, what was it next?” she asks, a shakiness to her voice.

As I speak, she follows, reflecting the actions to my words. “Grab the offside of the saddle with your right hand and quickly pull yourself onto your horse’s back.”

Emily climbs onto the horse’s saddle, and just like that, she’s done it. We’ve passed the mounting section of our training, and hopefully, what theory practice I gave will give her an edge for the practical part of riding a horse.

Clicking my tongue, a burst of mint blows forth, and all I can smell beyond the horse for a moment is that pure, strong minty flavor, and I think that is all she and the horse can smell as well as the way they both instinctively turn away is obvious. I won’t mention it, setting my sights on the field around us, its white fence painted edges, and the city girl-turned-horse girl.

I run my hand through the horse’s mane, reaching up and out to soothe her. She was one of my mom’s horses before her hips began to play up on her. Time makes its mark, I suppose.

Now, this mare may be getting on now, but she can enjoy a new rider.

“Am I ready?” she asks me, and I can’t help but check if the mare is ready as well.

“I think so. Stroke her mane. See if she’s ready herself.”

“What’s her name?” Emily asks, and gently runs her hand through the horse’s mane. A name flings itself into my mind.

“Helen, after my late grandmother.”

Emily nods, taking that information, and smiling. “What a lovely name.”

“It is.” I can’t help but look away. Even as Emily begins to put my lessons into action, the practice paying off, I can’t help but think of who trained me. What irony, really, that my grandmother taught me with the mother of the very same horse.

Helen is a gorgeous American Saddlebred breed, strong and well-mannered, taught well by my mother during her younger years. Helen might be getting on now, her years likely to eventually catch up to her. Not yet though. Not while she still has a spring in her step, and her muscle frame can reveal the true nature of her fire inside.

Emily, honestly, is a natural. I almost don’t want to believe it. She pairs well with Helen, the two of them working in sync, and seeing such chemistry, though there’s a hiccup here and there, means I’ve just earned a worker with a greater range of skills.

Emily isn't great just yet, but she will be. I can tell.

"Thank you," she says as she laps back around to me, a happiness in her expression that I haven't seen before. This is a genuine look. She's enjoying the thrill, as I hoped.

"Don't mention it," I tell her, but she digresses anyway.

"If you hadn't changed your mind, I would've never realized just how much I enjoy this." A glow in her face tells me much more than she says.

Keeping Helen at a gentle trot, she circles around me like a pro. I place my hands on my hips. I can't believe this. "Well, an employee should be given a reward for excellent work. It is only fair."

"Thank you," she says politely, and takes off again, only for her focus to waver, her balance to slip, and the next thing I know, I'm sprinting to pick her up off the floor. She's covered in dirt, bruises, and scrapes, but she laughs it off, acting like it is nothing.

I wouldn't admit it aloud, but I'm liking this new attitude of hers recently.

"This has definitely been the best way to spend a day off," she says, a glimmer of hope coming out of her. This wasn't technically meant to be a day off, but after yesterday, and everything before then, I have no issue with this. I am the one who proposed to teach her how to ride a horse. I guess, in a way, that could come across as some kind of a day off.

For me, this is a way to help empower her, and let her find some love in this way of life. But all the same, this is an opportunity for me as much as it is her.

Seeing the way she trots, gallops, and manages Helen's gait so effectively brings me back to the days where I struggled without end. She has her moments where she falls and fails, but she's right back up again. At this extent, I almost believe Helen respects Emily's determination. She's practically radiating it.

"This must be a great way to relieve tension, you know?" she tells me as I go to prepare my own horse to join her. I've had enough of walking around and observing. She doesn't need me on standby if she falls.

"How so?"

"Like stress."

She's not wrong there. It can be. There's no greater feeling, sometimes, than the wind against your face and the thrill of the rush in a fast-paced gallop—a rapid sprint with no end in sight. To push your horse's limit, and to thunder on... ah, now I'm even more eager to join her. I have a stallion of my own waiting at the stables.

"I'm curious," she says, bringing me away from my lack of an answer.

"Yeah?"

"What do you enjoy the most about this cowboy life of yours?"

“Hold on.” I don’t even get the saddle ready for my horse, a white stallion with patches of brown—a powerful mustang breed. “Did you just say that?”

“Say what?”

“Cowboy life.”

“Yeah?”

“Why cowboy?”

“I thought it suited.”

I shake my head. “But... we’re ranchers, not cowboys.”

“It’s close enough,” she murmurs.

“It isn’t.”

“So?”

A light laugh works its way up and out of me. “Well,” I begin, exasperated, “this *cowboy life* is the only thing keeping me grounded.”

“What do you mean?” she asks from atop Helen, her curious gaze on me like she’s searching for something.

“How do I phrase this?” I stop my preparations. My horse remains confused, but indifferent to my pause. “It’s like...” I really have no idea how to phrase this, do I? I guess it’s not that far off from what’s going on for her father right now. It’s not quite the same, and yet, is.

“Hello?” she asks when I don’t reply.

“All right. Think about it like this. Michael went out of his way to find a way for your dad to come back out here and get a taste of his roots. He decided to do it because it might help your father reconnect with himself. It might help him find something.”

“Find what?”

“Contentedness.”

“Is that what it’s like for you?”

“Yes, actually.”

Understanding slowly dawns on her. “Oh... It’s good of my brother to do what he did, then.”

“Yeah. He was definitely on the right tracks with his train of thought.”

“Honestly? I—”

“Hey, Brandon!” I hear, and I can’t mistake the voice of my dad calling out to me. I see him across the field, by the barn, but he’s not alone. There’s two people. I recognize them, but only one of the two I don’t dislike. The Ferguson family is here: father and daughter.

“Emily, go to the stables. We’ll leave it here for today,” I order.

“Ah, fine.” She trots off in one direction and I take another.

A frown crosses my face while I cross the field slowly, ensuring my horse is kept at a lacking trot. I’m in no rush to arrive. Why should I? Meredith and her dad are here.

I never thought I'd see her in the flesh this close to home after what happened. Our bitter rivalry at the market in the town center is borderline malicious, but for her to turn up on my homeland riles me.

We meet face to face. I have no care for her father—a weak man, truly. But he's here anyway and he's doing business with my father.

The business they have here today is simply to sell a horse to my dad. I don't trust it. What's the catch? What possible reason do they have to sell us just this *one* horse seemingly out of the blue? Is it extra cash? Is that it?

My dad is too trusting, handling business, the haggling, and finally, the deal. He gets a good deal, and the horse offered up to us is a rare breed. In the grand scheme of things, you've fetched a fair price, Dad.

Then there is Meredith, as stoically smug and cold as ever.

“Who's that girl?” she asks, tone sly, voice low.

“None of your business,” I answer calmly. There's no need for conflict. Fighting won't solve anything.

“If you say so...” Meredith takes her leave, and I'd follow to stop her, because I know for a fact that Emily is coming this way, Helen having been sheltered in the stables for now.

I'm dragged away by my father, his attempts to keep me focused on the business aspect of this way of life failing him. I know all this. I know how to handle business and why I must.

But I can't help but give Meredith's father the cold shoulder, and my own father a distant shrug.

Business is business. That's fine. I just want the contention to pass. Someone else has other ideas.

I overhear, for a split second, Meredith confronting Emily.

We need to finish this up and finish it now. The deal is made. The jolly atmosphere of the two fathers slips away as it's clear the bad blood between us has surfaced.

The fathers do their thing, concluding something that could've been done without interfering with Emily's lessons for today. I understand my dad's message, but it's too late.

As I intervene, ready to save Emily from such troublesome introductions, Meredith says it.

"You'll never get him."

If she wanted a conflict, she's got it. And to think the worst of it all was taking on Emily. Instead, she's become something of a strange delight, and then... *then* there is Meredith.

"What did you say?" I snap, and sneer at her. She meets me proudly, not a shred of doubt in her.

"You heard me," Meredith retorts. "Interesting to see how I've been replaced with some city girl. Is she as good an employee as I was, or...?"

"Her name is Emily," I find myself saying, going against everything I once thought.

“What is going on?” Emily asks, confused. “I hear a lot about you Meredith, but...”

“Oh, you hear a lot about me, do you?” Meredith turns on me, her every physical trait suggesting nothing but malice for me and me alone. “What kind of things does he say?”

“Uh, nothing really? He doesn’t really like to talk much when it comes to anything about him.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him.”

I step in. “Enough of this. Let our fathers handle business. You’ve no reason to be here, Meredith.”

“I’m here to learn and help.”

“You’re here to scope us out. Stop playing nice.”

She smiles wryly. “I never was. I can be much worse.”

“Oh, stop it.”

Emily pipes up, quietly declaring, “I’m going to go and wait in the stables with Helen.”

Meredith gasps. “Ha, oh, I remember her. Great old horse. She’s getting on now, isn’t she? Years catching up to her. Shame no one will ever ride her, so don’t bother barking up that tree. Mary was the last and she’ll be the last.”

Emily, dumbfounded, looks questioningly at me. That look on her face begs explanation of all this. I think she’s caught on that I never gave Meredith the opportunities I’m giving her. Then she withdraws a sharp breath, smiles so wide I can’t help but shiver, and says aloud, “Brandon, I think I’ll go and

prepare Helen on my own this time and take a trip around the ranch?”

Meredith flinches. The hidden, sarcastic dagger in Emily’s voice has left its mark.

Not so long ago, Emily and I were at each other’s throats. Seeing Meredith again has taught me one thing—Emily isn’t so bad, after all.

Chapter 9

Emily

“Looks like we won that battle,” I say once Meredith finally leaves. She couldn’t figure out what to say. This is the one time I must give my silent applause to my “city slicker” charms—Meredith can’t handle the sass or the sarcasm. Poor country girl is all riled up.

“It was,” Brandon says in disbelief, as if he can’t quite catch on to what just happened. He doesn’t know it yet, but I expect quite the explanation from him on whatever happened just now. I’m still lost, but context alone is enough for me to connect some dots.

“And the spoils of our victory are over there,” Brandon says, and as much as I want to say that *technically* it isn’t a spoil of anyone’s victory, I don’t have the heart to ruin our first proper bonding moment.

John approaches and instead of Meredith’s father is a patchy white and dark brown horse. It’s tall, strong, and rowdy by the looks of it. Brandon seems fascinated, unable to help his surprise.

“The business deal was you purchasing a Galineers Cob?” he says, unable to contain his exclamation.

His father chuckles and hands his son the reins. “Beauty, isn’t she? I reckon she’d be a great match for your stallion, aye?”

“What?” Brandon’s eyes widen. “I mean... really?”

His father nods. “It’ll be a lot to talk about but seeing as we’ve got near-generational horses for a generational family, we might as well keep our own personal bloodline going.”

“Dad, that’s...” Brandon doesn’t finish what he wanted to say. I expect he was going to say something along the lines of “weird” or “unnecessary,” but I think it’s kind of sweet. “Wait, am I in charge of her?”

“Yes? Who better?” John retorts in kind.

Brandon huffs. “As if I didn’t already have enough on my plate—”

“Stop it, boy. You’ll be fine. Soon enough, my legacy will be yours.” John gestures to the world around him—the ranch. “Now, I got more business to come. I need your help. It’s about your ma and mine’s business trip out of town in the coming weeks.”

“What do you need me for?”

“I need to run something by ya.”

Brandon nods, and goes to follow, when he realizes he’d be dragging the new, unnamed horse along with him. “Er... Emily?”

“Yes?”

He hands me the reins. “Seeing as you’ll be here for who knows how long anyway, you can look after her. You’ll be fine.” He stops, looks around, and catches sight of my brother and father walking toward the house nearby from the cattle fields. “Hey, Michael! Help Emily, will you?”

Michael comes running, ready to do what he must, and then I'm left alone with this new horse. A horse that looks at me with big, auburn-colored eyes and... is it judging me? Does this horse even have a name?

“What’s her name?” Michael asks as we head toward the stables to get her settled and introduced to what will be her new family.

“Hasn’t got one.”

Michael looks at me, perplexed. “Ah.” He furrows his brows. “All right, then, let’s get this unnamed horse settled.”

We work together, helping introduce unnamed horse to her new home. And, as we go, and chat, and he learns about my day with Brandon, the conversations shift, changing into the topic that is Brandon himself.

“I know he can be... well, you know how he can be,” Michael reasons, leaning against the wooden fencing splitting off the unnamed horse’s pen from the next. He looks around, as if searching for the right words. “Brandon’s not great with all the social stuff. You can blame his childhood for that. Even as kids—teens, even—he struggled. He had distant family, and his parents had a lot of issues as well. We were loved deeply by our parents. His... well, it’s been a bumpy ride for him. It’s only really since Sophia that things have perked up for him and changed.”

I listen. I learn. Michael doesn’t give me the details. He doesn’t know the full depth. But I have a nagging question. “How about Meredith? What’s that about?”

“Oh, her? Just some past employee.”

“What happened? They look like they hate each other.”

“Well, she caused him *a lot* of grief. Just ask him about it.”

I look away. It’s not worth arguing. If only you know how that is much easier said than done, Michael. Getting Brandon to properly be open about himself is like banging my head on a brick wall.

“Okay, then,” I continue, stroking the unnamed horse’s mane. She seems to like it. I think she’s taking to me nicely. “What about Sophia’s mom?”

Michael’s silence isn’t a great start. He takes a breath, as if to stall, and then, he responds lowly, both in tone and expression, any form of energetic body language gone. “I don’t know if I can really tell you, but... as you can guess, Sophia’s mom isn’t around.”

“I know that. Did she leave him?”

“No, not quite in the way you’re thinking.”

“Cheating? Or...”

“Well, she’s not around because she died a long time ago, Emily.”

“That would explain why she’s not around anymore. Sophia must find that difficult not having her mom here—”

“She never knew her.” Michael looks away. “I don’t really know the details. We grew distant around that point and even

then, I wasn't a great friend. I wasn't there when he needed me most. That probably didn't help his trust issues either."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means Sophia's mom died during childbirth, sis."

My mouth hangs open for a moment. "H-how?"

"Honestly, I don't really know. He doesn't tell me anymore than what he wants me to know. I've never really learned. I just know the facts."

"That sounds like Brandon. Never giving anything away."

He looks away, defeated. "Exactly."

"I bet it hasn't been easy."

"No, not at all. I think that's why he is supportive of Dad."

His words make a switch flip in my head. "Oh my God, now I... I never knew that... If I did, I would've thought of it all differently and... now I feel like a massive—"

"No swearing, remember. That's a big no-no for him and his family, ya know?"

"I know." I look deeply into the unnamed horse's eyes, and all I wish is that I had known more. Maybe, just maybe, our first impression would've been much, *much* different than what it was.

"You might as well name her."

"Isn't that Brandon's job?"

"Nah. She's unnamed. Go for it. He won't mind."

“Okay...” Really? Should I? I mean, this is a beautiful horse, and... I’m sorry Brandon, I think I have a good one. A name you can’t argue.

“So?” Michael insists.

“I have a name.”

Chapter 10

Emily

Whoa, nearly died there! That was close! Too close! But I'm going to be just fine. Focus. Keep your eyes peeled. Ignore the beating of your heart. Ignore the chaos in your head. Just look ahead, scan for danger, and swerve, left, right, and again. Ignore the wind in your hair, against your face, cheeks, and teeth, and ignore the bright, wide smile, teeth and all as you race on horseback. On Esme, my horse, my pride and joy these past few days. Our bond is inseparable; she's taken to me fully. She trusts me. And, when we're together, we have this connection. Like we understand one another. But she's young and reckless and I'm inexperienced, and this rural path with its twists, turns, and foliage is one massive accident waiting to happen!

But not yet. Not until we've tried to overtake Brandon and his stallion. Not until we've proven we are better, that, even despite all our pitfalls, we can win!

We're going to win this race.

It's going to be a close one.

Too close. Too close!

"Hey, careful!" I shout, bobbing up and down with greater speed, an ache in my hips and a soreness in my thighs from overuse, and Esme begins to slow. Come on, Esme, please. A little longer. We've almost done it. Almost. Almost—

“You be careful!” Brandon roars as we almost collide, and he swiftly turns, and gallops ahead, and Esme surrenders, unable to match his horse’s pacing. We gave it our best shot. We really did.

I stroke Esme’s mane, and I speak to her soothingly, telling her that it is okay. It isn’t her fault. We did the best that we could.

The rural path comes to an end, and we cross into uncharted territory. He waits ahead of me, his smugness evident in aura alone. We don’t speak of our defeat. Esme and I tried our best, and no matter how I rationalize it, the truth is that I’m new to this, Esme is new to this, and we just haven’t got that same synergy that Brandon has with his horse, James.

“One of these days,” I warn him, and he shrugs off my threats. He knows I am a natural, and these past few days, in between work around the ranch, I spend most of my free time training with Esme. “Sooner or later, we’ll catch up to you.”

“We’ll see, if I give you the chance, that is.”

“You better, or it is all for nothing!” My voice is silenced by his hand, as if we’re soldiers in enemy territory. Thinking about it, we kind of are. He’s warned me in advance that this neighbor of theirs is close friends with Meredith’s father, and lo and behold, who is at the scene of the crime when we arrive?

Meredith, grumpy as anything, hides her defeated look. She crosses her arms and puts on quite the show, but it isn’t enough. Not as we gently trot by, making ourselves known at

an intersection on the rural path, and finally, the destination—a crossing between three fields and on the east side, a cow had gotten its head wedged in the fencing.

“I’m just too scared I’ll hurt her,” Brandon’s neighbor admits, an older woman by the name of Freya. I’m not entirely sure she’s American, her slightest smidge of a foreign accent betraying her.

“Did you even bring tools?” Meredith barks at Brandon. “Don’t go wasting time, will you?”

