



Right in
FRONT
of You

Volume One
Brinley & Adrian

BROOKE MAY

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Right in Front of You Vol. 1

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For Grandma P

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Prologue

Brinley

This is the worse day of my life. It's never going to be the same. I'm so beyond sad that even as I smile and laugh, it feels like it's going to be the last time.

A sharp and glistening knife is thrust up into the air, catching the light through the small round window that overlooks the front yard below and where the sun is coming in so brightly, I wonder why there aren't any curtains over it.

There are frilly, super pretty curtains all over this house none of us are allowed to touch, but not one up here. Maybe it's because we're always up here playing. The thought steals my attention away from my friends instead of focusing on what has brought us up here from my going-away party.

This is our place, the one spot our parents have always felt safe letting us loose in even if there are things up here older than all of us combine and extremely breakable. Like the creepy doll Clover accidentally dropped while chasing Lexy. We ended up hiding it until Lilly could smuggle super glue up here to fix it.

Anything pretty much goes at Lilly's house as long as we don't touch the curtains. We have to check in through Polly, Lilly's grandma, every couple hours or so, unless we're playing up here.

Moving from my knees to my butt, I look at each of my best friends, the absolute most amazing ones I could ever ask for. Lilly is sandwiched between Lexy and Julia while

Mina, Eliza, and Clover are all looking way too happy to have stolen a knife from the kitchen.

It isn't just an everyday butter knife they would have usually snagged to use to open something, but an actual steak one this time, and knowing Lilly's grandma, it's sharp enough to cut through anything.

"The seven of us," Eliza starts as if she's giving a speech before some mighty battle, "solemnly swear to be each other's best friends for life. That no time or distance will ever stop us from being as close as we are now and continue to be each other's tribe of choice. And someday ..." She licks her lips as if she just thought of something else to add to this pact. "We'll be bridesmaids at one another's wedding." Eliza holds the steak knife high in the air as if it's her sword, and she's about to announce the charge while the rest of us sit in the circle we've made up here surrounded by boxes of Lilly's family's memories and a sheet of paper in the center.

"And for our book club to remain as strong as it is now as well." Lilly pipes up softly which leaves Clover groaning and nearly falling backward. Out of all of us, she's the one who least enjoys reading.

"Do we really need to do this?" All the color has left Lexy's face at the sight of the knife. Her brown eyes are as wide as the serving dishes downstairs staked with all my favorite foods and treats on a card table.

"Yes, this is a must." Mina barks, causing both Lilly and Lexy to flinch and grab each other while Clover and Julia bend over with a laugh. "Brinley is moving, we need to do this so we remain friends for life."

Julia is next to me, straightening up before she twines her black hair that looks midnight blue between her fingers. It was in a swirl braid from Clover's *Pocahontas* hair braider when we first got up here. Until Eliza made her announcement, she wasn't even paying attention to the crazy girls surrounding us.

"We have each other's addresses, and I promise to write all of you as often as I can." My laugh is nervous as I eye the knife coming closer, with Eliza giving me an evil smile.

"Blood will seal us as sisters for life. A tribe of seven." Mina nods even though she has a real sister downstairs likely trying to figure out where we all ran off to.

"There's no other way, Brin. Just one little poke. I even brought up peroxide and bandages afterward so we are all clean and not passing germs around." Eliza has put *way* too much thought into this.

Yet I can't argue with her.

"Okay, fine, but we do our own pokes and it *won't* be my trigger finger." Swiftly, I take the knife from her, stab the tip of my finger closest to my pinky and let a drop of blood hit the piece of paper we wrote our promises out on and signed. My drop lands right over my name.

It goes quickly for all of us until the knife is passed to Lilly. We are all ten, but she's the smallest out of our group and looks more frightened than Lexy did even though she's just as pale.

“Come on, Lil. It isn’t bad.” Moving between her and Julia, I wrap an arm around her the same moment a shout comes up from down below for us to get back downstairs.

“Come on, before we get caught and Brin has to leave.” Clover who’s been laughing through the whole thing now looks worried we’re about to get busted.

It wouldn’t be the first time, and hopefully, with me gone, not the last.

Big brown eyes dart around to all of us until Lexy takes the knife and goes first. Even though she winces; she forces a smile for Lilly’s sake and lets her blood drip over her name. “See, not bad, Lil. You can do it.”

It takes us a couple of minutes to convince her she’ll live, and her mom and grandma won’t be mad at a little prick. When she’s done and her finger is in her mouth, Eliza quickly reclaims the knife and slides it into the folds of her blue skirt her mom forced her into for my party.

“There, now we’re friends for life.” With a nod of her red head, Eliza rolls up the piece of paper for safekeeping and leads the charge downstairs with the hopes of more cake just as my mom shouts for us to hurry up, we need to get going.

Today is my last day in Morris Valley with all my friends. Mom was offered a job in Texas she couldn’t pass up, and Dad wants to find land down there and establish a ranch for us. We have to leave right away because Mom needs to get to work as soon as possible.

One by one, we make our way down the pull-down ladder while I say goodbye to my life. I don’t want to move

and be away from my friends. I want to stay here, but I have to be with my parents. When we come down to the dining room, a few people are drying their eyes while I look around the room.

Our parents and a few grandparents are spread throughout the room with Mina's younger brother and sister running around laughing. We've been lucky that our parents were all friends before we came along.

Sadness takes hold of me as tears fall, and I turn, rushing into the small crowd of my best friends. "I'm going to miss you all so much," I cry as they all wrap me in a cocoon I wish no one could break.

"We'll miss you too." Slowly, each of them pulls away until it's just me and Eliza. It feels like if I let go of her, all of this will go away.

But I have to turn to everyone who came and be polite. "Thank you for the wonderful party. I'll miss all of you." After a few more hugs and tear-filled goodbyes, Mom, Dad, and I load up into the truck weighed down by the trailer that holds our life and I'm forced to wave to everyone I'm leaving behind.

Our cattle and horses will come as soon as my parents close on the ranch they found in Texas.

My heart feels heavy, but as long as I have their addresses, I know I'll always have my friends.

Chapter One

Adrian

Present Day

A woman is called a Karen if she's doing something rude and annoying, but what's the name when you come across a man who's doing the same?

Ken?

Brad?

Kevan?

Whatever it is, the man before me is seriously getting on my last nerve, and I don't usually have many for the random people I'm forced to come into contact with whenever I come into town.

Richard? That way he can be called Dick?

I had to come to town to pick up groceries and thought I'd make my way downtown to Mina Sander's diner to grab the only kind of coffee I'm willing to pay for instead of brewing my own at the house.

And this top-knot, flip-flop with tube sock wearing tourist is making my visit to town even more unpleasant than it typically is.

"How can you *not* have soy on the menu?" He guffaws and begins to tap one flip-flop-wielding foot on the linoleum.

I've got milk that'll go bad if I don't get my ass on the road soon. Maybe now would be a good time to finally

convince the old man to get a dairy cow.

He'd just tell me to start packin' a cooler.

"I'm sorry, *sir*." Lyla, Mina's little sister, is quickly losing her temper, which is kind of hilarious, considering how squeaky her voice is. She isn't even the sibling anyone should worry about. Out of the three Sanders siblings, she has the coolest head. Evan looks like a brute but isn't too bad, while surprisingly, the dress-and-smile-wearing Mina has the hottest temper. "I've told you twice already, around here there isn't much call for soy so we don't carry it."

"What kind of tourist destination is this?" He scoffs, foot still tapping away. "You're in customer service, and I'm not satisfied."

I'm seconds away from pulling my knife from the holster at my hip and cutting that man bun from his head. It's an eye sore. I know all the law enforcement around here; I should be safe.

Before Lyla can say another word, Mina pushes out from behind the saloon-style door that leads to the kitchen with two full trays of food to a table filled with old men who are looking just as pissed off as I'm feeling.

She's quick to have them settled and turning her attention to the man who just needs to get the hell out of Morris Valley. If he's having an issue, there's a *Starbucks* on the opposite end of town.

"What seems to be the problem here?" Her tone is filled with sweetness, but I've seen that innocent-looking snake bite, and she's as deadly as they come.

“I wish to speak to the manager.” He continues with that haughty tone that has my fists clenching as he looks up and down Mina with apparent disgust. It’s such a douchebag thing to say and do.

“I’m the owner.” There goes that deadly tone on the final word. The smile drops, and her arms cross. “If you have a problem with what I have on the menu, then I have to kindly suggest you find somewhere else to get what you’re looking for.”

“Well, I—”

“Excuse me, but some of us have places to be.” Not taking it anymore, I shove my way to the counter and as politely as I can, muster myself to ask Lyla for my usual and then turn to lean against the counter to look the man in the eye.

Out of all of my friends, I’m the most reclusive. Tends to happen when you live on and operate a ranch alongside your single dad with no help we can afford.

“That was extremely rude,” he whines and looks like he’s trying to be ten-foot-tall and bulletproof, but the moment I stand to my full, towering height of six foot one, he takes a staggering step backward and nearly trips in those fucking flip-flops.

I’m not nearly as big as two of my friends—Gage Redford and Landen Doyle—who would likely make this man piss his tropical-themed shorts, but under my straw cowboy hat and dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up, I can be pretty damn intimidating.

“No, you wanna know what’s rude?” Thrusting my hands into my jean pockets, I lean closer to him as if I have a secret to share. “Comin’ to another town and expectin’ people to cater to you. Being a douchebag may be the norm where you come from, but here we treat people with respect, and it’s given in return. You’re bein’ nothin’ but rude to the two women who have made this business a hometown favorite, is the rude thing. If you even think about leavin’ a bad review, I’ll track you down and escort you over the state line myself. And trust me”—I narrow my eyes on him, not missing the fact he’s trembling—“I’ll know *exactly* what vehicle is yours. Now get out of here. This diner doesn’t want your money anyway.”

I’m all for the girls handling this on their own. I know they’re capable of it, but I’m in no mood today. It seems like every time I come into town, there’s something different to grind my patience down. More houses and apartment complexes expanding the outskirts of town, more people everywhere I look, and fewer things I used to find with ease in the stores.

I’ve never been a prepper or anything, but I’m starting to consider it so I don’t have to make any trips and be surrounded by dumbasses.

I’m not a huge fan of change, and Morris Valley is changing way too quickly these days.

He flounders while the old men start to clap and cheer, growing louder as he finally rushes out. I turn just as Lyla puts my coffee on the counter. I don’t give a flying fuck what the guy likely thinks of me. I only hope he doesn’t do anything to tamper with Mina’s reputation.

“Thank you, Ly.” Giving her more than just my amount and tip, I take my coffee and wave goodbye not only to Mina but the old guys as well.

“Man, that guy sounded like a real Chad.” Nash Dixon, one of my closest friends, stands by the door, grinning like usual as he leans against the wall next to the table of old men.

“Is that what being a douchebag male Karen is called?” Grunting, I take a sip of my coffee, hoping it’ll help tamp down my bad mood.

“Sure, I guess.” He’s laughing. He wouldn’t be if he were here to listen to all the crap the guy was attempting to spread. He’s just as protective of our friends and town as I am. “What did he do to piss you off so badly?” A frown mars his otherwise jovial face as he kicks off the wall and walks over to me.

“The poor boy needs to get laid.” The statement comes before I can answer him.

There isn’t much that startles me, but the sharp and completely unexpected remark coming from my right throws me, and I nearly stumble into the table of old men barking with laughter. I focus on Polly McArthur. She’s the most legendary woman in Morris Valley mainly because she speaks her mind and has never *ever* possessed a filter for her thoughts.

“Now, Polly, do we need to have another talk about not butting into other people’s love lives?” Mina reprimands the old woman, but she knows she’s struck a chord.

“Don’t worry, hellfire.” She waves Mina off while playing the part of a kind old woman. “I’m sure the right girl will come along, and Adrian can dip his stick.” Heat slams into my face with her wink. It’s enough to have me booking it out of the diner without another word to anyone. I’ve had to come to town more often in order to find a woman, and even if I did, none really wants a man who works nearly twenty-four hours a day and lives in isolation.

Chapter Two

Brinley

There's absolutely nothing glamorous about this kind of life.

Sweat is trickling its way down my back before disappearing into my pants, thanks to the Old West garb I'm wearing while the camera remains pointed at me even though it isn't rolling. I'm thirsty, tired, and sick of filming already. When I agreed and then signed the contract for this, I didn't think it would take weeks to get this done.

Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am was what I thought I'd be in for.

I'm not even the main focus of this episode of some show for a history channel or something like that. I just so happen to be an expert at Old West weaponry as well as an Olympic gold medalist at marksmanship.

No matter how much I'm being paid for this job, I'm ready for it to be done with.

What better thing could I do right now?