Honestly, even if I am just here to, well, be here with Brandon—mainly having an excuse to ride—I don’t understand her. Why is she here? Meredith has no reason to be. I am already aware that Brandon’s dad was only called for help because Freya had tried turning to the closer help first and that hadn’t worked. Meredith failed. That’s why we’re here, on Freya’s farm, and as neighbors, Brandon will complete his act of goodwill.

The heartiness and friendliness out here is touching. There’s this sense of warmth and niceness and it feels real. Genuine. Not quite like the city. The city teaches different things. I mean, nothing is ever set, either, but there’s no denying how much more dangerous the city can be.

Then again, I have nearly had my fair share of being stampeded by a cow swarm, too, so... yeah. There’s that.

“There’s no way you just did it like that?” Meredith says, unable to hold back the surprise in her voice. I can’t help but stare at her. She’s shocked. She can’t believe it. As if it didn’t

just happen. Honestly, I wasn't looking myself. I have no idea. But Brandon did it and Freya is over the moon that her singular, stray cow is free at last. From the looks of things, Freya can be at peace, the cow, as odd as it is, can go back with the rest of its grazing herd, and Meredith can, well, continue to silently show her spite.

"I still don't understand how she got stuck, but all is well that ends well!" Freya exclaims and shakes Brandon's hand. The goodwill between them is shared, and Meredith, left on the side, is ignored. Freya does extend her hand and jolly nature toward her anyway, but Meredith has none of it. She won't accept it. I don't even think she can fathom tolerating the idea of accepting Brandon won.

It makes sense, now, seeing the way Meredith acts. I understand her intentions. I didn't before, but now they are so clear, I'm worried as to how I didn't pick up on them in the first place. I think it is because I have a tough time reading people out here. People in the country are just different in many ways. Mannerisms. Speech. Customs. So much is similar and yet so different all at once.

One thing that is no different is human envy. A natural thing to feel. And Meredith is all about that right now. She can't even hide it.

"Did you just stick around hoping to see Brandon fail?" I ask, and she's caught off-guard, made a fool in Freya's presence, and Brandon doesn't bother to say a thing. The conflict comes and goes, and whatever tension was barely kept

from tipping over in a full-blown war by Freya being stuck in the middle ends. There is no dangerous crossfire. The conflict dims, and ceases.

Brandon turns away, his work is done.

“We’re done here,” he tells me, and bids Freya farewell, and I do as well. We mount our horses and take our leave. And as we go, Meredith is left looking like a disgruntled child, her spite turning into a seething rage that, sadly, must just be let go. She hasn’t got a choice. Other than to, well, watch me leave with her old boss.

“You nearly made yourself the target there,” Brandon says. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing. You had a job to do. She was getting in the way.”

“And on my nerves.”

“Mine too.”

“She couldn’t have backed off for like two minutes, could she?”

I shake my head and steer Esme away from the scene. “Nope.”

“At least I solved it quickly. I almost feel bad for her.”

I almost scoff. “Why?”

“Well, she must feel embarrassed, humiliated.”

I look at him like he is crazy. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t. But I’m not cruel.”

I can't help but say, "Just cold."

"Careful now, I've only just started to warm up to you."

"I wish I could say the same about Sophia." Now, that I hadn't meant to say. That slipped out, and it shouldn't have. That's the hardly subtle, but subtle, city girl in me taking my hardly subtle shot.

"Hm?"

He's looking at me intently now, so there's no avoiding this, and considering we've got to journey all the way back to the ranch together, we've got plenty of time for chitchat. "She's distant with me. I think it's because you're not spending as much time with her lately."

"That's... a bit blunt?"

"It's just a guess."

"A very specific one."

"Well, you do spend a lot of your free time teaching me now?"

"I'm busy. You're new. I have to teach you the ropes, don't I?"

"Sure." He sure got defensive over that. "Whatever you say, boss. Just make sure to find time for her, yeah?"

"I know. Speaking of Sophia, she's actually got a big school trip coming up."

"Oh, really?" This feels familiar. Whatever. "Where is she going?"

“She’s going to the big city on the coast.”

“Yeah, duh! Which city?”

“It’s only because ‘big city’ is how I’ve had to describe it to her. It’s Virginia Beach, chosen purely for the beaches, which is what Sophia’s teacher tells me. They thought picking a city on the coast with ‘beach’ in its title would excite all these kids who’ve only ever seen the sea in movies. We don’t exactly have any beaches around here!”

How ironic. I laugh at his joke first, and when the moment has come and gone, I take my chance. “That’s where I’m from.”

He looks at me like I am crazy. “Yeah, I know. It’s not a big deal.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to say it is ironic! Anyway, I got ya. Is she excited?”

“I’d say so. I just hope I have the time to go with her. It’s partly a guardian-child thing as well, so…”

I offer him hope in a smile. “You can only try?”

He nods thoughtfully. “I can only try.”

And while you do that, Brandon, I’m going to try to not take a page out of Meredith’s book here by not getting jealous of your eight-year-old daughter. She’s going to be visiting the coast—the city—my home.

Chapter 11

Brandon

I can't believe what I just heard. I nearly dropped my spoon into my bowl of porridge. What a waste of porridge that would have been. Did Emily really come into the room and say that? Is this a dream? For one, not only is she fully dressed, but she's *already* been out and about working on the ranch, and *I'm* the one who is up late today *and* not fully dressed?

“When did I end up being the one who wasn't looking forward to work?” I tell her, and I know she'll have a witty reply. I feel like I've got a good reason though. Sophia has been a handful lately. I feel like Emily's warnings on Freya's farm have come back to haunt me. I should've listened.

That settles it. Today is a day off. I'm a grown man. I will work it out. My dad will have to accept that. The thing is that I need to figure out how to go about it. I know Michael is going to be busy as he and Steven planned to do something today. So that leaves the city girl. Now that is its own issues because I'll be asking *her* for help, and I feel like she's going to probably hold that over my head. Then again, I might not have much in the way of a choice here, which is fine.

Okay, here goes... “Emily,” I say, grabbing her attention, and I leave my porridge for one minute to focus on her. “I need to ask you for a favor today.”

“Oh?” Her eyes widen. As expected, she's already turning the wheels in her head that, for once, I am the one needing her

help. It has to be done for the sake of Sophia. There goes my pride to be a good dad. “What is it?”

“Will you help me?”

“Only once I know what you’re asking. Nothing weird, I hope.”

“No.” I shake my head. I can’t believe she said that. “You’re ready for work, and you’re looking forward to it, and since—”

“I want lunch!” a shrill voice shouts, and bounding into the room is my little pride and joy.

“It’s only breakfast,” I tell her. “Go and make yourself some —”

“No, I want lunch.”

“But—”

“Early lunch.”

This little pride and joy sure knows how to make me question everything in my life. “Sophia...”

“Just let the girl have her lunch,” Emily vouches, and gives a wink to Sophia, only, she doesn’t quite catch on to what exactly Emily is doing. Sophia has never had anyone wink at her, so it probably comes across as a weird one-eye blinking twitch.

“Yes, Daddy, but I want her to make it!”

I could almost laugh. But I’ve put a spoonful of porridge in my mouth and now Emily can reap what she sowed by taking

Sophia's side. Now, the demand for lunch falls on Emily's shoulders.

"Also, Daddy, Grandpa needs your help today."

"Oh, does he?"

"He says to go now. It's urgent."

"Urgent? What is... oh, urgent. With what?"

Sophia, one step ahead, clambers about the kitchen, looking for supplies to whip up a sandwich. "Big market trip."

Of course it is. Why does he need me? Well, it isn't like he's here for me to argue my case. I'm done with this porridge anyway now that it's gone cold. Getting up, I make a move, and as I leave, I stop and look at Emily. "The favor I was going to ask has changed. Can you look after Sophia?"

"Yeah, sure. What was the original favor?"

"Ironically, it was to take over my ranch duties for the day so I could spend time with Sophia."

"Ironic."

"Yeah." I leave, joining Mom and Dad in his little office, and what else could it be but handling their business calls? If I didn't know any better, I'd say he is really starting to try and prepare me to take on all the responsibilities around here...

One phone call leads to two, and then to three, and I hear down the hall how happy Sophia is that Emily is making her lunch. It sounds like Sophia is having her concoct the best sandwich possible exactly to her tastes.

My parents are out and about doing their thing. Michael and Steven drop by for some water and go on their way. And I'm here, taking these calls, handling contracts, transactions, and they're all important. I wouldn't say boring. It tests me. I'm not the best talker. I've never been great with my words. Maybe that's why you want me doing this, don't you, Dad?

The next call comes in. I take it. "Hello, this is the—"

"Brandon?"

I pause. That voice. Her voice. "Meredith?"

"Where's your dad?"

"Out on business."

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, because he's out on business, I'm in charge."

"Right."

I spin in my father's chair. This just got serious. "What do you want?"

"What do you mean 'what do I want?'"

"You're calling for a reason."

"For business, Brandon."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. The horse your dad bought. My dad wants the transaction finished and accounted for."

"Right." I'm a fool. I can't believe I let this get personal. It's all just business, nothing more. But I can't shake off this

tension now. Not one bit. We talk, we handle the transaction, everything is accounted for, and all the while, I'm enduring the awkwardness. She seems fine. She talks like nothing is wrong at all. Like she doesn't spend all her time trying to spite her old boss.

"There. Done," she declares, her voice booming through my dad's office phone.

"Good doing business with you," I say, because it was, not because it was her.

"And you, Brandon. How's Emily?"

"Being nice to Sophia."

"And how's Sophia?"

And now this is all wrong. This is personal. The tension returns. "She's fine. I've got to go, Meredith. There're more calls to be done."

"Okay, okay. Good luck!"

I wait a second. I expect her to end the call, but she doesn't. Five seconds pass. Is she expecting me to?

"Can we talk, Brandon?"

I end the call. And, from the kitchen, I hear that the wondrous sandwich of unknown fillings and design is complete. Sophia doesn't move on to eating it. From what I hear, their situation is as tense as mine. I almost wish my door and theirs had been fully closed and shut.

“I don’t like how much time you spend with my daddy,” I overhear Sophia say, as direct as ever, and she’s no good at being subtle either. I suppose just like me.

“Sophia, would you prefer it if I spent less time with your daddy?”

“No, that’s okay. You make him happy.”

My heart wrenches. She’s sweet, my girl is.

“Well, he’s a good boss. He helps me a lot.”

“You used to hate him,” Sophia says aloud. Ouch, “hate,” really, Emily?

“I wouldn’t say hate, Sophia, that’s a strong word.”

“Daddy didn’t like you either.”

“Well...”

“He likes you now.”

Well, she’s not wrong. Emily has grown on me since I started teaching her how to ride a horse, and even more after she named the new horse Esme, which, as much as it deeply *frustrates* the life out of me, I will accept. I must accept it! She’s gone and named it after her deceased mother—may she rest in peace—and I wasn’t even consulted.

The argument I had with Michael behind closed doors is one I won’t forget. To me, it isn’t *her* horse, and it doesn’t make any sense, anyway. There is no logic to it. She and her family are living here temporarily. Why should *she* get to name a horse she now has a personal bond to that, and if I

broke that bond, I look like the bad guy? I would've preferred to do it myself, but after Michael stepped in and explained the context of how Emily named her after their mother, how could I? I mean, I did fight back, at first. And then Michael hit me with a hard truth—I nearly got her killed due to my recklessness on her first day on the ranch. He made me do that so *we* as *friends* were even.

Ugh, so complicated... Whatever. Esme is “hers” for now.

“I’m trying my best... And Sophia, how about we spend more time together? Would that help?”

“I don’t know. All you ever want to do is the horse poop.”

“Okay, we can do more than shovel, uh, that. Would you like that?”

“Yes, please.”

I smile. I can’t stop smiling. Sophia has made a friend. I almost don’t want to walk back in. Their moment comes and goes, and, from what I hear, Sophia sounds like she’s starting to look up to Emily. Maybe I’ll just close the door and relax for five minutes. They can have their fun, and I’ll have my moment of peace.

Chapter 12

Emily

“You’re putting me in charge?” I have to ask Brandon. Why me? What have I done to earn this? Is it some kind of trick? Reward? I don’t really know what to say.

“You’re in charge today. What would you like to do?”

“But why? Is this a test? You know all I am going to want to do is work with the horses.”

“That’s fine,” he tells me, and smugly smiles. Surely, this is some trick? “Just remember, you are in charge of not just yourself, but me, your brother, and your dad today.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“It’s a test. I’m surprised you didn’t see it coming. Two days ago, your dad was in charge, and we worked with the pigs by his choice. Then Michael wanted to work with the tractors yesterday. Now, today is your choice.”

When he puts it like that, I’m surprised I didn’t see that coming. At first, I thought it might have been because of how I’ve been spending more time with Sophia ever since I made her those sandwiches. I’d have never eaten them myself, but she seemed happy with her creations, thought of by her, and put into existence by me.

It's a nice day, and since Brandon's parents are busy preparing for the market in town, there's less work to be done around the farm. The ranch is peaceful. As much as I'd love to have a calm day, I want to ride Esme, but she could use a break and Brandon gives his warnings in advance that, ideally, we need to give some love and care to the colts.

Now, I'm in charge, and we have plenty of colts shackled down (not literally) who could use some freedom. Honestly, the area of the stables they're kept in isn't quite like the pens for Esme. Obviously, James, Brandon's horse, named after his late grandfather, is among the best.

So, where do we go from here? No one has ever given me this kind of control before, and the less in charge I am, the more boisterous the men around me become. Without something to put their mind to, they joke, and laugh, and play. Considering my dad is in his mid-fifties and Michael and Brandon are thirty, I would've expected this kind of immaturity from Sophia.

Then again, it *is* nice to see them all acting the way they are. It's good to have a childlike side sometimes. Many weeks ago, we were all clashing with very different mindsets. Things are changing. Walls are being broken down and we're all getting closer because of it, and who else to thank but my brother?

How it happened, why it happened, and when it happened all have bad answers. It all stems back to you, Mom, but... I think you'd be happy to see how far we've come. I think you'd gush with glee if you could see Dad right now. I really do.

You were gone too soon, Mom.

“So, what are we doing today?” I find myself asking Brandon, who shoots me a wary look.

“You decide.”

“Well, it has to be something to do with the colts, ideally.”

They all look at me blankly.

“What?” I ask them.

“Darling, that’s your choice?” my dad insists.

“I don’t know what though...” I guess, if I am looking at the whole “colts are stuck in worse pens and could use some freedom” idea, then I should just let them out to enjoy the fields for the day? They’d appreciate it far more as it would be unique and different from their normal routine.

“Remember, you’re in charge,” Michael says. “So don’t go looking to Brandon for things for us all to do. That’s too easy.”

“It’s what you tried to do when it was your turn,” Brandon intervenes. “I’m giving you this chance of leadership for a reason—it’s fun and different from the norm.”

“I understand that, but you’ve put me in charge. I appreciate it, I really do, but my mind is blank.”

“Don’t think too much into it. Just look around, find something, and act on it.”

Brandon’s advice goes a long way. I think I’ve made up my mind. We set to work. The four of us work as a team. We move the panels around and open up the pens to try and let the

colts get out and enjoy some air that isn't the dusty barn. It takes time, but one by one, we get them out, and we adjust the panels until the colts have the freedom to come and go as they please.

We're plastered with sweat from the heavy lifting, rushing about, and control we must maintain over young, hasty colts, but they enjoy the sun and fresh air and sprint to their hearts' content. It makes for a magical sight, honestly. I didn't think I'd ever get to see anything quite like this.

So much has changed. One day I hated coming here. I didn't like the smells, the sights, the noise. This way of life was not one I fancied. Now I'm living it, enjoying it.

"Emily, can you get that end for me?" Michael asks while Dad is busy getting emotional for the umpteenth time that I named the new horse Esme. Now what does my brother need my help with that he can't do himself? From the looks of things, he has good reason to ask for help. He's trying to lift a part of a gate that was loose. It needs to be put into the proper place before we can fix it. When did that even happen?

The colts might've caused some damage in their chaotic happiness. Either way, I'll help lift it—

I gasp, and seethe, and a hot, red pain shoots through my palm. And when I look, I understand the burning as well as the new, dull ache as my blood pulses and pools from a fresh cut.

"Are you okay?" Michael asks, and his concern gets the attention of my dad, and his worrying snatches Brandon's attention to me.

“You’ve cut yourself,” Brandon tells me as if I didn’t already know.

“Have I?” I ask, and we share a small laugh. Rather than getting annoyed with me, he actually joined in on the joke? I feel like I don’t even know him anymore. Or at least, the Brandon I once knew.

We move to one side, and he sits me down on an old wooden chair, creaky as anything as I try to contain my small whimpers of pain. He cleans the gash and mops up the blood, and once it is done and he gets a proper look, I see it isn’t as bad as I once thought. The location makes it a tricky one to treat.

The tending of the cut is different entirely. He grabs a first aid kit and sets to work, the two of us finding a sense of privacy as my brother and Dad head out to the field to keep an eye on the colts.

Brandon keeps me steady, deftly working his way around the cut, providing a touch of deep care I haven’t seen from him. This man, so serious and blunt, jokes with me, smiles with me, and now, he looks at my cut like it is his worst enemy, and he’ll do everything in his power to mend it.

And... what did I just feel? That’s a first. Something in me. Stirring. Something new. It was in my heart, like a flutter, or a skip in my step, except it was a heartbeat and now, that flutter becomes a faint sense of butterflies in my stomach.

I’m seeing Brandon in a new light. This cowboy-like rancher has made me feel something I haven’t before, and it is

all as he cares for me in silence, quietly working away until I am cleaned, bandaged, and plastered. His job is done, and when he moves away, proud of his work, I can't help but miss his hands, and the way they felt on mine.

"I'm so sorry to have caused such a fuss," I can't help but say as I feel guilty.