This is my profession after all. It might not be making me overly happy while feeling a little adrift right now, but this is where my interest was pulled my senior year of high school, which led me to enlist in the Army, where I was given a chance to showcase my love of shooting. I gave the military my life from the time I was eighteen until just a few months ago. After getting into the Olympics, I was approached by a gun manufacturer interested in me coming on board to do events and shows like this to showcase their weaponry. They

were impressed with my Olympic performance enough to offer me a job, and I quickly accepted.

A downside to the deal came in the form of an overconfident man who thinks he's God's gift to the world. Cannon Jones, thankfully, isn't here today, and I get a reprieve from him.

My employers sponsor this docu-series, which led me to standing out here in the desert with a movie-perfect set of an Old West town as my backdrop and targets placed to show off my talents.

"Okay, in this take, Brinley, we'd like for you to talk about this revolver and then take some shots at the targets over toward the saloon." I'm envious of the man directing me. He has a huge fan set up where he sits in the shade behind the camera watching me.

"Like all the others?" I'm not the only one they've brought on board to be part of this, but I seem to be the main focus, considering how handy I am with the pistols and revolvers of the time. Cannon is good with the rifles, something I didn't offer up, considering how much I'm already doing.

Overall, marksmanship isn't really needed right now.

"Yes." He nods energetically. "The safety and all." He waves a flamboyant hand in the air but stops when I begin to chuckle. "Something wrong?"

"Revolvers don't have an external safety you can control and that's even more so with older styles like this one."

I flip my wrist and spin the revolver as if I were a gunslinger and show him both sides of it. “See? No switch.”

“O-Okay. Well, tell the camera that,” he urges and quickly backs away to allow me to get on with it.

The sooner the better. I’m ready to be out of this heat. No amount of sunscreen is going to save my pale ass from the nightmarish sunburn coming my way. Even spending my teen years on a Texas ranch didn’t help with that.

I’m allowed one final sigh before my cue, and I’m back to this actress form I have no clue I could pull out of my ass with such ease. Momma always said I was a shit actress while Dad did his best not to laugh in agreement. I could never lie, and they aren’t the only ones to tell me so.

Somehow, I manage to get lost in time as I dive into the history and mechanics of the revolver as if I were teaching a class I’m familiar with. I’m not truly in my zone until I turn to demonstrate how it shoots. That’s when I’m no longer just Brinley Moore, Olympic gold medalist, former Army Specialist, but become one with the gun in my hand which fits there with an ease that likely doesn’t make any sense to anyone around to watch me.

It isn’t nearly as accurate as modern ones and it kicks like a mule, but it’s still a blast to shoot.

I turn back to the camera. “As you can see, the accuracy isn’t up to par like modern revolvers, and at times, that meant the difference between life or death for the shooter and the person or animal they were aimin’ at in the Old West.”

As I continue, moving to another brand of revolver before finally getting to the modern one, shooting the same targets over and over again until the director is calling cut and a wrap for the day.

I'm aching and dragging my feet back to the trailer assigned to me for the duration of filming. It would have been so much easier if I would have just become a trick shooter. I've stayed out and watched those ones at work in front of the camera. They don't do much talking like me and just get to show off their finesse.

The air-conditioning envelops me, greeting and wrapping around me as I open the door. It isn't the smaller shower I go for, though. Instead, I pull a water bottle out of the small fridge I was smart enough to get ready before I started today and go to collapse on the bed to read the book my club is currently working on when something catches my gaze.

It isn't flowers or candles, but a small succulent sitting on my tiny table with a notecard resting next to it.

My dearest Brinley,

Your near purple eyes continue to captivate me.

*I long to run my hand through your green-tipped
brown hair.*

The two of us will be.

Your soul calls to me.

It's only a matter of time;

Before we become entwined.

Love, X

If this was the first time I got something from this X person, I'd be concerned and getting my assistant, Summer, on the phone to make sure my security is upped. But it isn't the first time I've received something from this person and has dread grabbing hold of me.

He's found me ... again.

Forget about the dystopia we've been working on and how dog-tired I feel at this moment. I need to find a way to figure out who this freak is and what I could possibly do to make sure this person will leave me alone once and for all.

Ever since my Olympic debut, I've been getting messages like this. They started off as emails or messages on my social media pages, always under a fake account no matter how many times I blocked them. The person kept coming back. Then it continued on to sending me things with no return address to the ranch. And now it appears I've been found here.

I might have to cave to Summer's wish of me having a bodyguard.

Chapter Three

Adrian

Raucous laughter fills the air as dust and dirt clumps fly up and scatter down the range from where we're set up.

Maybe raucous isn't the right word for what Nash is producing. For him, it's more like a manic who loves setting shit on fire rather than being the one to put them out like he's supposed to be as a firefighter.

"Jesus, Nash, it's just some Tannerite." Gage snarls at him while standing back up from his lying down position on the ground, where he just popped a shot off at one of the many white canisters I had set up around the prairie dog town that's been giving Dad and me a lot of hell lately.

This right here is what I needed. A way to blow off some steam while also dealing with a pest problem that cost us the life of one of our horses and getting to spend some time with my friends in the process.

When I found Leia, a sweet mare, struggling out here yesterday morning, I knew it was time to deal with the little fuckers that have taken over this pasture, so I gave my friends a call. Of course, I had to use the house phone since I have no cell service out here, but one by one, each of the guys agreed that on their next jointed day off, they'd come out, and we'd blow this town up.

I was relieved that the day was today.

I'm hoping this will be the solution to this problem at least. They've already cost us one of our best horses, so I

won't let any cow in here until I know they can safely walk through without getting a leg caught in a hole.

"It's funny." Nash scoffs, still grinning and looking ready to start a fight with one of our huge police officer friends.

The other big asshole I call a friend leans against the back of his truck bed, arms crossed and shaking his head. If a fight breaks out, I know Landen will ram his way into it alongside Gentry Fuller and Evan Sanders, while I'll be the only one just hanging out watching my friends making an ass of themselves in the middle of nowhere.

"Knock it off." My bark carries over to them but doesn't penetrate the angry cloud that has always been quick to form when a fight is about to break out.

Don't get me wrong, we'll always have each other's back, but fighting is just what we do.

Why do I even bother?

It would have been better if I invited the girls out instead. Then again, they would have made this into a contest, which isn't much different from the pissing match before me.

Ignoring the usual fight brewing, I hop from my tailgate, grab my own rifle, and get into a standing position. I'm instantly growing comfortable and am able to block the lot of them out as I get ready to take my shot.

There are two canisters still out there. One barely noticeable over the mound Evan put there by nearly blowing more shit up than was necessary a little bit ago.

It doesn't take nearly as long as I thought for the prairie dogs to start coming back to the surface. With the release of a breath, I take out the one that can barely be seen and quickly, before they know what hit them, I reload and fire off the last of the Tannerite we keep around the ranch for something like this.

I'd rather not poison the ground. I've got animals who feed out here that I don't need dying.

With a glare, I turn back to the guys and wordlessly go back to my truck to start the process of taking care of my gun.

"What's crawled up your ass and died today, Adrian?" A hand clamps down on my shoulder the same moment as Gentry's question comes.

"If coming out here shooting hasn't cheered him up, then only one other thing can do the job." From somewhere behind me, Landen pipes up.

"Oh?" Nash sounds like the clueless moron he tends to be. "What's that?"

There's a resounding smack, likely one of the others hitting him in the back of the head before Gage takes the opportunity to give him the answer. Because, apparently, the two police officers have a hive mind.

"He needs to get laid, ya moron." There's absolutely no way I can cover the rigidity that assaults my spine at his explanation.

"Oh," Nash says again before he appears at my side, regarding me closely. "Nah, I think he's okay The p-dogs are what have you all pissed off, isn't it?" His eyes are narrowed

as if he's trying to peer into my soul. It isn't going to happen, though. Nash never wastes time to look deeper.

Likely why he's still single and clueless.

"I'm *fine*." Biting the word out, I'm doing the best I can in putting my gun in the case and making my way around to put it in my back seat. "I don't need a woman to settle anything in me. You fuckers were supposed to come, hang out, and just have fun, not get into a pissing match."

It's only part of the truth. I haven't gotten laid in months, but none of them needs to know anything about th—

"Ya also need to get laid," Gage points out, not bothering to sugarcoat a damn thing for any of us. "You've had blue balls and a constant stick shoved up your ass since you and Felicity broke up."

"Gee, I never knew you cared or paid that much attention to where I was getting my rocks off before, Gage." Whirling around, I find all my friends staring at me as if there's a beast here in the place of who I truly am. "What?"

None of them speak. Even Nash and his constantly running mouth is wordless.

It doesn't last, though. Evan breaks from the crowd and places his hands down on my shoulders with a sigh. "Adrian. Adrian. Adrian." He tuts. "We always like coming out here and shooting whatever you have set up for us, but, man..." His lips disappear into a thin line as he shakes his head. "You need to get to town and find a distraction that doesn't involve shooting something."

“I think we need to clarify that he *will* be shooting something off if he found a girl,” Gentry offers, which causes me to sling a glare in his direction. The others chuckle like we’re all teenage boys again just learning what it feels like to get our dicks wet.

Seeing as I’m not getting out of this, I shake my head and finally give them something. Felicity did do a number on me. Here I thought I found a woman who liked my home, didn’t mind I wasn’t always readily available to take her out, and was willing to stay. The whole time, she was in town working and also paying plenty of attention to another man. All it took was for me to surprise her one night after coming off the mountain from checking cattle to figure out what kind of woman she really was.

Aside from Morris Valley changing so much, that’s the other reason putting me off going the hell into town.

“You find me a woman who doesn’t mind the hours I keep, has no problem sharing a workload a ranch requires, *and* likes to shoot, I’ll let you drag me into town and force me on that date.” Thinking that’ll shut them up because hell if even they’ll be able to find a woman like that if I couldn’t, I start to turn.

And then Nash opens his mouth. I’m not sure if I can believe him, though.

“I think I might know just the woman.”

Chapter Four

Brinley

“And that’s a wrap.” There’s a snap of that board thing they hold up to start filming. The instant I hear it, my entire body sags in the leathers with relief. I’m starting to feel the weight of my gun belt as I trudge off the set and don’t stop until I’m back at my trailer. “Thank you, everyone.” The director starts a slow clap that builds around the set while I give only a weak one before I can get too far.

I’m too exhausted from the heat to give it any more than that.

I’m officially done filming, and it couldn’t have come sooner. My skin is bright pink as I stagger into the trailer. Even the cool air isn’t enough to put a chill on me at the moment. And I’m sick and tired of listening to Cannon talk. I swear, the man loves the sound of his own voice because he can talk about any and all topics and of course, thinks he’s an expert on all.

My body, mind, soul, *and* ears need a break.

Summer showed up yesterday morning to act as my guard dog when I’m on set and has been a godsend, especially right now while she runs interference for me to change and cool off.

“Just remember what kind of opportunity this is giving you.” Muttering to myself, I end up dumping half of my water down the front of me. Thankfully, this is my own outfit so I don’t need to worry about ruining something that needs to be returned to production.

Weeks spent out here better be worth it when the miniseries airs on the channel that put it together. One thing I'm relieved about is there was nothing crazy brought up like aliens throughout filming. I would have thrown my hands up and walked off the set never to return if they had.

One bottle of cold water consumed, I reach down and pluck another out of the fridge as my phone begins to ring. There haven't been any creepier messages since the other day. I asked set security if anyone had come and gone from my trailer while I was on set and nothing turned up. And with feisty Summer here now instead of in her shaded and air-conditioned office, it's been as if nothing ever happened.

Before she showed up, I locked up no matter if I were in or not and kept the key hidden in my ample cleavage for safe keeping while filming. It still hasn't help settle my nerves, though. But it still isn't enough for me to inform my mom about it happening again. She would freak out, insisting I come home right away, and Dad would threaten everyone from random delivery drivers to new ranch hands in order to protect me.

Summer is enough.

I think going home would be the worst idea. Whoever has been stalking me knows where I call home and seems to have a way of tracking me down no matter where I go. It was late last night when I wasn't able to put the book down that an idea came to me. And just in case someone is listening in on me, I don't plan on telling Mom until I'm far from here.

I already covertly asked Summer to make my traveling arrangements and make it look like I was going with

her rather than flying north.

“Hi, Mom.” No point trying to sound chipper. I’m rarely that unless I have a gun in my hand, and right now, I’m beat.

“Are you finished filming yet?” She groans, likely filled with boredom that usually hits her when I’m away from home for long periods of time. The job that had pulled us from Morris Valley all those years ago treated her well and led her to becoming a vice president in her department, so now she’s been able to semi-retire.