"No, you're fine." He chuckles lightly as he steps away, taking the first aid kit with him and tidying up its contents.

"I feel like a bad employee."

"You made a mistake."

"I know, but..."

"Hey, relax. If it makes you feel better, Meredith was much worse."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Say... there was one time she particularly got on my nerves. She had to have something her way. She wouldn't listen to my instructions. It wasn't carelessness that caused a problem, it was arrogance that she knew what she was doing, like she was trying to show off." He closes the first aid box, finished putting it all back together. "And then Sophia got hurt as a result. It wasn't anything serious. But it is the principle." He looks me dead in the eye. "Worse was that she was ignorant when I confronted her. You're nothing like her. You're willing to learn, and try, and you've got a good heart under all the bratty parts of you in there."

I want to make a witty remark. I want to say anything. But I can't. I can only take in everything he said and try to not feel what I feel right now. I want to cover it up, hide it away, and accept his compliment—a compliment I don't think he realizes he has even given me.

“Look at us talking like friends, eh?” he says at last when I don't reply, and he doesn't seem to mind. “You're a good employee, Emily. Luckily, you're also a good person.”

Stop it, Brandon. Stop saying things. Stop saying the right things every time. Please.

“Meredith came to this farm looking for the job. She wanted it. And she wanted nothing more than to work under me.”

I lick my lips, look at this handiwork, even if I still feel the ache in my palm, and answer him before he thinks I'm being rude, “I'm guessing you didn't get along well?”

“Not at all.”

“And her not being good with Sophia doesn't help.”

“Ha, no. She wasn't nice to Sophia.”

I nod, and stand up, the old chair letting out a pained sound. “What happened between you two in the end?”

“I fired her. I didn't even wait for my dad's permission. It caused some trouble at the time since he was friends with her dad. Not like ours, but still friends, you know? And she went and took everything I taught her to her parents' farm, which wasn't in competition with ours because they didn't do what

we do. And then they ended up starting their own cattle business. So, it is difficult sometimes.”

“I can’t believe she did that. Why would she do that?”

“Spite, I reckon. I don’t get how a woman like her comes along, begs me for a job, flatters me, butters me up, and when she has everything she could possibly want, she has to go and ruin it the way that she did. I almost think she was looking for attention.”

I stall. Even as we walk back to the same pen gate that caused all this chatter between us to begin with, I can’t help but think her spite wasn’t because of how their work relationship ended, but because she was looking for attention from *you*, Brandon. Maybe she liked you? You were her crush. The way she talks, looks, and acts around you. Yes, there’s spite there, and the bad blood runs deep, but the original motivation might’ve been love. Maybe it was the only reason she went out of her way to get the job.

You didn’t reciprocate, I’m guessing. She got nervous and tried too hard. Probably envious of Sophia, or flat out rejected her because she would never be hers. And now, your bad blood is business-driven. She wants to show she is better. Better without you.

I’m a city girl, Brandon, and you’re a bit thick when it comes to the ladies. But I think, now that I’ve got some context, I can see right through Meredith to her core.

Chapter 13

Brandon

Emily looks at me with an expression on her face unlike anything I have ever seen before. It's truly a one-of-a-kind look. All because I've decided to put her in control of a stuck tractor.

"I'm going to guess you're not happy about this, are you?" I ask, and the returned look of "what do you think" is more than enough to go off. She's not happy. I'm glad we've established that. If it wasn't for the townsfolk all around us, looking on in awe and curiosity at what is to come, then I wouldn't do this.

"I've been put into a difficult predicament," I tell her bluntly. "So, we're doing this now."

"Surely your dad or mine or—"

"No," I tell her. "You have to be the one to do this."

Emily shoots me, yet again, another look of absolute worry. She doesn't believe that she is the one to handle this, but because of certain issues in our circumstances, I really haven't been left with a choice. The townsfolk bustle around us, eager and excited to see us get this stuck tractor out of the mud. If it wasn't for the sudden burst of heavy rainfall, this would've never happened, and we could've all been eating lunch right about now. But no, the challenge ahead of us demands a fight, and with so many onlookers, this really is a here and now type of situation.

I feel a hand tug my jacket. With a ferocious glare, Emily seethes at me with a level of cold honesty I haven't felt in quite some time. "Brandon, I don't know how to work a tractor." She makes that point, clear as the day around us, again and again, but it makes no difference.

"That's fine, we'll do a on the job lesson, yeah?" I tell her, and I somewhat have to focus on not falling back out of the tractor and at the same time, make sure she's comfortable and aware of what she is doing. "You've got this, just trust me," I reassure, but even the slightest of a hiccup in my voice reveals everything. Really, she caught me out the second I tried to use a nicer tone with her. She knows if I play nice, it is because I am doubting the problem ahead of me.

"I've got this," she tells herself, and she falls into the zone. As if, around us, the noise of the town, the chatter, the nervousness of the townsfolk to have this issue solved so the ruined land can be fixed, and finally, the tractor's engine itself doesn't exist.

"We'll be a team on this one, okay?" I say, and gently pat her shoulder. She doesn't spare me a glance. Her eyes are fixated on the tractor's wheel. I see a nervousness to her expression. She steels herself anyway, ready to take on the challenge.

"Can't be any different than a car, right?" she murmurs, and finally looks at me for some much-needed reassurance. I see her little grin. I know she wants a humorous reply. I'll give her what she needs. She deserves it for stepping up to the

challenge, against the pressure of the onlookers, and especially myself.

If I had it my way, I wouldn't have put her in this situation. But it doesn't matter now. What is about to happen must happen, or else reputation itself is at stake.

"Exactly." I force a smile, and she forces one back. We're on the same page, her and me. We can do this.

"It's not that difficult," I say, and guide her through everything she needs to know, one step after the other until she's as good as I am—I hope—but Emily still confidently relays everything back to me. Step by step, she repeats exactly what I have taught her, and this time around, when she holds the wheel, and she stares into it, as if it is some kind of monstrous abyss—she's not nervous. She's ready.

I'm proud of you, Emily. I've had no choice but to put you into the seat of a stuck tractor, and you haven't got a clue of how to use it. But here you are, probably still not sure, but you have the information you need to hopefully get you from point A to point B. Experience or not, this is just a part of life.

"Thank you," I say, and I'm not sure why. She tucks her hair behind her ear, licks her lips, and looks at me with such a deep affection in her gaze. I don't normally pick up on these things.

"No, thank you," she counters, a sweetness to her voice, and I am reminded all over again why she is nothing like Meredith.

"You stepped up," I tell her, and prepare to leave as my dad's voice rattles down my ear that we need to get a move on.

And we will. “One minute,” I shout back at him, and he nods, and I nod at him, and I focus. “Emily, you’re doing me a massive favor.”

“Think nothing of it,” she says, and shakes her head. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“I know—”

“All because of Meredith’s rumors. That’s some nasty stuff.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“So, she was your employee...?” she double-checks.

I nod. We’re running out of time. “Yes, Meredith was once my employee, and she’s gone and flipped everything anyone ever knew or suspected about us. I’m not sure what drove her over the edge, but her hissing like some kind of snake about how I mistreated her has certainly made an impact. The reputation I had was tarnished.”

“But you’re doing okay?” she points out.

I grunt. “Somewhat. It’s been two and a half years since that happened.”

Her mouth drops and she nearly fully turns to face me. “What? That long!”

“Yeah, and back then, it left a sour taste for many locally.”

“I bet...”

“Hurry up!” my dad shouts.

“We’re getting there!” I shout back and turn back to Emily, who stares at me with such vibrant, chocolate-colored eyes. “So, let’s get a move on: it almost caused enough of a fuss that a rift between our fathers occurred. But enough time has passed since then.”

“Must’ve been awkward, right?” she asks, and prepares herself for the task ahead.

“Oh, yeah, you have no idea. Considering I’ve been around for three decades, since I was a boy, and these people know me, you’d think no one would be as conflicted as everyone was. I like to believe that time healed certain issues and the reality of it all is that no one truly believes her. Yet, with your name beginning to spread as well, it does raise new questions.”

“How so?”

I place a hand on her shoulder. She jolts. “It pulls exactly that rumor into question. That same point. Did I mistreat Meredith? Perhaps I was harsh, but I didn’t do anything that she wasn’t deserving off. She was a right piece of work, causing nothing but trouble in the end, and for what? She’s my rival, and now, she’s trying to play the victim.”

Emily slowly nods. “So... she does what she does as her way of fighting back?”

“Basically. I mean, it was already odd enough that her family started up their business so quickly. I think it was only because her dad already had a farm doing other business and

had good contacts when he decided to open up shop on our turf.”

“And that, Brandon, is why the circumstances demand that I do this. I can’t stop her, not when Meredith is in that crowd, watching, waiting, for me to fail, and for you to get angry, or something?”

I smile. “It’s wrong. I’m not that kind of person. Lies, all of it.”

“Yes, all of it!” she cheers.

We smile at one another, and our gazes linger one second longer than it ever has before...

Now, I’ll prove you wrong, Meredith. Our past is complicated, and we have bad blood, but pulling Emily into our disagreements has only made everything worse.

I’m entrusting a heavy amount of responsibility to Emily, and she’s willing to do so, to take on this challenge, and show that Meredith was the issue—not me.

“Do you need a reminder of what to do when I give the signal?” I ask, and Emily gives me nothing more than a smile, and two solid thumbs up in the air. That’s it. That’s all I needed. “Let’s do this.” I hop off, pass by Meredith and spare her nothing more than a smile, because at this point, I feel like that kind of acknowledgment will rile her up even more.

“Are we ready?” Dad asks, and I give him the greenlight to begin. This tractor got stuck because of Michael, and now his sister is going to fix this. All this surrounding fuss is going to

end right now. My dad agreed to solve this issue, and to solve the rumors, and the source of it all is Meredith, but the answer, well, that's the woman in the seat up there.

The whole family has headed into town, and now we witness what is going to define our reputation and family moving forward. What was a whisper has escalated too far. I feel terrible too. This is actually Emily's first time visiting the town. She's not been given the chance to admire how quaint and cozy it is here.

We all work as a team, pushing, and digging the tractor out of the sloppy mud, and when the time is right, I go back up to her, and I see she's waiting patiently to begin. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she says.

I nod, and before I go, a thought flitters through my head. I look at her. "How is your cut?" I reach out and I take her hand. I don't even know if I am really doing this. I'm holding her hand, and I feel the softness of her skin. I feel the smoothness, but also where the skin has grown tough, and hard, with hard work, and I admire the distinction.

"It's fine," she says. I expected her to pull away. She doesn't. She lets me hold her hand, and she waits, and then she grips mine in return when I don't. I don't know what is happening; I only meant to be nice. Yet, we're holding the other's hand, and we share a look, and I don't know what this is. I don't know what is happening. But the way she looks at me, then... What is this look she's giving me?

“Come on,” she says, “we’ve got work to do.”

At this point, it is time to get my hands dirty. The tow truck has arrived, and I work with the local who runs the business—a younger man with short, bushy hair, thick eyebrows, and a stubbly face. I call out to him, and at the sound of his name, he turns, confused, and I remember he’s not fond of his nickname. I often call him Billy. For some reason, he doesn’t like Billy much.

“Sorry, I know you prefer Will, don’t ya?” I say and shake his hand.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Let’s get this sorted, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I don’t ask about where his dad is—I know he’s been struggling with chronic pain issues for years now, so by the looks of things, Will is taking over the family business and he does it well. My dad looms over me, almost as if to make a point of sorts, because we’ve got some issues of our own to work through with me being handed a mantle, one I don’t think I want.

Life was easier when she was around. When Annabella was alive, I had it all mapped out. So many plans. We had a long life to live together.

“Brandon!” a voice squeals, and I turn, distracted long enough for my dad to have to step in and manage the dirty work, trudging across the mud to prepare the hook on the tractor. I’m not sure it’ll be enough, but we’ll see. I’ve handled something like this before, and the tractor was far more

entrenched in the Earth than this one. The voice that took me away from working was Freya.

“Hello neighbor,” I greet, and she swerves around Emily’s father and brother and straight up to me. “What’s that you’ve got there?” I ask her, and she lifts up the package in her hands, neatly wrapped in colorful green and red wrapping paper.

“I know it isn’t Christmas,” she begins.

“I was about to say,” I intervene, unable to stifle my laugh as she thrusts the present into my hands. “What’s this about?”

“It’s for you and the sweet girl. Emily.” Freya smiles, making sure I don’t try to give the present back or something silly. “It’s my thank you for your help with the cow fence.”

“Oh?” A gift. For us both? And by the time Freya has left and I’m standing here idly with a colorful early Christmas present in my hands, the tractor is out of the mud, and I didn’t even see it happen.

They’ve done it, and Emily stands tall and proud as she leaves her post; the teamwork between us all was fantastic, and even if others stepped in at the last moment, it seems to be for the better. The townsfolk saw Freya’s actions, and I think she might’ve done it on purpose because of the rumors—there’s nothing but nice words and happy faces all around.

I search the crowd. I squint. I find the target. Meredith’s frustration is a beautiful thing. It is even better since she did not get the tractor unstuck in the first place, and blamed it all on me, and my mistreatment of her and lack of training.

I pass by Meredith on my way to Emily who tries to meet me halfway but is stolen by the townsfolk asking her all kinds of questions. “How does it feel?” I tell Meredith, and I don’t wait around. She knows exactly what I mean. She’s earned herself a bad reputation when she tried to speak up about us both and how what we did was the wrong approach, when clearly, she’s just sour. I know we’ll settle this once and for all when the town market comes, and my dad’s business comes out on top.

I reunite with Emily, and we step to one side, and there’s no time for congratulations. “What’s this?” she asks and prods the present.

“It’s from Freya.”

“Your neighbor? The same as when the cow got stuck?”

“Yes.” I hand the present to her. “Open it. See what this early Christmas brings.”

She giggles. “I was just about to ask why it is wrapped like a Christmas present.”

Taking the present, she tears the wrapping paper off, revealing what is underneath, and honestly, I’m not sure what to make of it. It’s a bundle package, a bottle of wine and two glasses—a gift for *two*, not one. *Two*.

“For us?” Emily mutters, unable to understand what this means, but I think I understand.

“She expects us to drink wine together. I’m not a wine person.” I wave her off when she tries to give the gift back.

“It’s yours.”

She grins. “I like wine.” She admires the packaging. “But drinking wine alone is sad. Maybe, one day, we can celebrate with a drink? I don’t know over what though.”

“I do.” I look around, searching for Meredith, but she’s already long gone. A smirk crawls onto my lips. “When we beat her at the town market fare.”

Emily gasps. “How evil.” Her tone betrays her. She is as ready for it as I am.

I check my wrist. My watch says it’s about time. “Now that this is done, I had better go and pick up Sophia from school.”

“I’ll go with you,” she says quickly. “I want to see more of the town anyway.”

Chapter 14

Emily

“What are you doing with my daddy?” Sophia growls at me, a fierceness in her that I’ve never seen before. And I thought that we were getting closer! I’ve barely stepped foot into her little school, littered with pictures, paintings, and all sorts of poorly crafted trinkets. Toys litter the floor, and the teachers rush from side to side, frantic to keep order in the main hall where all the students gather to wait for their parents to collect them and take them home.

I have no words for Sophia, and even the teacher standing next to me is stunned. The worst part is that Brandon has left us alone for no more than a minute, and the truth comes pouring out.

The lady next to me, not much older than me, crouches down and flashes Sophia a warming smile. Being friendly might be the best way around this. Hopefully she can handle it. Mrs. Hollywell, I think her name was, with the brunette hair, the blue eyes, and a sense of style more reserved for the eighties honestly. I mean, come on, that was forty years ago now! It’s not a big deal. Why am I making a big deal out of this?

Mrs. Hollywell does what she can to soothe Sophia, being as welcoming to her thoughts as possible, when all I hear is an annoyed little girl unable to understand why her daddy isn’t “done with me yet.” I hope that’s just an eight-year-old’s way

of speaking and there isn't something dirtier going on behind the scenes, intentions and all. Still, what can I do?

"She can go," Sophia says, flicking her hair behind her.

"No, Sophia, that's rude, that's your father's girlfriend—" The warmth in Mrs. Hollywell's voice quickly disappears, replaced with a silent, gaping mouth at Sophia's innate confusion, and a roar leaves the little girl's mouth.

"No!" she screams, and eyes turn our way.

"Sophia, please," Mrs. Hollywell says, doing her best. She's trying. Now I need to do something. Anything. For one, the facts.

"I'm not his girlfriend," I say to Sophia, and Mrs. Hollywell backs off at last, realizing she's caused more trouble than there already was. It was an accident. An awkward one, too, but that's okay.

"But teacher just said so!" Sophia barks back, feisty as anything. She bares her teeth. "You can't be his girlfriend!"

I laugh it off, and that allows some sense of normalcy to return. She's a little girl, protective of her father. I can understand, I suppose.

"Why are you laughing?" she snaps, and squares off with me, meeting me face to face without a shred of doubt. "You're not his girlfriend."

"No, I'm not, silly." I brush her hair back, and she recoils slightly. "And even if I were, what would it matter? Your daddy would be happy."

Sophia blinks, unable to concentrate as she looks around for her dad. She won't find him. He's had to rush to use the restroom. "Happy?" she grumbles, unsure.

"You want a happy daddy, don't you?" I ask her, and she melts away.

"I... do." She shuffles on the spot, shy. "A happy daddy is a good daddy."

"Exactly." I can't help but beam at her. Look at me, talking down an angry eight-year-old girl. I'm going to take pride in that.

"That is the beauty of love," Mrs. Hollywell tells her, and Sophia eyes widen.

"I love my daddy." Sophia flips toward me, and whispers, "You can't love him too."