“I think so.” The lie rolls off my chapped lips with a little too much ease. “Are you missing me that much?” When I went to the Olympics, she went with me and had a blast taking in a foreign country while Dad was left to manage everything back home.

“Your father is driving me crazy,” she drawls. “He wants to move the garden. Why does he have to do this to me? I find the perfect spot for it only to find out it’s apparently his ideal location for another training arena.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way to make Dad see reason.” Picking at the fringe of my leather pants, I take a seat on the itchy couch, regretting it instantly, but I refuse to lie on the bed while sweaty.

“You know I will.” The tease in her voice causes unwanted images to form in my head no one should have of their parents.

“Eww, gross, Mom.”

“What? You said I’d find a way.” She guffaws. “Anyway, enough about me and your dad, I called to see how filming is going. Is this going to lead to something more? Movie stunt double maybe?” I can see her blue eyes sparkling with delight at the thought.

I truly have the most supportive parents in the world. When I wanted to get into shooting sports in 4H as a teen, they built a small range for me close to the house. I won countless county and state shoots, and that was only the beginning.

While I’m perfectly content being a shooter for my sponsor, Mom thinks about the bigger picture of where I’ll get into Hollywood and do stunt shooting for westerns since they are starting to make a comeback.

I have no desire for that. Actually ... I don’t really know where I want to go after this.

“I don’t think it’s going to go *that* far, Mom. But I’m sure you’ll find a way to record this miniseries. From the sound of it, I’m going to be in every episode.” *All six of them.*

“Wishful thinking, I suppose.” She sighs. “What’re your plans after filming is done? Does your sponsor have anything for you afterward?”

My skin prickles at her innocent question. She’s my mom and with that has every right to know what I’m up to even though I’m an adult now, but I hold back because who the hell knows what my stalker could have done in here since they were able to plant something.

“I’m not sure,” I drawl. “There hasn’t been a word. I guess we’ll see.” I’m never evasive with either of my parents.

She knows I'm doing just that with the silence that follows.
"Mom?"

"I'm still here." Her voice has lost its luster. "Did you get another message?" she whispers even though there's a state between us.

"Yes," I breathe. "But I have a plan." I return with a chipper tone so anyone listening in won't know anything. "I'll let you know. I think there will be at least another day of shooting."

"Okay. You better come home afterward. There's no place safer for you." Even though my stalker has never made an aggressive move toward me, my parents are convinced I need to remain at home until the authorities—who are informed about this—handle it.

They've been *handling* it for nearly a year and a half now with no progress.

"Yeah, we'll see." I don't like being this way with her. But she must get that I don't want to say anything just in case. "I'm going to shower and cool off, Mom. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Okay. Be safe and keep Summer close if you can, Brin." I hear her kiss and give her one of my own before we hang up.

I don't get off the couch, though. Instead, I tap my finger against the back of my phone twice before I pick it back up and open the group chat I have with all my close friends.

Me: Need a vacay, what do you think of me coming to Morris Valley?

My short-lived reprieve is interrupted by a knock on my trailer door and Cannon calling out, “Wrap-up drinks on me. Come on, Brin.”

So much for some peace.

Chapter Five

Adrian

Why did I let Nash set this up?

Nash!

Why the hell did I even think Nash could match me with a woman who could possibly be interested in me and my life?

I'm not sure who's the bigger idiot right now; myself for allowing this, Nash for setting it up, or the others who didn't step in.

They likely figured it would be one way to get me off the ranch.

The bastards.

Delilah has been an interesting date. She's not necessarily rude but not a picture of politeness either. And even though she's rail thin, she's eaten more than me. Appetizers, main meal which she ate some of mine, and now she's devouring the dessert meant for two while I claimed to be too full to accept my portion.

Since sitting down after meeting her at the entrance, we've only exchanged small talk. An icebreaker didn't even cut through this, and I'm positive no one should ever let Nash handle anything remotely related to romance from now on.

No wonder he's living with Lexy and nothing is happening between them.

“So Nash tells me you live on a ranch?” Her mouth is full as she speaks. Definitely makes sense now how she knows Nash.

“I do, with my dad.” Nodding, I have nothing else to add. I’m really trying. I don’t want to be rude, and I certainly don’t want anything getting back to the guys about how big of a flop this is turning out to be. There’s no chemistry, and it isn’t my fault.

Maybe they’ll take pity on me with it being Nash’s match.

“Any hands?” Finally, she puts down her fork and leans closer with interest lighting her features. “How many acres?”

“No hands. Our ranch isn’t very big, just a little over three thousand acres.” I lift a shoulder. In terms of ranches around here, ours is pretty damn small, but it’s been in our family since my great-great grandparents settled here.

“Cattle or sheep?” she keeps prodding.

“Umm ... both?” I’m not sure why I say it in the form of a question. “More cattle than sheep, though.” This part of the state has a mixture of both.

“Sheep are useless.” She scoffs with a wrinkle of her nose and drops back into her seat before returning to her dessert.

That’s your opinion.

Have I pulled a sheep out of a small pond and had to tie her up to a fence to get her equilibrium back only for her to

go right back in? Yes, I never said they were the smartest of creatures.

“Nash never told me what you do for a living.” Steepling my hands, I lean into them and do my damndest to turn the focus on her. Most women like that, right? Felicity certainly did.

“I’m the receptionist at the fire station.” Once more, she speaks around a mouthful of food, and I swear I see some come flying out. “I was a little surprised when he approached me about going on a blind date. I usually don’t like that sort of thing, but you don’t seem half bad.”

Why can’t I be an asshole and just be honest this isn’t going to work? Maybe it isn’t an asshole move, but shouldn’t it be said about how truthful I want to be?

“I’ve never been on a blind date either. He thought I was spending too much time on the ranch.” My shoulder goes up again as I fall back in my seat and take a drink of my water.

Whatever it was I just said causes her to drop her fork as if it just caught on fire and an intense expression to take over her face. “You aren’t one of those workaholics, are you?” She doesn’t give me a chance to answer, though. “You’re an all work and no play kind of guy, aren’t you?” she excuses.

“I ... guess?” I drawl, feeling like I need to extract myself from this, pay the bill, and then track down Nash to give him a justified beating.

“Well, that’s not going to—”

“Adrian James Cook, what are you doing here?” The woman’s voice is more nails on a chalkboard than that of an

angel song, but right now, Polly McArthur is my saving grace.

Delilah's eyes widen as the older woman, decked out in rainbow leggings, a crop top with the word *suspicious?* written across her robust chest, and eyelashes that look like they could fan someone with every blink walk over to us in a hurry.

"Evening, Miss Polly." Offering the first true smile of the night, I'm flooded with a sense of relief.

"Don't *evening* me, young man." She tuts and reaches a talon-covered hand for my nice dress shirt. "You promised me."

"I—" I cut myself off. I have no clue what the hell she's talking about, and with wide eyes, I look across the table to find Delilah staring with saucers for eyes at the crazy old woman.

"Ut! Excuses are like assholes, everyone has one. Now, pay your bill and get your butt in gear. My garden isn't going to till itself," she continues before turning to Delilah, and suddenly she turns soft and warm, like a grandma should be.

How is Lilly related to this woman?

My parents divorced when I was five. My mom took me away from the ranch. I spent summers here with my dad, and when I was fourteen, I decided I wanted to live here full time. It wasn't like my mom was around that often anyway. Being the new kid starting a new school as a freshman wasn't ideal, and I quickly fell into a strange group of friends. Some were older, and none fit in one clique or another, but all

blended just fine. Enter meeting Polly McArthur, sweet and quiet Lilly's grandma who became one to me as well.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie, but Adrian here promised to help with my garden, and I *need* it done." It's likely the worse excuse known to humankind. It's the end of July. There's no way Delilah will believe Polly's starting a garden this late in the season.

"Oh, umm ... okay." Her eyes are still huge behind the rim of her glasses as she blinks and understanding fills them. "I get that. I have an herb garden in my kitchen window I'm super protective of."

What. The. Hell?

She turns her focus back to me while Polly beams triumphantly. "Maybe we can do this again?" Her question feels more out of courtesy with no hope of filling it.

"Yeah, sure. I'm sorry about this. I'll take care of the bill, go ahead and finish your dessert." Getting up, I try not to let on that it feels like a fire has been lit under my ass to escape. "It was nice meeting you." With a nod, I place my hat on my head and take off after the quick-moving granny. Once the bill is taken care of and I'm out the door, I find Polly tapping a foot between my truck and her car out of sight of the restaurant's windows. "What are you—"

"That isn't the type of woman you need to date, Adrian James." She points an accusing finger up at me.

"Blame Nash, then," I grumble. I'm a tall man being lectured by a short, robust grandma.

“I’ll have words with him.” She sounds deadly, and I honestly don’t pity Nash. “In the meantime, don’t listen to any of those men you call friends.”

“What? Are you going to set me up with someone?” I ask it as a joke, but sober the moment her serious expression is suddenly as in my face as she can get.

I’m quaking in my boots with her next words. “Don’t you worry about it.”

Chapter Six

Brinley

The landscape changed from brush lands to grass and then teases of mountains the farther north I flew until I was descending over a small stretch of mountains to one side and landing in a much more rural looking airport compared to the one I took off from and the town of Morris Valley to the opposite side.

Home.

As much as I had promised myself I would be back either to live here again surrounded by my friends or just visit, it isn't something I've managed to keep thanks to my busy schedule.

Life pulled me in a different direction. I made some new friends where we had moved to and though I never felt the same connection with them as I've always had with the girls I left behind here; I've managed. Summer was my closest friend in high school and it's worked out with her becoming my assistant. The Army and then the Olympics which led me to my career now, all of it feels like it was predestined and part of me loves it but the other half longs for the life I dreamed about as a little girl.

Living on a ranch outside of Morris Valley, maybe running a top-of-the-line shooting range with an incredible indoor complex when the weather is crappy along with an archery range where I can teach and train people interested in shooting.

That's what I had wanted in my life as a child and thinking about it now, sounds pretty good to adult me as well.

I've gotten all of it in some form thanks to my dad's ranch and the career I have, but having a range and teaching others gun safety still sounds pretty damn good.

I've seen the girls sporadically after I turned eighteen. We've spent small amounts of time together, but never long or lasting unless you count our book club video chats.

While the majority of the girls I still call my tribe have remained in Morris Valley; Eliza is a police lieutenant while Julia right under her in the chain of command, Lexy is a bestselling mystery author, Clover is a mechanic at a dealership, and Mina runs her own diner. It's left Lilly who is the only other one of us who ended up leaving. But from the way the girls talk, they're just waiting until she's ready to move back. It's a foregone conclusion to them while she swears she won't come back.

What if they want the same for me?

This isn't the first time the thought has crossed my mind. I thought coming here would be best to avoid my stalker, get away and just relax for a little while before I'm forced back into the world I now inhabit. I'm not as well-known as some gold medal swimmer or gymnast but in certain circles, all knew about the young Army veteran who won gold recently.

With Summer covering to make it like I'm with her, I'm hoping for anonymity for a short period in order to recharge my batteries.

The plane slows, moving toward the terminal, but there isn't a tube for the meager number of passengers and I to exit through. No, the Morris Valley County Airport isn't large enough to have something like that.

We are all thanked for coming on this flight as we exit. The legendary Wyoming wind is there to greet each of us in a sharp gust as we step down from the plane and make our way into the back of the building where we can collect baggage which includes my massive lock box containing my guns I was told to lock up and hand the key over to the flight attendant who's there at the doors for guiding us in and handing it over to me.

“Thank you. We hope you fly with us again.”

Nodding, I make my way over to the small baggage claim and collect my monster case. I may not look like much, but this case is something I'm used to hefting around. I never fail to find some amusement in the eyes of the people surrounding me as I practically pluck the case up and head for the main doors leading out to short-term parking.

When I sent the text out asking if the girls were ready for me to finally come home for a visit, my phone nearly died with the number of messages that had come through. All were insisting I make the stay as long as possible while also pleading with Lilly to get her peachy ass home so we could have a little reunion.

Sadly, she couldn't take the time off from the library she's working at but claimed we could still video call her when we are all together. I hated knowing that one of us won't be here, but there's always plans for the future.

And right now, shading my eyes with a hand above them, my future seems pretty damn bright as well as light enough I can breathe easily knowing that there's no possible way my stalker could track me all the way up here into Wyoming.

Just as I'm releasing a massive exhale of mountain air, a truck comes careening up, bouncing over the speed bump, and a blare of a horn as if I didn't see her as she comes to a screeching stop in front of me.

Clover's broad grinning face greets me through the open passenger window. Her brown hair is piled up on top of her head, pulled through a hat and those light brown eyes of hers are still as lit with mischief as ever.