I shake my head. "Sophia, I—"

"What's going on?" a deep voice asks, and I look up to see Brandon standing over me. I stand up straight and keep an earnest smile.

"Nothing," I lie, and he looks between me, Sophia, and then Mrs. Hollywell.

"Sophia was just surprised to see her, is all," the wonderful teacher says, God bless her for backing me up, and hopefully Sophia won't spoil this either. Wait, do we even need to hide this? I suppose so. It makes it awkward for Brandon and me, and even worse as he'll feel obligated to set Sophia straight.

“I see,” Brandon replies despondently, wow, what a word, actually. Where did that come from? I’ve been reading a lot before bed. Maybe that’s where that came from?

“I’m not happy to see her,” Sophia admits.

“What?” Brandon says, taken aback.

“I’m not surprised.” Sophia looks between us. “She’s not supposed to be here. This is my school.”

Mrs. Hollywell goes to step in, but Brandon takes over, gesturing that everything is okay. Not another word is spared. She goes on her way.

“This isn’t your school, sweetheart,” Brandon says in a soft voice. “Emily can be here. She nicely offered to come with me. I said yes.”

“But why?” Sophia pleaded. “I’m not happy to see her!”

Now this is getting awkward. No one is looking, but the atmosphere around is obvious. Oh, this is so embarrassing.

“Sophia,” Brandon says lowly. “Apologize to Emily, now.”

“No!”

“Sophia,” Brandon says again, a warning to his tone. “Now.”

Sophia’s bottom lip trembles. She holds her head high and looks up at me. “Go away.”

“Sophia!” Brandon scoops her up. “I was going to get you ice cream as a treat, but maybe not—” She kicks, shouts, and shrieks, fighting back, begging him to let them go and get ice

cream. She wants ice cream, but she's not happy. She doesn't want ice cream with me, but it doesn't matter. He makes his point, calm and cool, despite the awkward fuss this has all caused and, at this point, I feel like we are being mistaken for a couple.

"Daddy, please!" Sophia screams, but doesn't cry, or whimper. She's definitely been raised by a single father. She's tough as nails, choosing to fight back in her own way without resorting to saddening sorrow. She makes for an impressive sight, seeing her stand up to her dad like that.

"No, and that's final. Get in the car."

"It's not fair!"

"It is. You were rude to someone who, not so long ago, played games with you, helped you with chores, and made you that abomination of a sandwich—"

Sophia yells at the top of her lungs, "Leave my sandwich alone!"

"Then say sorry, or else no ice cream for a month." Brandon looks at her, cold and stoic. "And no ice cream at home, either."

"B-but, I..." She cracks. "I..." She ducks her head, and quietly slides her way toward me.

I don't mind what happens honestly. I'm enjoying the fresh air, the odd day, and the memory, the feeling, and the touch of when Brandon held my hand. He asked about my cut. He looked me in my eyes. He cared for me, looked after me, and

the butterflies in my stomach? Now, if she accused me of wanting to be in love with him, she'd be right. I don't want. I shouldn't. I can't. It's too complicated for us both. But she might not be far off. I'm finding it difficult around him recently, and every day extra I'm out here makes it harder.

"I'm sorry," Sophia says at last, accepting her fate.

"For?" Brandon utters.

"For being rude to you, Emily."

That's fine. It'll do. Bless her. "It's okay."

She lifts her head up, chin high, and smiles. "Ice cream?"

Brandon sighs. "I shouldn't really..." He looks at me. "And I didn't tell you about the ice cream thing. I promised her the other day."

I raise my hands. "Not a problem. I'm down for ice cream. It's hot out here."

The ice cream is delayed. The shop is too busy. So, we take the chance to go out for the day, and we play, and we explore, and I get my chance to smooth things over with Sophia, explore the town, and spend time together with Brandon. And before we head home, we loop back around, enter the ice cream shop, and for the second time, I am left alone with Sophia. This little girl with a dark look she reserves for me and me alone.

Sophia takes her chance, and I swear I sense it coming, the way she leans over the white, smooth, cool table, and pushes out of her seat. With her dad gone to collect our ice cream

while we sit and wait, she's seizing the opportunity. She confronts me. "Emily?"

"Yes?" I'll play nice.

"Do you love my daddy?"

Uh. What? I need to say something. But Brandon returns a second later, and what should've been an easy, smooth answer has come and gone. The word escaped me. A simple word. "No." But I didn't say it, and now she's suspicious. The ice cream distracts her, but I know she's caught on. She's intelligent for her age and mature in many ways as well.

I didn't say no, but I didn't say yes, either.

And all the while, as we eat, I ponder that question, and my feelings continue to stir.

Chapter 15

Brandon

One of these days, I swear she'll fall off and crack her skull open. The speed at which she rides her horse is staggering. I'm all for it, in one regard. We've named our horses, and we've gotten close to them and them to us, but pushing your horse to those limits? I know the feeling of the wind on your face, scratching your skin, and making your eyes water is an amazing feeling, but this is too much, right?

To think a few days ago, she was eating ice cream with me and my daughter, and now she's out here again, doing what she does best. I am not even supposed to be here. I'm meant to be with my dad, learning from him, and handling business calls. I will, when I'm ready, but I wanted to be here. I didn't want to miss this moment, to see Emily and how she rides so swiftly.

Watching Emily embrace the thrill, and her horse while enduring the push, yet, is willing to keep going? To keep pushing further and further against all odds? I don't believe it.

I lean on the crooked wooden fence, and it almost buckles under my weight. Drawing in a breath, I take in the fresh air, and I taste the mint on my tongue, and I smell it in my breath. I exhale, and I lower my gaze to the abundance of grass, long and green and everywhere.

The distant hills. The fields. The farmland. Smelly flowers, loud farm animals, and the hustle and bustle of a busy work day is all around. My dad is waiting. My mom prepares food.

Michael and his dad work together to herd a smaller herd of cattle for the first time.

I can't stop watching her. From where I stand, I look like a spectator, and nothing more. I'm admiring is what I'm doing. I know I am. I skipped breakfast to be here. But I had to brush. I have to be ready for anything.

Annabella always told me I had terrible morning breath. I'd hate for Emily to ever learn that.

Wait... why do I care? Should I care? It doesn't matter. I watch her, the natural she has become at horse riding, as she slows, and circles around until she's breezing by the side of the fence and around to me.

"Want to join me?" she asks, huffing and puffing with a wide grin on her face. "Come on. Don't want to miss out, do you?"

"No, I don't," I say, and I am quick to get my own horse ready and saddled, and I mount and I'm off. And we ride together, joining one another, racing, exploring, and trotting around the farm without a care in the world, and the sights, the scenery, everything about the life I live has a certain glint to it today. From the warmth in the weather to the bright blue sky and sun overhead, everything is right. It's all in place, exactly as it should be.

"I'm happy you joined me," Emily tells me as we slow our horses to a paced walk. "As fun as it is out there, doing it alone does eventually lose its feel."

“How can riding a horse as fast as you were get boring?”

“I mean, that’s not what I mean. I mean that it’s nice to have someone else with me.” Emily blushes, a pink tinge on her cheeks. “I can’t explain it.”

“No, please, explain it.” I stroke my horse’s mane. “Go on, I dare you.”

“I’ve already tried to tell you once!” She swerves away slightly. “I’m not going to tell you twice.”

“It feels like you didn’t even tell me once...” I sulk, playful, a childlike side of me just begging to come out and join us. “Hold on a minute.”

“What?”

I’ve had a thought. Dangerous, that is. “I’m your boss, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

She has no idea what’s coming. I swerve toward her. “So, you have to tell me what you were trying to say, that’s an order.”

“It’s not a big deal, Brandon!”

“I want to know, though.”

“Drop it!” she says, and laughs.

I smile. I don’t know what I’m pushing for. I don’t know what it is I want her to say; what it is I want to hear.

“Sometimes,” she begins, slow, but steady, “I don’t know what we are.”

Is that what I wanted to hear? No, it's too complicated. All of this is if we go down this route. I shouldn't have pushed it. This atmosphere around us. The feeling in the air—I need to ignore it, to make it go away.

Annabella, I...

“You're my boss,” Emily tells me as if I didn't already know. “And I'm your employee.”

“Yes?” I say, acting coolly. I don't want to push anything. I don't want anything at all. Not this conversation. Not this farm. Not her. I want... I want...

“We've got a weird... dynamic.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What?”

She bites the inside of her cheek—she's too obvious about it. Almost like it was intentionally done and not nervously performed by her subconscious. An accident as she bobs up and down? She even reacts with a slight bit of pain, but she licks her dry lips and carries on anyway, and I can't seem to look away from exactly that. Her lips. Soft. Plumper on the bottom. A pretty pink hue—

“We're friends, aren't we?” she asks.

“Uh, sure.”

She nods. “So...” The gentle clip-clop of our horses fills my ears. A newfound feeling rises in me. A feeling I don't know or want. “Is there... anything more?”

She's really taking some big steps here. It should be me. No, it shouldn't. I don't want it to be me. I don't want to do anything at all.

"As in... our dynamic?" How do I avoid this? What do I really want?

"I just... want to explore whatever *this* is."

I look at her. I'm trying to figure her out. Why did she place such power on that word? I don't know what *this* is, and I think *this* needs to stop. This isn't right. I should be with my dad, making calls and running the ranch like I've been trained to do.

"I guess I'm asking if there is a chance for anything more."

"More than what?"

She looks at me, a confused look on her face. "Us?"

"What do you mean?" I can't believe it. I'm thirty, a grown man, and I'm playing dumb around a woman.

Emily clenches her jaw. "You don't understand anything I'm saying?"

"You're very confusing today," I admit, but honestly, I'm just passing blame. I'm trying to understand myself.

"Oh, I am?" She laughs it off, but I know I've created a rift between us, and the two currents we had that were interconnected shift off course. We drift away from one another. "I swear, every time I think I understand you, I realize how little I do."

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No.” She strokes her horse’s mane. “You’re opening up gradually. I think you accept the way I am now.”

“I think we moved past all of that. How we first met was one, big bad impression, is all.” I look her dead in the eye. I don’t want her to mistake this at all, because I mean what I’m about to say wholeheartedly. “I like your city girl, sunshine attitude.”

“Oh, really?”

I hum in agreement.

“Why?”

I keep my eyes straight. “Accept the compliment.”

“But I want to dig for more.”

“Don’t.” I’m not admitting anything. Not how she’s brightening my world. How she’s removing the fog in my mind, and the clouds over my head.

“You know, I bet I’m breaking your shell. I’m getting to learn the real you, that’s what it is!”

She’s not wrong. She can say that all she wants. But I won’t reply. I won’t give her anything that might make her realize just how close she is to hitting the bullseye.

“Brandon,” she says softly, her voice so sweet, and warm, and beautiful to my ears, and my heart melts at the sound of it. This privacy we share on horseback, in the other’s company—

it's different today. Something's changed. A flip has been switched. I know it has, but I don't understand.

What is wrong with me? I'm not the type to overthink. To panic. I'm Brandon. I'm meant to be everything *but* some anxious, confused, fool!

She continues, "Did you honestly never get like this with Meredith?"

"What?"

"Like the way we are."

"No. You know that."

A glance from the corner of her eye, and she sighs. "You must have many bad memories with her. I bet you never skipped out on work to watch her ride a horse."

She's caught me. "Uh..." What is this woman doing to me? "Well, I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Protective, too?"

"No, just being a good boss. Meredith didn't get that treatment because she's left me with nothing but bad memories. She's bitter, and exists to spite me, now, I swear. Honestly, everything that happened with her is why I was so against you at first."

"What changed your mind?" She moves so close our horses nearly touch, and so do we, shoulder to shoulder. "Anything specific?"

"Your determination." I can't look at her.

“I proved you wrong,” she boasts. Yes, in all the right ways. She gallops away, laughing at me, teasing me, about this, or that, or something, but I don’t listen. I watch, and she has no idea how I peel my eyes away, and I smile genuinely.

I say under my breath, “Emily, you are one of the few things to make me feel truly happy.”

Chapter 16

Emily

Have the stars always looked this beautiful? I don't remember them being this bright. I think that's one thing I've come to like. I took it for granted, once upon a time, as a city girl. Now, looking at it now, I see how much I've missed out on.

Tonight, the moon is empty—missing. The sky is vivid—clear. The wind is gentle, and there's almost a chill in the air. But I walk, and I crunch through leaves and dirt, and I trod over rocks, my boots taking the brunt of the impact. And, as I walk, I look up, unable to move my view from the night sky.

All these stars, so captivating, have me in their hold. It's like magic. I can't escape. I don't think I want to escape. I've known how beautiful the night can be out here, but this is the first time I've really looked up when the weather suited it, and saw just how beautiful the colorful array of glittering sparkles is, twinkling up there, so high above, and so far away.

Compared to being in the city, this is one thing that will always belong to the country. Where the light pollution is less, the stars shine brighter. It's simple. Until now, I never thought about it. Now, out here, I can't believe the sheltered life I lived, so far gone from nature.

I do not like nature. Still, I don't fret as much as I used to—even if the occasional bug brings that into question. The stars make it all worth it in the end.

The beauty above, when mixed with everything else around me, makes my stroll all the better. I know I should go back, crawl into bed, and sleep. This stroll wins a hundred times over. I refuse to change that fact.

I like this. I really do. The first proper thing to make me take a step back and reconsider my position on returning home. The city is and always will be my home. It's where I was raised, taught, and learned. But this experience right now? I can't shake it off, how it makes me feel.

My ears perk up at the sound of distant chatter. Two laughing boys, chuckling, snorting, and scoffing like idiots fall silent when they see me, and in the darkness, at first, they believe they've seen a shadowy figure—a ghost.

“Sis?” Michael says, and beckons for me to approach. “Why are you standing there like that?”

“Am I not allowed to go for a walk?” I retort.

“You were just standing there.”

“You surprised me, that's why.”

Michael, convinced, nods. “Uh, okay?” Okay, maybe he's not that convinced.

“A late night stroll, then?” Brandon asks me.

“Yes. I just wanted to clear my head and see the stars.” They both look up, humming in their own agreement. “Exactly. What are you two doing out here anyway?”

“We’re on our way back from the stables,” Michael explains, keeping it short on purpose. He’s probably hiding something. As he brushes by me, hoping to move on, I catch a whiff of smoke around him, clinging to his clothes.

“Smoking?” I mutter in disgust. “I thought you quit years ago?”

“I have,” he tells me so fast, I’m not sure what he said. “Brandon and I, in our teens, loved to sneak out of the house with one of his dad’s mint cigars. We thought we’d do it once more for old times’ sake, not that the coward had any!”

Brandon laughs it off, avoiding him and me. “Look, I’m just there to fulfill the tradition, I didn’t want any part in it. I’ve got a daughter.”

“Whatever you—” Michael coughs, rubs his chest, and carries on. “—say.” Michael walks, but Brandon doesn’t. “You coming?”

“No, I’ll... stick around, keep an eye on your sister, make sure she doesn’t get up to any late-night mischief riding the horses.”

“Gotcha.” Michael passes a wary look between us and goes on his way.

“Make sure to change and shower. If Dad smells you, he’ll make you wish you were back in the city!”

“Whatever!”

I roll my eyes. I know he’ll be careful. Besides, he’s thirty now. He’s not a kid. But still, Dad always had a strong stance

on smoking after what happened to our granddad.

“You okay?” Brandon asks, already prepared to stroll back the way he came.

“I’m fine.” Then there’s him. He didn’t have to join me. I didn’t get a choice in it either. I’ll think nothing of it, as weird as it is. “I’m not going to go and saddle up.”

“I know. But I have to be sure. I do think you’re an adrenaline junkie.”

“I’m really not. You can’t be serious?”

“Well, as your boss, and the future owner of this ranch, I’ve got to keep a strong grip, don’t I?” I can’t tell if he’s serious or not. His tone reveals nothing, and I can’t see his face properly. It’s too dark. I see the outline of Brandon and nothing more, and his body language is even less helpful.

“You don’t have to treat me like an employee, Brandon. We’re friends and we’re outside of work hours, okay?” I won’t answer to anything he just said. He’s being an idiot.

“Don’t think anything of it, then.”

“I won’t.” I think a lot about it. He’s frustrating. Did he seriously have to hijack this stroll for no reason? No, I’m not stupid. I’m the slick city girl, aren’t I? I can see through him, as dense as he is. There is so much more than meets the eye. At this point, with how I am feeling, I can’t help but evoke those thoughts about him, and the feelings that come with them.

I know you're my boss, Brandon, but I want you all for myself, as selfish as it is. I love the starry night sky, and right now, I'm sharing this emotion with you, and you're acting stupid, and for what?

"Maybe we should do some odd job, then we can be boss and employee again," he suggests.

"Are you serious?" It's like he avoids this tension between us. Like he can't see what is stirring. Unless he really is blind to it all, and I'm wrapped around his finger, and he doesn't even know it. He has no idea the affect he has on me. How he makes me feel. The butterflies, the tingles, and the way my heart leaps each time we touch? The smallest of things set me off. It's maddening!

"Yes, I'm serious," he says.

"Fine, then." If doing an odd job this late puts us together in a situation where we can just be ourselves, then fine. At this rate, bedding the boss isn't a bad idea if it shuts him up for two minutes so I can enjoy my walk!

We stroll, and the stars overhead follow us. We stroll until we begin to pass under trees, and we lose sight of the flickering lights. Soon, we reach a clearing, neat and tidy, and we're here together, alone, with nothing but one another, and each of my senses is purely overwhelmed by him. Maybe it *is* time I'm true to myself—I have feelings for him. I feel the flare in my heart.

He turns to face me. I turn to face him. It's just you and me here, Brandon. The tension is there. We have the right

atmosphere. The suspense is building. I'm getting sweaty, I'm fidgeting, and what next? My face is hot, and I can feel your breath—smell it, too, minty as normal—and I know you can feel mine.

“Emily,” he begins. “This isn’t the odd job I had in mind.”

I slap his arm, and he grunts, and goes quiet. “Brandon, shut it. I’m going to confess. I’m going to pour my heart out. I’m going to tell you all about it, how I’m hopeful to learn more about you, and what loves means, and what it means to me, and what it means for us both. You know there is something real between us and it’s growing—”

Ah, enough of this! I press my lips against his. His lips are cold, and firm, but he steadies himself and keeps the urgency of the kiss, and then slow and steady, and the warmth rises between us. Second after second, I sink deeper into this feeling we share in both heart and body. This begins our relationship, doesn’t it? I kissed him first, and as we separate, and he struggles for air and words, I know I’ve finally broken him down, and we’re no longer enemies, nor are we friends, and despite my faults, I know he likes me too.

He goes to speak, at last, and I kiss him again. I don’t want him to spoil this. Not for one second.

Chapter 17

Brandon

I can't shake off the buzz in me. The touch of her, and her lips... What a night. I can't believe that happened. It was so sudden, out of nowhere, and...

"Sophia?" I say, unable to keep my voice down in the quiet, slumbering house, other than the fact Michael is still in the shower. "What are you...?"

I don't finish. I see it all too clearly. The confusion written on her face, her features tight, scrunched, and anxious. She's holding a picture in her hands—a picture of me and her mother in our high school years.

"This is Mommy, isn't it?"

"Yes." There's no hiding it. "During our late teenage years. You'll be a teenager one day as well. Now, why are you—"

"You've never showed me."

I feel like it should be me who has caught her. I'm the parent, and I'm the one who needs to tell her off for what she's done. She should be in bed, she should be sleeping, and she should be keeping a good sleep routine for school tomorrow. Instead, she's snuck into my room, and found something she shouldn't have.

"Why didn't you show me my mommy?"

"Because I was worried it would hurt too much."

“I don’t know her.” Sophia clutches the picture frame tighter. “You look very happy with Mommy.”

My heart sinks inside my chest. I move toward her, the door closed behind me, and I sit beside my little girl and wrap an arm around her. “Come here.”

“You’re smiling so much, Daddy.”

I don’t know what to say. Have I handled this all wrong? She’s only eight.

“That’s the same smile.”

“What?” I raise an eyebrow and she pulls away from me. “What do you mean?”

“That smile. You smile with Emily too.”

I grind my teeth. I wish I knew what to say. If only the words came so easily. “Sophia, I... What are you doing out of bed this late anyway?”

“I did go to bed,” she says eagerly, nodding away. “I did, I swear.”

“I should hope so. I put you there.”

“But I had a nightmare!”

I slowly nod. That is fair.

“So I went to find you. You weren’t here. I waited. I did!”

I sigh. “Not long enough, clearly.”

“I just... I just wanted to look...” She looks away, avoiding my gaze. She should. I’m a little upset, but at the same time, I

don't think she meant to find this specific picture frame. I had it buried deep in an old drawer. Still, she's looked out of her own curiosity and found the old picture anyway.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I didn't want to have this talk with you so soon. I thought it would be too hard on you."

"No, it's not. Dad, I'm okay. I didn't know Mom. That's okay. I know she's in heaven. I know it."

My mouth falls open. I don't know what I can possibly say to her. Nothing comes to my mind. I comfort her, and I need to get her to bed, but she's made her point clear. She's okay, really. I think she's confused. She doesn't understand. Then she brings up Emily. The same person I've kissed tonight without a proper confession of anything—the same person my daughter isn't keen on.

"What is Emily?"

"I don't know," I admit.

The next morning comes very slowly. My night is long and empty, my head filled with white noise from all the confusion. I spend my sleeping time awake, until I go downstairs, tired and sluggish, and see Sophia with Emily. They chat happily, and I see no issues, but then I hear the topic. The topic of me, and how I am what is called a widow. Sophia is asking all kinds of questions, and then it comes quickly.

"What was your mom like? I don't have a mom," Sophia asks innocently.

I peek around the corner, down the hall where they talk openly in the dining room. Emily takes a moment, thinks, and answers, “My mom was incredible. I hope to be as incredible as her one day, but I know I could never live up to her.”

“What? Why?” Sophia questions aloud.

Is Emily sympathizing with my daughter because she lost her mom? Am I seeing a true bond between them? And if that’s true, then... where does that leave me? I have a bond of my own I am forging with Emily whether I am aware of it or not. That bond is only going to continue to grow. How can all this end? I can only wonder.

It is complicated but not impossible, and I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t like the prospect of Emily becoming a motherly figure to Sophia.

The day goes on, and I’m stuck with my dad and his intense, devil-like glare—pure evil rests behind his eyes.

First, I take the blame for his missing cigar. Mom was *not* happy about that. You owe me, Michael.

Second, I’m told I’m in charge of the market stall in town. When the big market comes around, as it always does, they’re gone for a business trip. So, without anyone else to cover, who better than the person he intends to pass his legacy to?

“We’re leaving before then, so you’d best prepare, Brandon,” my dad warns.

I nod, and I listen, and I learn. I am capable of this. I know I am.

The issue is that a certain special little girl has a school trip coming up. I won't be there for the school trip.

I find my path is quick toward Emily, who's spent most of the day with Sophia anyway, and I put the question forward. "Will you go with Sophia as her guardian for her school trip?"

"Yes, of course!" Emily happily agrees, and Sophia is... excited? She's genuinely excited more to have Emily along than me?

Michael wanders by us on his way to the fields. He passes me a knowing look. Is this about the cigar? But he's watching Emily and Sophia rejoice, celebrating together for the school trip. Sophia boasts about the ocean, the beach, and the skyscrapers, and Emily laps it all up in a fit of smiles. I watch Michael in return, but he pays no notice to me. He watches his sister and my daughter play, and he smirks. Then, and only then, does his gaze turn to me. I don't know what is going through his mind and quite frankly, I don't think I want to know...

Chapter 18

Emily

“Well, you see, that stall over there is selling their meat at a lower price, so surely you can make an exception?” the haggler said, an older woman, wrinkled and crooked. She had a nice smile when she first approached the large market stall. I was happy to serve her, thinking it’d be swift and easy—oh, how wrong I was. Now I’m stuck trying to manage an old lady who doesn’t realize we can’t budge our pricing more than we already have. Especially since Meredith’s stall won’t, either.

We’re at a crossroads pricewise. From here on out, it all comes down to quality, reputation, and the townfolks’ personal preference. From the looks of things, across the hectic market in the town square, across a lovely patch of gardens and land, we seem to be the busiest. We’re not just a butcher of sorts, but we’re handling all forms of business, selling a greater variety than any other.

Brandon chose me to handle selling meat. Now I’m at odds with this old lady. She’s a haggler, and as far as I am concerned, she may as well be referred to as nothing more than haggler.

“So?” the old lady says, as if I am going to change my mind.

“If you want it,” I say, slapping my hand on a plastic-wrapped bag of bacon. “You must pay the required price. I’m sorry. I can’t budge on this.” As long as I’m sweet, this’ll be

fine. The queue is growing, and the stress is growing right alongside it.

“But—”

I slap the bacon bag again, creating a wet, sticky sound. “I’m sorry,” I say, and adjust my attire, my apron, my fishnet for my hair, and my moist, bloody gloves. “No exceptions.”

The haggler huffs, narrowing her eyes at me. I think I’ve handled this well. At last, she saunters off, annoyed but accepting that enough is enough. She goes home empty-handed.

“I’ll take that, then, at the required price,” the next customer says, an older gentleman. “And I’ll also have some...”

It was a blur after that. One customer after another, until I’m moving on to managing the next task, like Brandon’s assistant. I take pride in it, though. I’m his right hand, in a way. While he commands, I carry out the orders.

I charge into the forefront of the busy market, metaphorically speaking. I carry the weight of the hectic crowd on my shoulders. I take command where necessary and I fight against all of those who try to haggle the price. The customers keep on coming, and the money is stacking up. Business booms, and the competition remains as fierce as ever against Meredith. I can’t see her, but I see the tops of where she’s set up. She may have gotten the better location, but the townsfolk know what’s what. They come to us.

We're a team who's come far—all of us—and none of us would be able to do it without the other. My dad. Michael. Brandon. All of us, a team where we're dependent on the other, because otherwise we'd lose the harmony we've created, and this is even more important as Brandon wants to secure more contracts with locals than Meredith. Looking professional, with long queues and no issues, makes for quite the presentation against Meredith's.

We continue in our fight, pushing through the day, through sweat and blood (from the produce) and few tears (a little bit when the old lady came back for round two and was awfully rude to me) and then the day is done. My dad heads back to the ranch to tend to the herd, and Brandon makes the almighty call of joyful success to his parents who, now, will have an even more enriching business event, whatever it is they are up to.

We approach the end of the day and clean up begins. The market quietens, and the people clear out.

While I'm handling the customer service, Brandon prepares the meat, and Michael is on transport and hauling duty to keep everything flowing and set up correctly. We don't need everyone on deck, so to speak, now that the day is at an end.

"It's still not quitting time yet, but so far, we've made the most sales with the town butchers we now have contracts with!" Brandon boasts to us, beaming with confidence as he says, as he has all day, "There is no better meat than straight off the cow!" He's cute. I love it when he says that

catchphrase. Our enthusiasm was what made us so much business in the first place.

This day has come and gone so fast, I almost can't believe it happened. As if, for a time, I forgot that the man I kissed, and confessed feelings to, is right beside me, working hard. I look at his lips. I look at his face. I look at his body. And I think—I know—I made the right choice. We're yet to talk about what happened properly. It just... happened, and then we went back to the house. I'm wearing my heart on my sleeve, but him? He's not spoken a word of it. I won't pester, but I know there's no hard feelings. He wouldn't treat me so nicely otherwise... even if he has been a little bit distant... I shouldn't jump to conclusions. Not until we've had a chance to talk. I can't blame him, it has been a very busy day.

"Is it that time already?" Brandon gathers us both together. "I can't leave. Someone needs to go and pick up Sophia from school." He taps his wristwatch. "Please."

Michael looks expectantly at me. "Well...?"

I nod. "Of course." I don't see why not! I'd be glad to.

"It'll just be the two of us though?" Michael warns.

Brandon chuckles. "I'm not going to abandon my daughter to her school. She'll be driven mad!"

I don't mention it, but it makes sense that I'm the one going to pick her up in the first place since I'm the one who's going to be her guardian on her school trip anyway.

"Hey, hold on!" Brandon calls out to me. "Are you sure?"

“Yeah?”

Brandon looks at me like I’m mad. “Really?”

“Yes? What’s the problem?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing. I just... expected you to say something like ‘that’s your daughter, you go and pick her up and take her home,’ you know?”

“I don’t, no.” I can’t help but smile. Is he trying to get a rise out of me on purpose? “You’re my boss anyway, right? Just order me.”

“I can’t order someone who is willingly doing it anyway.” He checks to see if Michael is close—he’s not. “Emily, I’m fond of that. Thank you.”

My heart flutters. Whoa. O-okay, let’s calm down. So, we definitely have a lot to talk about once we’ve got the chance. He wouldn’t open up and say something that direct otherwise! “Thank you. Uh, all right, I’d better get moving! I’m already late!”



Brandon

“Hey, Brandon?” Michael says, shifting beside me as he carries a crate to the white, dusty truck we used to get everything here. It’s a good but old bit of scrap metal at this point.

“Yeah?” I answer him as I organize all the paperwork and earnings for the day before it’s swept away in the building wind.

“Is there something going on between you and my sister?”

I freeze. He’s made a very good guess. “No.”

“Ah... okay.”

Does he not believe me? I feel like answering his doubt proves there is something. Silence is the right answer here.

“You’re close, though.” He huffs as he drops the crate into the back of the truck. “Very close.”

“I’m her boss,” I state.

“I know.” Michael rejoins me, and takes a seat beside my little, temporary desk setup in the back of the market stall’s tent. “Sophia is really taking to Emily now.” I catch a glimpse of his smug grin. “I mean your employee.”

“What’s your point, Michael?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. Or do. It doesn’t matter about me. I’m just surprised about Emily. She really ended up

liking it out here..." His voice fades, and he looks away into the distance.

I stop what I'm doing, leaving it one more second to face him. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so. I just... I ended up being the one who misses the city. How weird is that?"

"You do?"

Michael nods. "I had a life back in the city. One that I'd created. Emily may have left a lot behind, but I have people to go back to... if that makes sense." He ducks his head. "But hey, I'm out here for my dad. That comes first."

I frown. I want to console him. He has every right to feel this way. If he really wanted, he could go home, I'm sure his dad won't mind, but... I guess it isn't that easy, is it?

"Oh, careful," Michael warns, getting up and back to work.

"What?" I say, watching him leave.

"Hey," a familiarly distasteful voice utters, and I turn to see the wicked witch herself. "Brandon."

"Meredith," I respond ruefully. "What brings you to this side of the market?"

"Oh, shut it." She steps closer, but no more, almost barely in the entrance. Her face is droopy, like she's sad, but doesn't know what to do with her facial muscles. She's confused. "You won."

I want to brag, but it doesn't feel right.

“Well done, the day is yours. You’ve won,” she repeats, as if waiting for a reply.

I don’t know what to say.

She crosses her arms lethargically. She’s almost pale. “You’re going to find a lot more success, you know?”

What do I say? I lick my dry lips. “Uh, will I?”

She nods, and paces slowly around the small tent. “My dad is packing up the business. We’re returning to our roots. We were never a ranch, or herders, like you and your family.”

I shouldn’t, but I smile when she says that. “Oh... I... I actually...” But I clearly come across as insincere. I feel like a winner. And I can’t help but say it: She looks like a loser. But we’re not children. There are still livelihoods being put to the test, and the Ferguson family has decided enough is enough.

Seeing her here, like this, I can’t help but let go of that feeling of glorious victory. Anything that I was feeling just fades away, and I stare at her, watching as she crumbles in front of me. She’s always tried to appear strong. At last, she reveals her weakness. Above all else, she just looks so, so tired of all this.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and I can’t help but put those two words forward. I feel genuine pity, but it is too late to go back on it. I’ve made how I feel on the stance very clear by my smile at her defeat.

“Don’t suddenly be sorry,” she mutters coldly, shooting me a glare, and her façade quickly dissipates into steam, and all

that is left is a rueful, tired woman. “If anything, I am.”

“Meredith, I...”

“I’m sorry, Brandon.” She slinks away, already making her escape. “And I hope you don’t let that girl go. I hate her guts, really, I do. But I know that if you were removed from this mess, I think I’d admire her.”

“What?”

She snaps, “Don’t let her go.”

“I...”

She goes to advance on me.

“Okay, I won’t.” She stops. “Is that good enough?”

“You have no idea, do you?”

I blink. “Uh, I...”

“You’re hopeless—”

“We kissed.”

Meredith flinches. “So, you’re a thing then?” She bites her lip. “No, you don’t look that way, either of you.”

“Well, we’ve not talked about it. It happened suddenly.” I raise my hands in honest defeat. “She sprung it on me, actually.”

Meredith laughs aloud. Ouch, thanks. “Wait, h-hold on, so...” She claps her hands. “Oh my god, she started it, didn’t she? I admire her even more. So, you didn’t talk about it?”

“No, it was... complicated.”

Meredith's mouth hangs open. "Why?"

"Well..." I don't know. I'm not fully in on this. I just... I think of Annabella. I think of—

"You kissed, and she started it, but you haven't said a word, have you?"

"No..."

"Do you like this woman?"

I raise my chin. I haven't considered it. "I do."

"And she kissed you?"

"Yes."

"And she confessed?"

I know where this is going. Delaying my answer doesn't help. "Yes..."

"But did you confess?"

"I... well... no?"

Meredith groans, scratching her head. "Unlike me, Emily is different because she can handle a man who is also a single father. I never could. I was the problem. I wanted you all for myself. So, for that, I'm sorry. I want to move on, explore other things. I can't keep living my life like this. Neither should you. And not in the way that you think. I know your past, Brandon. You deserve to be happy." She turns to leave, but not without the final word.

"So... *don't let her go.*"

Chapter 19

Emily

Sophia carefully takes off her shoes, avidly rejecting any help from me while she's at it. Brandon raised her to be independent, and at such a young age as well. She can do things that I couldn't—things I'd never even dare to try. But the water, the slosh of the sea's waves on this slightly chilly day, the ocean breeze against us? Well, it's got me feeling a little nostalgic. I can't believe, at last, I'm home. Virginia Beach has never felt so nice.

My head feels free. Everything is so simple out here, in this moment. It's just me and Sophia, the rest of the class is nearby, but most kids break off to either play with their parents, or to join their friend group.

I've learned many things on this school trip. Sophia is kind of a loner; despite being so outspoken, she has a streak of being more on the shy side. She was like that when she met me, and then her father's blunt personality shines through, and I think that puts some of the other children off.

Sophia doesn't mind having very few friends. I fill that role, I guess. She asks for my hand, and smiles at me. "Please help me." She doesn't say what she wants help with, but I think I know. She wants to go down across the sand, and to put her feet in the sea.

I look ahead, across the horizon, and honestly, with the way this day has gone, I'm not surprised it's empty. The threat of cold, miserable weather put off the people of the city, but not

us. We've come out here to enjoy the things others wouldn't consider a luxury.

These kids ask so many strange questions. For many of them, this really is their first time seeing the ocean.

I take her hand, and we leave our belongings with Mrs. Hollywell, and we make our way down. One foot in front of the other, I join her, feeling the squish of the wet sand beneath my toes, and the cold around my feet. The sea water works its way up and around my heel, then my ankle, each step making a moist slapping sound the closer we get to the far-out tide, the waves appearing gentle, but crashing down on approach—the tide is coming in.