I can't help the shriek of delight at seeing one of my best friends for the first time in a couple of years. The last time we were all together was when they came to watch me in the qualifying round for the Olympics and we had a sober celebration minus Clover who always manages to get the liquor.

Her delight matches my own as she springs from her rumbling truck and meets me at the tailgate to get my case into the back. The moment I have it in and she has it slammed shut, we're in each other's arms. "Clover Adkins, you look full of trouble as ever!"

"You know it, girl!" She grins cheekily as we separate and load up into her truck. "You'll be staying with me while you're here."

"Oh, boy. Good thing I don't have a place to go if you're going to showcase your liquor collection." Out of all of

us, Clover likes to unwind on nearly a daily basis with something strong. It's something all of us are concerned with that she might have a problem, but so far, she hasn't had a DUI or let it get in the way of her work.

"Damn straight." The old truck I'm certain is the same one she prized herself at buying all on her own in high school groans to life, sounding much better than what it looks like and we're jettisoned off. "So are you going to tell me what made you want to come here after so long or are you finally willing to admit you're ready to call Morris Valley home again?"

That cheesy grin doesn't go anywhere while she waits for my answer. Knowing Clover, it's not bound to make a disappearance at all. She may have way too much fun when it comes to drinking and I know deep down there's a pain there she refuses to show the world and that includes us, but she does her best to live life to the fullest.

"I'll wait until we can all get together and fill y'all in." I promise. We take a corner and the breath freezes in my lungs as I take in the southern part of town. "It's grown."

"Well, yeah." She snorts. "You've been gone for too damn long, of course town has grown."

"I guess I didn't realize it would grow like this." I gesture to the cluster of homes I can see over the horizon where the drive-in used to be. I wonder if it's still there or if it's gone with the times.

"Wait until you see what else is waiting for you in the heart of town." Grinning like a loon, she turns off the road to the airport and points us northward.

“I can’t wait.” And I mean it. It’s been too long since I’ve been able to have any real amount of fun.

“Good to hear, I hope you brought something sexy to wear.”

Chapter Seven

Adrian

When I was a teenager and had made the decision to make the move here so I would spend all year with my dad and started to make the friends I still have now, we would have loved to have had a place we could just hang out. Away from the prying eyes of the adults who always thought we were up to no good.

In defense, Nash *was* always starting a fire that needed the fire department's attention, Gage spent more time in the back seat of a cop car than the rest of us because he wasn't smooth enough not to get caught, Gentry was known to be a streaker, and the rest of them were constantly in some form of a rumble or another while I was the one who did my best to stay as far away from the trouble as possible.

It didn't stop it from finding its way to me though.

And now we're adults, only a few of us actually acting like them with a place to hang out when they can get me into town. Which seems a lot lately. In all fairness, they come here without me but tonight, they've managed to snare me into coming.

The Brickhouse, owned and operated by Beckett Lewis another one of our ragtag group who grew up and managed to become an adult is our go-to place for beer and a game or two of pool.

The bar is a converted train station made of bricks where the name comes from, the interior is dominated in the center with a circle bar to serve all sides with a dance floor and

DJ booth to one side and a set of six pool tables to another with booths closer to the door leading in and out of the place.

Aside from going out to my ranch to shoot and do other random shit and the house Gage bought for him and his sister after he pulled his head out of his ass and started to somewhat behave, this is the only other place we can unwind.

Mina's is another. We gather there often enough for breakfast before she opens up as well, but that has a time limit.

Landen is slumped over across the booth from me, scanning the room while Finn Jordan just rushed off for our next round of drinks. Gage and Evan are whipping both Nash and Gentry's asses at the pool table they claimed. And I'm sitting here in my own misery after laying into Nash for that failure of a blind date and dreading what the guys are going to cook up for me next.

To make matters worse, I've been getting text messages from Miss Polly asking me an odd question or two before going silent after a quick thanks, only to reappear when I'm close to town and have cell service. It's as though the woman is starting up some sort of matchmaking company.

Lexy offered offhanded that Miss Polly's been seen downtown questioning women about their relationship status to the point she's getting looks stranger than what she already receives and given a wider berth.

I'm doomed.

There's no way I'm going to get out of whatever this is I've managed to stumble into with Miss Polly. And yes, I did, in fact, till her garden that night.

“What’s got you looking like you’ve seen the dead?” Landen rumbles, drawing my attention away from the spectacle taking place at the pool table.

“Polly McArthur.” I grind out, not needing to elaborate because him, just like the rest of us, know *exactly* what the woman is capable of doing.

But that doesn’t stop him from questioning me further. “What did she do now?”

“Saved me from that disastrous date Nash set me up for and has it in her mind she’s going to set me up with someone more fitting.” I accept another beer from Finn as he places all of them down in the center of the table and reclaims his seat next to Landen.

“Who are we talking about?” He perks up, looking between the two of us as all the others make their way over to get their refills.

“Miss Polly.” Landen’s rumble halts everyone from lifting their bottles to their lips, except me. I’m downing that sum-bitch as quickly as I can if I’m going to have to tell them all about this.

One of them can be responsible for me for a change.

Slamming the now empty but still cold bottle down, I take a deep breath and meet every single one of them at a time before I’m retelling the date and glaring at Nash when it’s his turn.

“And now Lexy tells me Miss Polly is trying to have her own version of Morris Valley *Bachelor* with me as the main focus,” I grumble.

In a building filled with the noise of music, people talking and dancing, there is silence surrounding our table before Gage is the first to bark out in laughter. One by one, each of these fuckers I call friends follow suit and I'm leaning back in my chair.

"Laugh it up, assholes," I growl, which only works to urge them on further.

"Can you imagine the woman she'd set him up with?" Gentry barks while the others offer their agreement.

"Adrian would be doomed," Evan barks, and my temper escalates.

"If it wasn't for Nash, I wouldn't be in the crazy woman's crosshairs now." I snarl, slamming a fist down on the table and rattling the bottles there.

"Hey, I honestly thought Delilah would be a good fit. She's always going on about how she wants property." Now it's Nash's turn to grumble. At least he isn't laughing anymore.

"At least ya tried." Gage slams a massive hand on Nash's shoulder which might start a brawl between them and include the rest of us before long. There're two police officers among us and neither would stop even if one was the person to start it.

Before a lighthearted fight can break out, Gentry is the next to pipe up, and I really wish he would have just kept his trap shut. "Why don't we all give it a go?" he muses before finishing off his beer. It's enough to silence the others surrounding the table.