Sophia tightens her grip, her little hand in mine, and we're not far now.

"I'm scared," she tells me, but I urge her onward.

"We'll do this together. You've been looking forward to this, haven't you?"

She nods unsurely. Her moment of hesitation has her focusing on the sand, her bare feet, so small and cute. I see her thinking, deeply lost in her thoughts, weighing out if she has what it takes to do what all the other kids and their parents are doing.

She's a shy, honest girl. She's got many issues unknown to those around us, but I know her, and I see right through her, and I think, right now, if Brandon were here, he'd want to urge

her onward—to enjoy the sea, an experience that is a rarity for her.

Instead, I'm here, and I'm coaching her forward, hopeful to guide her until she enjoys herself. A few of her only friends run by, and they acknowledge her, tease her, and it gives her the bump she needs. Brandon didn't raise his girl to not be incited when challenged. It's a motivator, like her father, to prove those around her wrong. She has that stoic streak, like him, and then she goes to let go of my hand. Only, she stops.

“Sophia, are you okay?”

“Together.”

“Together?”

“I want us to go together.” She looks up at me with warm, hopeful eyes. I can't help but smile. “Please.”

“Of course.” We advance together as a team, and the unease wears off, revealing the excitement beneath, and we're laughing, and we're running, and then we're in the cold water. She screams, and giggles, surprised at how cold the sea is, but she embraces it. And soon, she's let go of my hand, and I watch as she plays with her friends, and they make up games and chase one another. Is this what it feels like to be proud of someone else?

This school trip, honestly, felt like my chance to go back home. To enjoy what I'd left behind, but here and now, I can't help but watch her. Sophia, this little girl, makes me forget about everything I've wanted to go back to. She's loving the

beach, the weather, the sights, the scenes, and all the while that Sophia is enjoying the coast and the big city, I'm torn. It's silly, really. I'm happy to be back home, but at the same time, I miss the ranch, something I never believed I'd feel. It isn't just the ranch, though. I'm also thinking of Brandon.

When our time at the beach ends, and the children run in playful fear one final time from the waves, one thing that didn't end despite us leaving the beach was their games. Their day had only just begun, and we explored, venturing around the city, having a blast at the mall, an arcade, and then bowling. We do these things that their quaint little town and lands don't provide, and we give them this chance.

I watch over Sophia, and sometimes, when she feels shy, she comes to me and holds my hand. Sometimes, she'll ask for help, or an extra dollar to treat herself, only to end up buying me a tacky keyring when I wasn't looking, something the other kids weren't brave enough to do alone. And yet, as the day drags on, and it comes to an end, this tacky keyring of a red bowling ball with the company's name on it is something I'll treasure. When I look at it, I'm reminded of how I've learned greater responsibility as well as caring, handling, and managing not just Sophia, but working with other parents, the teachers, and their kids as well.

Sophia is learning to trust, accept, and enjoy my company, but I'm not just someone to play around with. No, Sophia has learned she must listen to me, not misbehave, and be good for me.

And then, as we're making our way back to the coach, the inevitable finally happens. After a long day, I've even bonded with the other parents.

"I'm sorry, may I ask you a question?" a lovely mother of twins asks me. Her name is Sarah, and she's spent the day trying to help her children break out of their shells as well. We've come to be friendly with one another, but I know what's coming.

"Of course."

"Please excuse me if this comes across as rude, but... I didn't think Sophia had a mother?"

I stop. What do I say?

Sarah quickly rebounds in terror, "I didn't mean any offense! I just... well, some of the other parents are confused, you know? And we weren't sure."

"I'm not her mom," I clarify, and she nods, but still seems unsure.

"Are you sure? You're amazing with her."

I blink. Looking away, I can't face her. Sarah, what have you done? Why would you say that? Am I so good with looking after Sophia that it's led to the point that other parents legitimately believe I'm Sophia's mom?

"Are you close with Brandon?" Sarah asks when I don't reply. She knows there is an awkward tension in the air, but she's sweet, and means no harm.

“I suppose so,” I admit, and though I’m not sure I know Brandon very well, I do think I have gotten closer than anyone else. He’s yet to tell me about what happened in the past. At least, not directly from Brandon himself—Michael has partly filled that role. But that’s okay. I won’t push anything onto Brandon.

“Well, it shines through with you and his girl.” Sarah smiles, and then Mrs. Hollywell announces for everyone to board the coach and take their seats. I, all the while, am sitting with Sophia on this journey home, and my mind is a whirl of thoughts. I find the distance between Brandon and me today has made me miss him. Yearn for him, even. Oh God, I can’t believe I even thought that word. It’s not like I desire him or anything, I think.

Do I desire Brandon?

Sophia makes it more difficult. She, like many of the other children, are worn out after a long, active day. She’s fallen asleep on my lap, and me? My heart burns for her, and if this, what I’m feeling, is a maternal instinct, then... wow, because it’s powerful.

For the first time, I think I am confident in thinking this: I swear I would do anything for this little girl, no matter what. But after what Sarah said, that same thought comes back. I can’t help but wonder if Brandon would possibly ever accept the idea of me as Sophia’s stepmom. Time will tell.

Chapter 20

Brandon

I want to kiss her. She's only been gone a day, if that. But I want to kiss her anyway. We've not discussed our relationship. I don't know what we are. But I know what I want. And I want her.

When they return to the school, I receive the call to go and pick them up. I alert the family, despite it being late evening, and all of us except my mom prepare to head down to meet them, taking two cars in the process.

I don't know if it is over the top with all of us going to see them and celebrate, but that's okay. I know everyone is excited to hear their stories, hopeful they've both had a good time. I've heard enough from Emily's dad about his happiness with her. They don't talk much anymore, not like they used to, but he thinks that this school trip for my little girl was her opportunity to enjoy herself.

I understand him. He wants Emily to be happy. He's seen how hard she's working. It's obvious she is enjoying herself, but maybe he thinks going back home, even on a day-long school field trip, will help her. I find his focus on hoping she still enjoys the city life a little weird after how far she's come.

It is difficult to tell him, but Michael tried to put it well enough—he needs to try and talk properly with Emily. He's been avoiding her. Though part of that, Michael has told me, is because she is the spitting image of her mother, and all it does is hurt him more.

I can't help but find my own troubles are whether or not she'd go back to the city if given the chance. It'd be cruel, Emily. You kissed me. You said all those things. I'm a man of few words. I know I'm difficult. But, please, don't do that. Don't still fret about wanting to leave so soon. Not until we've had a chance to talk.

When we arrive, it's all smiles and happy greetings, and from the get-go, it's tricky. I feel like I walk on eggshells to hide everything I am feeling. I'm normally good at that. I go blank—empty. But not right now. Not when I see my little girl clinging to Emily like she's her mother. Not when I hear how happy they both are, and then everyone talks, and the questions come around, and it's all just... good news. Such good news.

I know I stand out. I'm acting different. I don't think anyone really noticed until I tried to share some of the joy with Sophia, but she seemed to have preferred having Emily come along, and then when she noticed I was acting odd, she pointed it out—the way I've raised my daughter has come back to bite me!

“Say thank you,” she tells me, and everyone gasps, mostly because it is funny that I've had my own polite manners flipped on me like this.

“Thank you,” I tell Emily with Sophia's watchful eye on us both. Emily nods, and smiles, but I swear I see a look in her eye. I'm not an idiot, am I? Or am I just hopeful? I am dense, I

guess. But with what Meredith said, and Michael, and... I don't know anymore. I really don't.

We welcome them back from the trip, and I am forced to keep my head high. I show my gratitude, of course, but I have to be formal. My approach of treating what Emily has done as some kind of "job" for me doesn't go unnoticed.

"I did this willingly," she tells me in private while everyone else prepares the seating plan between the two cars. Who goes where? Well, Emily wants to ride with me, and Sophia seems adamant she wants to spend time with her granddad for the journey to the ranch.

Michael casts me a look I don't understand. I see it come my way, as if, for a moment, he wanted to ask if he could carpool with me, but he seems to change his mind. He beckons for his dad to follow, and they all get in one car, and then there is just two of us in the other.

We say our goodbyes, and they leave first.

"I wanted to show how much I care," she tells me as she opens the car door and gives a final wave to... ah, what's her name? Sarah? And of course, a thank you and goodbye to Mrs. Hollywell and some of the other parents I'm not close with. I wave too, and I get into the driving seat.

Emily climbs into the passenger seat.

We both close our doors, and now, we're alone, left with one another.

"This wasn't a job for me, Brandon," she whispers.

I place my hands on the steering wheel. “And it wasn’t some way for you to escape back to the city?”

She lightly laughs. “No, but I understand why you’d think that.”

“Did it cross your mind?”

“What?”

I turn the engine on. “About going home, eventually.”

“Of course.” She puts her seatbelt on. “But I did what I did for the man I like, and for a chance to show I would do anything for his little girl.”

I put my seatbelt on. I use it to stall so I can gather my thoughts. What do I say? How do I reply to something that has somehow made me needlessly happy?

“So...” she breathes, “want to hear about Sophia’s first time going in the sea?”

I gasp. “She went swimming?”

“No, but she did walk in it for a bit.”

Our drive home feels short and sweet. The tension in the air lifts the more we talk about the trip, and once we’ve had some dinner, and the joy we all share with Sophia and her tales of the big city and especially Emily, the evening comes to an end.

Night is here, and we all call it a night. The evening was a breeze. I wish it lasted longer. But it is done and that’s okay. I get ready for bed last, alongside Sophia. It’s a fight to get her down, but she accepts it, and once she’s in bed and I am about

to tuck her in, she places her hands on mine, frantically stopping me.

I look up at her from where I'm partly sitting on her bed. "What's wrong?"

Sophia beams at me tiredly. "I want Emily."

"I'll get Emily for you." The look on Emily's face when she learns Sophia requested her to tuck her in is endearing, and she does it, and Sophia loves it. Emily soothes her, and puts her to sleep, and at the last moment, from where I stand in the doorway, admiring them both, I wonder how she'll handle the most crucial part of the goodnight routine.

Emily turns away but doesn't get far. Sophia blurts, "Ah, wait! Kiss please." She pats her forehead. "Daddy always kisses me a goodnight kiss. He says it helps keep the monsters away."

Emily plays along, and she does so perfectly, agreeing with her, apologizing for her carelessness, and kisses Sophia on the forehead softly.

Emily, you're perfect with my daughter, and my heart swoons for you. How do you feel? Why does it feel so difficult between us? What am I missing? Am I the one who's out of touch and confused? Is the ball in my court considering how blatantly you've made the first moves?

I think we're more now, aren't we?

I step outside. Emily follows. "Goodnight," she tells Sophia, and closes her bedroom door.

“Thank you,” I say.

“No, thank you.” She ducks her head. She won’t look at me.

“Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re lying,” I retort. I lean on the wall and cross my arms. “What’s wrong?”

She whispers sweetly, “Looking after her has...”

“Left you in high spirits?” I intervene and put on a weak grin.

Emily shakes her head. “No, I...”

“Well, it can’t be something bad. You’re getting along so well. Unlike when you first met,” I point out, and she nods, and smiles, and finally, she looks at me. “Do you agree?”

“Of course I do, and I’m happy Sophia and I are getting along now. It’s just, after today, and that just now...” Emily sighs. “It doesn’t matter. I’m tired, I need to get to bed.”

Am I losing her? Doesn’t she want to talk? How do I handle this? How did I do this with Annabella? Am I meant to court her? Oh my God, am I really thinking that? Brandon, shut it. Focus. It’s been eight years. Eight long years. Don’t get lost in sorrow now. You are a grown man—you choose—you decide.

I pick you, Emily.

“I missed you,” I say below my breath, and she’s heard me. She turns, surprised.

“I missed you too,” she replies, her voice hushed. We don’t want to risk anyone hearing us. It’s late, and if I’m right, I think we’re the only ones left awake, I hope.

Emily looks up at me. She’s quiet, but content. And then I kiss her, and pull away slightly to look at her. I feel like I need to check I made the right choice. Then she kisses me, and I’m overwhelmed, and she is as well.

Emotions run high.

And we kiss without end.

We try to keep quiet, but I think we both know the hallway isn’t the place to do this.

So, next, I’m guiding her to my room, and we’re inside, and I close the door, and then it’s all a blur. I don’t know what happened—I do—but it happened all so suddenly. I feel like I’m in a lucid dream, and it’s the best one yet.

Kissing. Embracing. All behind a closed door, and she doesn’t leave my room tonight. There’s no need. Not when we’re joined as one, for good, and we admit to one another that there is definitely something between us, and we have a lot of issues to navigate, mainly in our circumstances, but that’s okay.

When we’re done, and she’s sleepy, and she’s gone into a deep slumber, I lay on my back and I’m left with my own thoughts, and they all say the same thing.

I love her.

Chapter 21

Emily

Brandon pushes a plate toward me, hands me a knife and fork, and then sets down his own plate and cutlery. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” he says, and smiles at me. He’s had an aura about him since last night. If anyone is too observant, they might notice he’s got a stride in his step and he’s holding his head higher than ever.

I shouldn’t think about it. I really shouldn’t. Not now, not when he’s prepared me a classic breakfast with his own spin on it—pancakes for dessert. A strange mix, but I’m too high in the clouds to care, and with him being so positive around me, it’s difficult to think of much else.

“It’s okay,” I tell him, and prepare to dig in. “Thank you for breakfast.”

“You’re very welcome.” He places a hand on my shoulder, and slides it across the back of my head, ruffling my hair until it is slightly frizzy, but he does it all with a gentle touch, with strong, hard hands that proved how caring they can be. A shiver courses through me, and I can’t help but lean into him before he takes his seat. As he sits, he glides by me, kisses my cheek, and I feel the electrical energy flow through me like last night. He pulls out his chair, the wood scraping the kitchen tiles, and sits down.

“Now, let’s eat,” he murmurs, and prepares to dig in, just like me. “I hope the pancakes aren’t too strange for you.”

“No, it’s fine. You like them for a reason. I should at least give them a try.” It’s a very strange mix considering there’s sausages, bacon, fruit, and fried eggs. I would never normally eat this much, but if he wants to spoil me, who am I to stop him?

“Don’t judge it till you try it,” he tells me, already eagerly cutting up his food. I’ve never noticed it till now, but he’s eating like a hog! He scoffs his food down like there’s no tomorrow, eagerly eating up every bit he can.

I poke his cheek, and he stops. Confused, he looks at me, a mouthful of fruit and pancake in his mouth. He doesn’t say anything, he just stares.

“Slow down,” I tell him, poke him again, and proceed to eat my breakfast as well while it’s still hot. “It’s delicious,” I tell him, only a few mouthfuls in. To show how thankful he is, he gently places a hand on my thigh, or at least, I assume that’s the case. He squeezes my thigh twice. Ah, a second shiver...

“Having breakfast together, are we?” John asks as he enters the kitchen, and Brandon removes his hand from my thigh so fast, it could’ve left a burn. He swallows his food and smiles innocently at his dad, putting on the act we agreed we’d do together. He hides how close we are. His peppiness is already too much of a giveaway, and I am not sure how perceptive his father really is.

Brandon handles the social dialogue. I nod, smile, and eat since I’m so far behind. What few words I say are all that is needed. I don’t need to put on an act. Brandon is the one who

decided we need to take things slow and steady, for his sake and his daughter's, but me? I don't know what to make of any of it. I'm not sure what we are or why. It all happened so fast—I blinked, and it was the morning. I feel great, don't get me wrong on that one, but Brandon... this is complicated. We're very different at heart, with very different lives. There's a reason we clashed when we first met. Who's to say we won't clash in the future?

“It's good to see you two are getting along, course, we've known that for a while,” Brandon's dad says, looking at the leftovers on the table. “Your dad and I, Emily, were talking about how much has changed since you both met.”

“I imagine a lot,” I reply through a mouthful.

John leans on the side of the kitchen counter. “A lot indeed! You know, have you two ever spoken about the day you met? I must admit, those impressions were very rocky at the time.”

Brandon finishes his plate and pushes it aside. “Ha, yeah... rocky is one word for it.”

“Well, neither of us were in a good mood,” I point out, preparing another load of pancake on my fork. “But in hindsight, I think with everything I've learned... that whole first impression between us was just terrible timing.”

Brandon leans on the table, his arms bulging as he does so, and the definition of his forearms not only looks pleasing to the eye, but I also know how they feel now, and a look almost isn't enough like it once was.

“It didn’t help that I jumped to the defensive with you not working on the farm,” he says.

“You snapped at me, as well. You said especially not me, remember?” I put the forkful of pancakes in my mouth. I chew and say carefully as to not choke to death (death by pancake wouldn’t look great on my gravestone), “I’m not sure what the first thing I said was, but the second I had barely stepped onto the path down into the main body of the ranch, I think I... what was it again?”

John looks between us as we talk.

“You said something along the lines of how you can’t believe you are going to have to work here?” Brandon says, trying to remember what had happened. “Oh, wait, no, hold on. We got off to a bad start because Sophia charged at you.”

“Oh, right, yeah.”

John laughs. “Ah, so that is where it all started?”

I take another forkful, chew, swallow, and mutter, “It hurt. She’s strong, like her dad.”

Brandon, surprised by my comment, trips over his tongue for a moment. Then, he says at last, “Well, I don’t go charging into people, so I don’t know where she got that from.”

John hums. “Not her grandparents, that is for sure.”

Brandon laughs as I take my final mouthful. I can’t believe I finished my plate. I don’t know how I’m going to get all my tasks done when I’m so full!

“It’s all in the past now,” Brandon says aloud, leaning forward further, but he turns his head to me. “I’m sorry for how that all went down. I hope you can forgive me. I know you were going through a difficult time.”

I push my plate away. “I’m sorry for everything I did. Let’s leave it in the past. It was one bad day.”

“Other than the first time you had her herding cattle,” John said gravely.

Brandon bowed his head, not rising to his dad’s comment.

“Anyway, it is good to see you both doing well. Sometimes, I think you’re more than friends.”

We all laugh, and joke, but once it is done, I can’t help but feel stressed. This is quite a mess we’ve gone and gotten ourselves in. His dad helps himself to the leftovers, declaring how successful Brandon has been with running the business while he was away the other day. Breakfast rolls on, and I move on to showering, tidying myself up, and making myself properly presentable for the day ahead.

John gets back into the swing of things, picking up what contracts Brandon had secured, so Brandon has a free day ahead of him.

“What’s the plan?” I ask him when we have a private moment.

“I don’t know. There’s nothing to do today other than the usual. So…” Brandon shakes his head, and we find ourselves drifting toward the living room. We soak ourselves in comfort,

relaxing on the couch. I sink away into the depths of the cushions, melting into bliss. I close my eyes and try not to think about how awkward this morning has been.

“We should do something together and talk,” he says, and checks the surroundings.

“Talk about what? We both agreed last night that we’d take it slow.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Is there something on your mind?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there something specific you’re worried about?” I shift toward him until our arms touch. “Don’t hide anything from me. You do that enough as it is. Wait, no, I’m sorry, that was bratty of me. I shouldn’t have said it like that. I mean... you’re only just opening up to me, you know? I don’t want to cause you any issues, is all.”

Brandon lifts his hand, and from his angle, he places his hand on my cheek and guides me to look him in the eye. “I do want to make leeway with us, whatever we are.”

“Me too.”

He caresses my cheek. “We’ll progress bit by bit, until we’re ready. I think it is because everything is still new to us. We can’t help but feel confused by it all. It’s strange for both of us. I take it you know a little bit about my past? You can tell me the truth.”

“About... Annabella?”

“Yes.”

I don't look away. I tell him directly. "I do."

"I'm guessing you learned, or figured it out, or—"

"Michael," I interrupt.

He sighs, and looks at the ceiling in thought. "Of course he did."

"We don't have to talk about the past, unless you—"

"No, I'm fine." He looks at me and smiles. "I want to start living in the here and now. Seeing you and Sophia has made me realize just how much I'm missing out on."

I lean into him, resting my head on the broadness of his shoulders, and I feel the cushioning of his muscles. "Well, if you ever want to talk, I'm here."

"I know." He lightly kisses my forehead, the same way he does Sophia. "And vice versa, about anything you need to talk about."

The front door opens fiercely, bringing with it the thundering footsteps of a man riddled with excitement. I leap away from Brandon, pretending nothing is wrong, and if anything, I've also just arrived. Turning into the room is my dad, and he looks at me with a wide smile on his face, and a look to him that I haven't seen in a long time now.

He waves his hands about and talks to my face alone. "I've been offered a job back home!"

"Home?" I ask, bewildered. "As in...?"

“Virginia Beach,” he clarifies, a broad smile on his lips. We’ve barely spoken. Lately, we don’t connect like we used to. Not since Mom died. And now he’s here, telling me this, and I’m not sure what home is anymore.

“You know, the ‘big city,’” he tries, but it isn’t working. I should be jumping for joy. I’m not.

Still, my dad continues, smiling away. “A well-paying position, too.”

I should say something. I can’t.

My dad begins to slowly understand. “What’s the problem? You’ve wanted to go back home, haven’t you?”

I should say yes. I did make a fuss. But I don’t know what home is anymore.

“Emily, we can go back to the city,” he states.

I insist on my silence. I find my gaze falls onto Brandon. My father looks his way. “What’s going on?”

“Congratulations,” Brandon says, but his numbness is apparent too.

“What is going on?” my dad says, and looks between us, disappointed. “I thought it would make you happy—”

“Dad, stop,” I say, and he does, and then he takes a breath to continue anyway. “Dad—”

“Do you want to stay here? Did you change your mind?” He furrows his brows. I see the way he clenches his jaw. He looks

at Brandon, perplexed, and then at me, exasperated. “What’s changed? I mean, I suppose it is okay, but...”

But? Why did he have to say that word? What if I had changed my mind? Does he expect a good reason from me? I want to say, “so much” and “I’ve fallen in love” and how it is more than just Brandon that makes me feel conflicted. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve worked hard to get this opportunity,” he mutters, downcast in all but his eyes—in his eyes is anger. “The choice is yours. You made such a racket about us moving out here and wanting to go home. Make up your mind, darling.”

“Can’t you see how happy I am here?” I find myself saying.

“Well, of course. I see how hard you work. I just thought, seeing as you had grown up in the city, that you might still want to go back?”

I open my mouth. For a moment, instinct, nostalgia, and the thought of being back where I belong comes and goes. I almost go for it, grasping the opportunity. I stop. I see the hurt look on Brandon’s face. Did he see the way my face lit up, because I felt that. I felt the way the smile was rising, and my lips twitched, and every facial muscle contorted to reveal how, at last, the choice is mine... and I’m not sure I want it.

“Surely, you must’ve missed it when you went on that school trip?”

“Of course,” I tell my dad, and from the corner of my eye, Brandon rises from his seat.

“Really?” he says aloud.

“Well, yes, but also—”

“Well, you’ve been given the opportunity. Better not miss it.” He looks at my dad. “Congratulations again, sir.”

“You don’t have to call me—” Brandon had already left the room, leaving my dad flabbergasted, “—sir.” The focus is put on me again. “Well, think about what matters to you most, then, because I need to give them an answer.”

“You haven’t accepted the job?”

My dad shoves his hands into his pockets. “Not yet.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to tell you first. To ask.” He sinks away, retreating. “I’m glad I did. I guess being out here changed your mind a bit, eh?”

“Kind of.” I step after him, but my heart hurts. I need to speak to Brandon. He’s upset, isn’t he? I have to do something.

“So, what was it?”

What changed my mind, he asks? What, with my heart swooning for Brandon and the chemistry between us starting to sizzle, it’s no wonder I’ve found myself at odds with my father. “You’ve done all of that for me?”

“No—”

“Yes, you have. But do *you* actually want to go home?” I ask, flipping it on him, and I stand up to my dad who closes

his eyes, and hesitates to reply, telling me everything by doing nothing.

“You don’t want to. You shouldn’t do something just because of me—”

“But, you—”

I shout, “I know I was a sulking, whining child for weeks. I know!” I feel tears pushing behind my eyes. I feel red and hot with anger. I feel stuck. Confused. Lost. “What do *you* want, Dad?”

“I...”

“Mom’s gone. There’s no home anymore. So what do you want?”

“I’m stuck between money and my own happiness,” he says back, trying to keep his tone fair, and his temperament in control as I attack him verbally, hot in the cheeks and tears streaming from my eyes. “On the ranch, I found a part of who I really am again. So, no. I don’t think so. I don’t know!”

“Then do what you need to do for you. I’m not a child anymore. I’ll figure out my own life. If I want to go home, then fine, I will, but it doesn’t have to be with you!”

“You’re going home?” a meek voice says, and we both turn, but the snap of reality crashing down on us is different. My dad doesn’t understand fully, but for me, then, to see Sophia innocently walk into this war zone of confusion and pained emotions, she’s caught me at the worst time. Already, I try to

wipe my eyes, but she's starting to stutter, and cry, and she looks at me with such sad, puffy eyes.

“You... y-you're leaving. You're my new m-mommy. You're leaving...”

She turns and runs, and I realize her fear, because one mother she didn't know left her without a choice, and now she thinks the mother she knows is choosing to leave her too.

Chapter 22

Emily

“What a mess, huh?” I mumble to my horse. She listens to my woes. I’m surprised she isn’t sick of me yet. I run my hand through her mane, feeling the softness of the hair, how it slides between my fingers.

“This is all just one big mess,” I say, and I stroke Esme’s mane again, and I’m reminded even more of how attached I am to being out here. If I go home, I say goodbye to many things, and horse-riding and Esme is one of them. Of course, irony has it that she has my mother’s name. I wonder what she’d want for me. The obvious answer is to be happy.

“How do I fix this mess?” I ask, and Esme wiggles her head.

“I could use your help,” I continue, and she snorts.

“Thank you.” I stroke my hand across her head, patting the top, and she accepts it like it is a great honor; even if she’s confused, she accepts all the love and attention anyway. I don’t have any issues with it. This is comforting, in a way. It’s been a difficult day, and after lots of ensuing drama, where things were said and done, it helped me realize just how much has been going on behind the scenes.

My dad was working hard to find a way to get me back home. He still looked out for me and tried, and he thought he had a lovely surprise ready for me as well. I ruined that for

him. It's not like I've kept up with him, keeping him in the loop or anything.

Communication broke down since Mom died. It just up and disappeared. I don't know what I can say or do to remedy that. I know he wants an answer from me sooner or later. He won't wait forever, not with that job offer hanging over his head, but he's made it clear that he wants to stay out here. He loves this life. It's the reason we came back out here in the first place.

Michael planned all of this for you, Dad, and you've embraced it to the extent that you want to find your own way. The city is something you don't want to get back to. So, that's the core of all of this, right?

"Esme, what do I do?" But Esme has nothing to offer. She's cute, she's fierce, and she accepts any and all cuddles that come her way. But she has little else to say or do than accept my comfort because I think she knows, really, she's comforting me right now. They say animals aren't stupid, that they can sense emotions. Well, here I am, letting it all out, and she's been nothing but a sweetheart with me.

"You've really grown on me," I say, and press my head against hers. She shuffles, nervous, but relaxes as I stroke her again. At this point, we're cuddling, the two of us alone in the stables, the evening drawing on after a long, tedious day of nothing but trouble.

"Are you the same?" I ask. "Do you feel close to me too?"

I'd like to believe she's grown on me the same way I have on her. What if we're inseparable? What if she refuses to ever

let anyone else ride her?

“I can’t believe this,” I mutter, and drop my head. “I’m talking to a horse. As if that will solve my problems...” I giggle softly, I can’t help it. I’m laughing at my own jokes, about my own predicament. They do say that self-deprecating humor is the best kind. But right now, it feels kind of sad.

I’m alone. It’s quiet. It’s peaceful. I have Esme and she has me. But most of all, I have my thoughts and nothing more.

When I look at Esme, and I talk with her, and I breathe in the stench of the nasty manure she’s just dropped like a log on the forest floor, disturbing the peaceful nature, I’m forced to confront a hard truth. As if, right now, as I talk to Esme until I must gag and move away to recover from the smell’s radius, the debate rages on. The mirror I look at, and talk to, reflects a choice. I know a choice must be made.

I cough, I splutter, and I groan, having escaped the smell. “I’ll make a choice for myself.” I look back, and Esme happily munches away on the hay I offered.

So, what now, huh? Back to square one. And I thought my life was complicated when I got here. Ha.

“Esme, you’ve got it really simple, you know?” I say aloud to her, but she doesn’t seem to care. “You don’t have to decide if you’ll go back to the city, if you’ll go back to the life you once had. I wanted that life back. I really did. But I don’t think I want it anymore. It’s like a chapter in my life, and I can’t go back. So, what are my options? Because, the way I see it, the

other option is to stay, to fall deeper in love with Brandon,
and...”

Chapter 23

Brandon

“—And what?” I finish for her, and she spins to face me, eyes wide with surprise and rightfully so. This day has gone haywire. Everything has slipped out of control and I’m not sure at what point everything began to fall apart. But it’s happened anyway, and now we’re here, trying to make amends.

“Brandon,” she says, a slight amount of shock to her voice, but it is her face that reveals so much more. I can’t be dense right now, and I know most things go over my head, but every step I take closer to her, through the quiet stables, as the evening gradually fades into the looming night, and we face one another, and I know she is happy to see me.

“How long have you been out here?” I ask her, no more than two steps away from her. I keep my distance. I’ve had a long day to think about her, and everything she’s going through.

“Maybe a couple of hours, honestly...” She darts her head away, and her eyes refuse to look at me. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “There’s nothing wrong, really.”

She snaps back to me. “Yes, there is.”

“No, there isn’t,” I insist, and I take my first step toward her. “You are your own person. Do whatever you want to do. I’m just happy I found you first. Emily, we’ve all been trying to find you. Your father is asking after you. He wants to know

you're okay, and where you've gone, and..." I can't bring myself to say it. He's kept his standpoint and he's held that ground like he's the king of the hill.

She finishes for me, "He needs an answer."

"Yes," I murmur.

She nods and crosses her arms. "He deserves one."

My mouth hangs open for a moment. "Uh, yeah, I suppose so?" Slowly, she shakes her head, and shifts away from me, walking toward Esme and her hay. "I take it you fed her?"

Emily nods. I nod back. I'm not sure what to say. I've found her, the woman I've fallen for, and she's found peace in the stables. I know why. I'm surprised I didn't check sooner—what a fool I am.

"We've been talking," she says, and gestures casually to Esme, as if the day hadn't turned into absolute chaos. "She's helped me try to gather my thoughts."

"And how is that going for you?"

"Not very well." A small, delicate laugh slips past her lips. "I'm trying, I really am. I'm just... so confused."

"It's easy to get lost in everything that has been going on. You've had a massive change of lifestyle, and now it's about to be flipped again." I step beside her, joining her where she stops beside Esme, admiring her. I reach out, stroking Esme's mane. "I haven't made it any easier. I'm sorry."

Emily knocks into me. "Why are you sorry?"

“Because I should’ve just kept away. I’m the reason you’re not sure what to do, right?”

“Mostly,” she surmises, and forces the words out like it pains her, “but it isn’t all you that is making this difficult. Don’t get so big-headed to assume love is the only reason I’m struggling to decide.”

“I know that.”

“Clearly not.” She turns on me. “There’s so much more to all of this.”

“I’m not stupid, Emily. I know.”

“Then why do you think you’re the problem? It’s not about you. I didn’t take you for a narcissist.”

“Well, I... I just assumed.”

“You assumed?” She scoffs. “There it is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You assumed. That’s the problem. You seem to do that with most things, don’t you? You don’t put much thought into it, or anything—”

“Now you’re just being rude for the sake of it.”

She growls at me. “I’m... I’m struggling, Brandon. My mom died. She left us so soon. Then all of this happened. I had friends, dreams, and prospects back in the city, I had my way forward in life planned out and you know what happened? Do you really want to know? I left. I had a choice as well. I was too scared to do it alone. Everything went wrong and I had no

control over anything. I was just some kind of stupid fly in the wind. And then, as the weeks rolled by, I noticed my friends didn't bother to ever check up on me. My dreams were either stupid or too ambitious. Any prospects I thought I once had had been so generic, it made me realize that this..." She points to Esme. "This whole life."

She points to the stables, and the ranch beyond that. "This lifestyle is the one I want. I crave it. It helps me... feel closer to my mom." Lifting her hand, she trembles as she strokes Esme, and her eyes shut tight. "Then there is everything else. Sophia. You." She opens her eyes and faces me at last. I stay silent. "So, you want the full truth, do you? I feel things for you, if you hadn't noticed. I don't know what it is. I want to say love, because it hurts my heart that we're having to have this talk. That it has finally come to this."

She stops, stutters, and chokes on her words.

I don't give her another chance to ramble on. I hear her. I've listened. I've learned.

I hold her, and I don't let her go as she cries into my chest, and I keep her there, stroking her hair, and I whisper, "I never thought I'd love again after Annabella died. I never thought Sophia would accept anyone for a mom but the one she never knew. I never, ever thought in my wildest dreams I'd feel the things that I'd felt with Annabella, with anyone. And then you came along. Eight years since my life fell apart, you made me realize how beautiful it all is. You've opened my heart in a way. You make me happy, and, even if Annabella is a heavy

weight on my heart, I feel it is lighter knowing you're here, and you accept me, support me, and love me through it all..."

I lightly kiss her head, her hairs bristling against my lips. "Annabella died during childbirth. I've not been the same ever since. We were so happy. So eager for the rest of our lives together. She died not knowing if her baby survived, or the gender. Sophia's birth was a miracle, because the doctors told me that neither of them should've made it..." I can't stop them, the tears, they come, and flow, and fall. "We always said if we had a girl, it'd be Sophia, so I kept that promise, even after she passed, not knowing what had even happened. And I know that if she were watching over us right now, she'd adore you, Emily, and she'd know you're right for me because you put Sophia first."

Emily pulls away, and she gawks at me, unable to comprehend the teardrops pouring from my eyes, and neither can I. I haven't cried since Annabella died, and I haven't felt this strongly for someone since her either. That's how I know, even if the past will never truly disappear, that it helps me understand just how precious this moment is now, and she is, and why I can't let this go. I won't let her slip away from me if I can help it.

"I don't know what to do," Emily mumbles, her voice weak and squeaky, and she cries harder, and I cry with her, and we're trying to compose ourselves but we're failing.

"I won't tell you," I say despite how much it hurts. "I only want you to be happy all the same, I really do."

Emily wipes her eyes. “I just... I think...”

“B-but you should know, as your boss, I can’t let you walk away that easily. You’ve been slacking the past couple of days!” I say, forcing humor to make this situation easier. The tension eases a bit, and this last resort of mine to sway her into staying makes her giggle through her sadness, but it doesn’t work.

“I’ll choose,” she says.

I stop my laughing. I wipe my eyes. I wait. My heart hammers in my chest, and I feel my blood run hot.

She utters lowly, “I... think I know. I’ve chosen.”

Chapter 24

Emily

Clean. Romantic. But only temporary. Our kiss ends with the calling of my name, and even though my choice is made, and settled in the dust at last, it doesn't stop me from jolting. I have to pull away from him, and Brandon understands why. The roars of my father approach, closer and closer, until I'm left frantically trying to find a way to handle this situation, and I think I know how to when Brandon decides to kiss me again and hide himself in a pen, behind Esme, with the cover of darkness and shadows. I'd laugh as he realizes she's left quite the mess in there with her, but it's too late to change things now, and his gagging doesn't exactly help him keep a low profile either.

We shared our talk, and our kiss, and I'm in a sorry state. My appearance is a mess, but I don't bother to hide it. I step out into the open, ready to confront my father, but he's beaten me to it. He storms his way down the long walkway of the stables, past horse after horse, until he's right in front of me, and I see, once he's close enough, that his gasps and mutters were that of love. He hugs me, and holds me so tight I can barely breathe.

"I'm sorry," he tells me, his voice shaky. "I never meant to cause you so much pain."

I can't help but laugh, and you know what, Dad, I'll hug you back. I'll hug you harder than you ever could me. "It's okay." Because I love you. "Mom wouldn't want anything to

come between us. And it's not your fault, Dad. I'll be okay, whatever I choose, but it should never be a burden for you."

I pull away, and he rubs his back where I'd held him so tight. His face, tired and weary, shows signs of wrinkles, and his hair signs of grayed stress. The years caught up to him, slowly, but surely, but one thing doesn't change after all this time, and I thought he'd lost it when Mom died, but there it is. He's smiling, and it's bright, and loving, and warm, and even in the barely lit stables, the dim lighting a product of a close, half-moon on a clear, cool, and calm night, I know he's genuine. There's no pain in his smile.

"You want to stay here, don't you?" he asks, and looks me in the eye, person to person. He doesn't treat me like a child. He sees me as an adult. "Whatever you want to do, I'll support you in whatever way I can."

I gulp, because here it is. I have to say the words, and then it's done. This is the next big chapter in my life, and nothing will ever change that. I miss you Mom, and I love you so much, and I hope you're watching us now—all of us—and smiling with us, knowing that we'll resolve this, once and for all.

"I want to stay here," I tell him, and he relaxes, only before raising his eyebrows and pondering aloud in shock.

"I'm curious. What changed? I think there is more to this than you just enjoying working and living on the ranch. Is there more to this? What is it that's changed?"

“So much, Dad. Haven’t you seen it? The same way I see it with you. We both love this life. We’re at home here. The city will always have a special place in our hearts, but that chapter in our lives is over, and it ended with Mom. She’d want us to be happy, to do what we want.”

“To follow our hearts, hold our heads high, and keep a smile on our faces,” he says, and smiles, and hugs me again without warning. I cough, laugh, and hug him back, despite the fact I can hardly breathe.

“Coming out here has changed me,” I admit, and I grin when I say that, because it all crashes down on me just how different things are now.

Then, it hits us. I gag, and my dad gags, and a certain someone gags in the pen belonging to Esme.

“What did you feed that horse!” he shouts, and coughs, and then his face is riddled with the fearful certainty he heard someone else, and he’s sure of it, because he’s checking despite the stench of horse poo, and lo and behold, he’s spotted Brandon.

Chapter 25

Brandon

I... can't... b-believe this...

“Brandon?”

“Hi, Steve...” I choke out, and I lurch as I escape the pen. Get me out of here, now! The smell— Someone— Please, help—

“What’s going on?” Steve questions, cautious as he edges away from us both, and we follow, because neither Emily nor I want to be anywhere near Esme right now. I need to get her checked as soon as possible because wow, what in the world just came out of her—

“Why were you hiding?” Steve says, and at last, it’s out there. He’s made the clear, well-thought statement and I don’t know what to say. He wasn’t supposed to find me. Esme wasn’t supposed to gas me out of my hiding spot either. So, I clean myself off, regaining my composure to face the man who’s utterly lost, but concerned, by what he’s just witnessed.

“I was hiding because...”

But there’s no good reason. What can I say? There’s nothing. Nothing at all that can help smooth over this situation. So, now I stand here, spluttering on words that dance on the edge of my tongue, and I’m turned from the man he thinks I am into a confused child who doesn’t know his left from his right.

Steve looks at Emily, and I swear, the way it dawns on him then is almost spectacular. The shining glow on his face as reality comes crashing down all at once. It makes sense.

“Oh,” he whispers, and nods, and crosses his arms, and the look I expect is anger, and I don’t know why I do, because instead he just smugly echoes a laugh that I know I’ll never forget. “That makes sense.”

“D-Dad,” Emily begins, catches her breath, and speaks so fast, it’s a miracle either of us understood what she said, “Brandon is an idiot and tried to hide when he shouldn’t have and I tried to play dumb and it didn’t work so—”

“I’ve pieced it all together,” Steve says, cutting her off, and waving a hand at us both. “In all my years, I would’ve never guessed it.”

Neither would I, but I won’t say that. Trying to even begin explaining the complex story of Emily and me is not one I want to get into right now.

“It’s complicated, Dad...”

“I bet. You know, I thought you two were going to kill each other when you first met. Somewhere along the line, that changed, didn’t it?”

I step in, and I make it snappy. “I was just supervising her and making sure she was okay working this late.” They both look at me.

“Are you that stupid?” Emily mutters.

“There’s no point trying to play this off any longer,” Steve laughs, and shakes his head, dismissing me entirely to focus on Emily. “If I’d have known love was keeping you here, I’d have never believed it. You know what? I’m inspired. I choose to stay on the ranch, and I’ve been thinking about even beginning to invest in purchasing my own plot of land. I know returning to my roots was part of helping my grief, but all it’s done is helped me realize just how much passion I lost when I moved to the city. Your mom always worried she’d done me wrong, but love kept me strong, and I learned to love the city the same way you learned to love it here, and... in that same way, you found love just like I did despite the circumstances. Without Esme, the city will never be the same, so here I return, to find what I’d lost now I’ve lost her. Oh, wow, I feel guilty saying that—”

“No,” Emily bluntly interjects. “No, Dad. It’s okay. Mom would want this. She’d want you to be happy.”

Steven nods, and I stand here, nodding away, unable to fit myself into this awkward situation. I think this moment, really, is between father and daughter. I’m just a spectator to a beautiful heart-to-heart if nothing else.

“And what about Sophia?” Steven asks her, but she turns to me.

“I’ve come to love her too,” she says, and reaches for my hand. I reach for hers, and we take the other’s hand. “Father and daughter—both are as incredible as the other.”

“Ah, my little girl...” Steven looks at me, absolutely vivid with emotions I can’t possibly begin to describe. “You two, my god...” He laughs, and has to turn away to wipe his eyes. “Come on, let’s get back, you two. Everyone is worried—”

“Hey,” a new voice says, and enters the fray of emotions, and we all jump and stare at who dared to appear so suddenly, and in the doorway stands a firm face, and a strong stance.

Michael comes forward from nowhere. “I was listening for a while,” he explains, and looks at his dad primarily, showing no surprise that Emily and I hold the other’s hand. He spares a glance, and smiles, and then wipes that smile away to focus.

“Dad, I’m going back. I had a life in the city, one worth going back for, and being older than Emily... I’d cemented myself there, you know? City life isn’t all bad. So, I’m going back home. I’m going back to where I want to be, with the friends I’ve made, and the love I’ve found.”

My dad looks between us, his children, and sighs. “Everyone is falling in love...” He sniffles. “Ah... if only your mother could see you.” He wrinkles his nose, and lifts his chin, a clear way to try and hide the forming tears. “S-she’d be happy.”

Michael hugs Dad, and I do as well, and we don’t say a thing. When it is done, I return to Brandon, and I take his hand. This is it. From here, we are making our own path in life, and we’re doing it together with support from my family, and hopefully his as well, though I see no reason why it would cause any issues.

Brandon wraps a strong arm around me as my dad interrogates Michael on what exactly he's been up to, and how he has gotten away with his long-distance relationship and no one has noticed—even me, and I'm normally able to read my brother better than anyone else!

“Our future is going to be a good one,” Brandon whispers while my dad and Michael are distracted.

I cuddle into him. “Agreed.”

Chapter 26

Emily

I still can't believe him. My big brother, all this time, had a secret romance of his own, long distance and struggling in its own ways. I had no idea there were days he'd disappeared, going all the way back to meet the woman who'd given her heart to him and him alone.

So, it makes it all the harder, standing here, with everyone at the gate. Michael's packed, his car has a full tank of gas, and he's ready to go, jacket, keys, wallet, and all of everything else he brought with him. And, even though he's going, he has a hint of excitement in his face. In everything he says, how he says his thank yous and farewells to John and Mary, and offers up a high-five to Sophia, sharing a moment of joy with the little girl he's happy to call his niece. Then there's our dad, and the hug they share, and the words that flow with it, are so rich with love and pride.

"Promise you'll be okay?" Dad says for what might be the tenth time or more, and we all laugh, all of us gathered here on this warm afternoon, the day taken off to see him off as he enters a new chapter of his life just as much as the rest of us.

"I promise, Dad. And, don't forget I'm thirty—"

"You're still my little boy!"

We all laugh again, and then it comes to me, and Michael looks at me with a lopsided grin. "You be safe. Call me if he causes you any trouble. I'm sure he won't!"

Michael turns to Brandon, who prepares for their own way of brotherly handshakes and hugs for a goodbye, but Michael stops him, holding up an open palm. With a gritty voice, he declares, “You do anything to her, and you’ll not see the light of day again.” Brandon chuckles uneasily. Michael then smiles. “But I give you my blessing.”

“Oh, shut up!” I shout, and everyone laughs, and I’m pretty sure Michael was joking, but honestly, I’m not sure, and even Brandon looks a little bit unsettled.

“I’m kidding. Besides, I knew you two were falling in love for a while. I’m glad to see you come together at last.”

“Michael,” Brandon seethes, and now it all makes sense, because we’d not made anything official yet. The only people who knew were him and Dad, and even that was sudden and unexpected in the way it all unfolded. Now, Brandon’s parents curiously loom over us, and Sophia’s beaming eyes scream out a wondrous happiness I’ve never seen before. I blush, unable to contain my embarrassment.

“Go on, goodbye,” I tell my brother, and he hugs me, openly laughing away.

“Sorry, sorry!” he yells, nervous, but it’s out there now, and it doesn’t matter. At last, his little last-moment joke reveals all there is to know, and our relationship, new, fresh, but steady, is there for everyone to see, and know, and gawk at.

“When did this happen?” John asks, unable to refrain from a big, wide, toothy grin.

“My, my, Brandon!” Mary gasps, surprised despite her blissful tone. “You have lots of explaining to do!”

“Really?” Michael chuckles, already trying to escape Brandon’s wrath, slipping away from the group to his car without much success. “Did no one else see these two lovebirds falling in love?” He looks around, even as Brandon hones in on him for the kill! “Really, no one?” he yells, and is caught in a playful wrestle with his childhood friend, their scuffle bringing out only more laughter in us all.

This moment, all of us here, changes everything. This is it, where everything changes once and for all.

What has happened out of everyone’s sight and mind is no longer disguised or hidden, and Brandon, once I tear him away from Michael before an accident happens, says with me, “It all happened last night.”

And at last, for John, Mary, and Sophia, it all made sense at once, and they were able to piece together everything that, before, didn’t make sense, into a clear picture of why things have changed the way that they have.

John and Mary, happy as can be, get to watch their son be born anew, and they see a good, strong, happy man whose past no longer defines him, and he’ll take up the mantle they’ve built for him.

My dad will work with John and Mary to find his way in life and begin his own business nearby.

Michael watches on as we all talk, and chatter, even as his phone rings and he really must go—his special someone is waiting for him in the big city.

And then there's me and Brandon, and we hold the other's hand and turn to the little bundle of joy, a little girl who, at one point, was odd to me. She was a strange thing, so unlike anything I've ever known. No little girl is quite like her, but she rushes toward me, announcing as she goes, "Mommy, Mommy!", and I can't help but drop to my knees with my new partner, and between us, as she slams into me, we hold her. The ecstatic Sophia nuzzles me, saying again and again, "I love you; I love you."

I feel a delicate touch on my temple. Brandon kisses me softly, before turning me to face him. In one swoop, he embraces me, lifting me up by my waist and in the air. I giggle and wrap my arms around his neck. We gaze at one another longingly. This moment is ours and ours alone.

Gently, he lowers me, whispering in my ear, "I love you, Emily."

And, I say, and I smile through those four words, "I love you too."

The End

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My Grumpy Cowboy Boss

He's a cowboy keeping the family ranch above water.

She's a disgraced starlet and his brother's best friend.

On paper, they're terrible for each other.

Then one kiss changes everything.

Thomas

The last thing I need is a blast from the past.

Mindy took off for Hollywood from our small town and never looked back. Sign up for my [newsletter](#) and get *My*

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My Grumpy Cowboy Boss

Ten years my junior, she's easy on the eyes, but as my newest employee, she's off-limits.

The last time I risked a work romance, I ended up divorced and alone with my son.

Mindy

Working as a ranch hand for the world's grumpiest boss should have been simple.

Running from my recent scandal was supposed to be the hard part.

Then Thomas suddenly pulled me in for a kiss and everything changed.

The last thing I need is for the paparazzi to catch wind of our forbidden romance.

With his broken heart and her secret past, can these two opposites overcome the odds or will their love get trashed by the tabloids before it begins?

★ My Grumpy Cowboy Boss is a sweet, closed-door romance full of sizzle, witty banter, chemistry and even a kiss

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First book in the series...

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE ***My Grumpy Cowboy***, the 1st full length book in the series.

My Grumpy Cowboy

**Falling for the handsome cowboy wasn't part of the plan!
And him becoming my boss was the last thing I expected.**

My brother's best friend Allen Drucker needs to sell the family ranch and it's supposed to be an easy deal.

I quickly discover he's the grumpiest cowboy I've ever met, but his little girl seems to melt his cold heart.

He repeatedly rejects my offers to buy the property, but I never take no for an answer.

Now I've got two weeks to prove myself as his ranch hand.

Closing this deal is all that's important to me.

But then there's the way he looks at me, and the feverish tingle I feel when we touch.

I know from the first time it happens that I'm in deep trouble - in more ways than one.

Do I choose the man I'm falling for over my dream property? Or will he leave me no choice and walk away from it all?

Start reading *My Grumpy Cowboy* NOW! [Click Here!](#)

Sneak Peek....Chapter One

Jean

“That will never happen,” Allen Drucker’s voice boomed right across the living room from where he stood and sent a chill up my spine that stiffened it and made me gasp. It was a fierce sound that sent a shiver right through me, and a flutter erupted in the pit of my stomach.

The sensation only lasted a second before it disappeared, and a churn replaced it.

This isn't going according to plan.

I met his sharp gaze. His dark eyes shot daggers at me, and his upper lip curled into an annoyed smirk. Allen Drucker was obviously tense from the entire news I broke to him seconds ago, but the grim expression he wore did not hide much of his handsome features.

He combed his lean fingers through his dark mass of hair and looked at me again. Another tingle raced through me when

his brooding dark eyes pierced mine, and I had to remind myself to breathe.

Not now, Jean. Yes, Allen Drucker was a sure sight for sore eyes, but that was not why I was here. *I am here to get a ranch, and a vineyard too,* I reminded myself, then sucked in a deep breath and stilled my weak insides.

“You’ve got a good deal on the table, and—”

[To continue reading *My Grumpy Cowboy*, CLICK HERE!](#)

Cowboy Recipes

It's Been a Long Day Crockpot Chicken & Gravy.

Only 3 ingredients!! Just dump everything in the slow cooker and let it work its magic!

Serve over hot steamed rice with Not Your Granny's Green Beans (shared in My Grumpy Cowboy). SO easy and a crowd pleaser!

Ingredients:

3 to 4 boneless skinless chicken breasts
1 (10.5-oz) can cream of chicken soup
2 (0.87-oz) envelopes of chicken gravy mix
1/2 cup water or chicken broth, optional

Instructions:

Place chicken in the slow cooker and season with salt and pepper, if desired.

Whisk together soup, gravy mix, and water (if using). Pour over chicken.

Cover crock-pot and cook on LOW for 4-6 hours.

Before serving break the chicken breasts into bite-sized pieces.

Serve over hot steamed rice.

Notes:

Do not make the gravy. You are only using the dry mix.

Can use chicken thighs or tenderloins in place of chicken breasts.

Can add frozen vegetables to the mixture.

You will need to cook on the higher end of the cooking time if using frozen chicken.

Hardy Breakfast Bites – Sausage Breakfast Muffins

Individual breakfast casserole bites baked in a muffin pan. These muffins have been on repeat at our house.

Only 6 ingredients. Sausage, hash browns, cheese, eggs, milk, and Bisquick. Can freeze baked muffins for a quick meal later. Great for parties, baby showers, breakfast, brunch, lunch, and dinner.

Ingredients:

1 lb sausage
1 cup Bisquick
4 large eggs, beaten
1½ cups shredded cheddar cheese
¼ cup milk
1 cup hash browns

Instructions:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Lightly spray a muffin pan with cooking spray or line with cupcake liners.

In a skillet, cook sausage until no longer pink. Drain fat.

Combine cooked sausage, Bisquick, eggs, cheese, milk, and hashbrowns.

Spoon batter into prepared muffin pan.

Bake for 20 minutes, until brown.

Notes:

I used Jimmy Dean Sausage. You can use any brand that you

prefer.

I like to use hot sausage in this recipe. It gives the muffins more flavor.

For the hash browns, I used Simply Potatoes refrigerated shredded hash browns.

Feel free to use frozen shredded hash browns.

I would suggest letting the potatoes partially thaw before adding them to the batter.

If you are short on time, pop them in the microwave to get them thawed.

I used a regular muffin pan for this recipe. Feel free to use a mini muffin pan.

You will need to reduce the cooking time if you use the smaller muffin pan.

You can freeze them! Bake the muffins and let them cool completely.

Place the muffins in a freezer bag and freeze for later.

To reheat, pop the muffins in the microwave or wrap in aluminum foil and bake at 350°F until warm