“You mean, each of us find a girl who might be a good match for our poor Adrian?” Evan forces his large frame into the booth next to me and drapes an arm around my shoulders.

“Why not?” Gentry shrugs and takes a look around. “We know plenty and could even get the girls to help. Speaking of which, didn’t they say they would be coming here tonight?”

As if they are all just noticing that the volume is somewhat calm compared to what it is when the girls are around, they all start to search. Nash typically ends up stealing Lexy away in order to help him to win a pool game while Gentry finds himself dealing with the sad drunk Julia turns into.

It’s almost like Gentry had just announced their grand entrance. Not that any of them are spotlight seekers. The door opens and there they are, striding in all dressed as if they’re in a night club in some big city rather than a simple yet fun bar in Morris Valley. Eliza and Mina are leading the way with Clover and Julia to both their sides, but as they walk past, heading to the bar with purpose, it’s the woman with green tipped hair and a skimpy, body-hugging lavender dress who commands all of my attention.

Who is she?

Chapter Eight

Brinley

Thank God for the person who invented tit tape.

Not just to keep unruly boobs at bay and under some semblance of control but to help with other parts of the body as well.

When we arrived at Clover's apartment, it was only a matter of minutes before the others rushed over. Mina and Lexy aside, one because she had to close her diner and the other because she also didn't live at the same complex, Eliza and Julia walked over.

There's no getting around it, having them all flock together and the laughs coming easy as ever while we got ready was something I missed with being this close to them.

By close, its proximity that I'm longing for as we stride into a place they called the Brickhouse. When I was little, I have some memories of this building being something other than a train station it was a long time ago.

"Beckett Lewis bought this building a few years ago and worked tirelessly to update it to turn the whole place into one of the most popular places in town," Lexy explains as she loops an arm through mine as we head into the building, music blasting through the door as Mina and Eliza open it, and I'm ushered in.

It's warm with just a tease of cool air.

"Holy cow." Whistling, I take in the entire place which is open yet clearly divided into sections dominated by

the bar Eliza and Mina are leading the charge toward.

I feel a little overdressed in my figure-hugging lavender dress that cups my boobs perfectly but wants to ride up my thighs higher than it already is, and that's where the tit tape has come in so handy.

The lace at my sides tickles my legs, making me believe that the tape is giving up and I'm going to end up flashing everyone in here.

Mina leans in, telling a man with short hair on the sides and sporting a small Mohawk our drink order before she turns back to us. Her eyes are lit with glee when she looks past us and waves. "Looks like the guys got a head start on us," she muses before I feel a large presence behind me.

"I almost didn't recognize you, Brin," an unfamiliar voice booms over my head. The girls are all smiles and relaxed, allowing me to remain calm as I turn and look up and up at a man's face I'm unfamiliar with as well as know somewhere all at once.

Frowning, I'm trying my best to let it come to me. Even going as far as to glance around his wide frame to the others. Gage Redford is easy enough to recognize; he hasn't changed all that much except getting bigger and meaner looking. He still scowls like he did as a ten-year-old. There are two blonds, one far wider in the shoulders than the other, and I know one is Landen Doyle and the other Nash Dixon. I'm betting Nash is the one standing with the goofy grin on his face while a dark-haired man glares at him.

I can't help but glance at Julia, and sure enough, she's focused on that man also known as Gentry Fuller with stars in

her eyes.

“Can’t remember me?” the man before me teases, pulling me away from the men at his back to finish my assessment.

The near white blond hair on top of his head is my only true indication of who’s standing before me.

“I know who you are.” I tease back. “Hello, Evan. The last time I saw you, *I* was the taller one.”

“That you were.” He chuckles.

“Sweet Jesus, what have you been eatin’? You’re a mountain!” I laugh as I finally give in to a hug, but he’s so damn big I can’t wrap my arms around him like I once was able to. “You don’t look like the shy little boy I knew once upon a time.”

I’ve seen plenty of pictures of him, but none recently. The last time I think was when Lyla graduated from high school, and Mina had a picture taken of the three of them, both girls dangling from their brother’s arms.

He’s far larger now and sporting a scar under his right eye. “It’s good to see you again.” I have to say a little louder as I back away and take the drink Mina hands over to me.

I’m herded over to the table and reintroduced to all of the men who were boys the last time I saw them. It’s a shock to learn that along with Eliza and Julia, Gage and Landen both joined the police force while Nash and Gentry became firefighters. Evan explains that his size is due to the gym he owns right across Main Street from Mina’s diner, and then my focus is on *him*.

The man sitting across from Landen isn't someone I remember. There isn't a single thing in his shaded face hidden under a straw cowboy hat and a fair growth of stubble taking up his strong jaw and upper lip that is familiar.

His hands have a layer of dark hair over them as they're clasped together, and that's where his gaze is fixed with an empty bottle next to them.

"And who do we have here?" None of the guys I remember from my childhood are cowboys, so seeing one among them has intrigue spiking in my ever-curious mind. Pushing some hair behind my ear, I make my way over to him as Nash steps in.

"This is Adrian Cook, Brin. He didn't move here until we were teens, and by then, you were long gone. Ouch!" He rubs the back of his head and glares at Gentry. "What was that for?"

"Of course, she wasn't here, you idiot!" Gentry snaps. I can't help the laughter that follows. I'm glad to see some things haven't changed.

While the two of them argue, I turn my attention back and offer the lone cowboy a hand. "It's nice to meet you, Adrian. I'm Brinley Moore. I used to live here when I was little and managed to keep my friendship alive with the girls at least."

His large calloused hand parts from the other and reaches out to take my smaller one. There's a zap to it, but it isn't until those deep, rich brown eyes come to me that I'm startled. Not since my crush on Simon Johnson my junior year

of high school came to be reciprocated when he asked me to prom have I felt such an instant attraction to a man.

Chapter Nine

Adrian

“Get your ass up, don’t be disrespectful when introducing yourself to anyone, young man.”

The words my late grandma had grilled into me have me on my feet as I finish shaking the gorgeous woman’s hand. It isn’t a voice I want there right at this moment as I take in the startling color of her eyes. I think they’re blue, but in this lighting, they could very well be purple.

It’s enchanting.

What’s more ... well not off putting but intriguing is the fact I’m not shaking the hand that’s been taken care of with large amounts of lotion so they’re as smooth as possible, but rough ones with calluses from hard work.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Brinley Moore.” Her name is sweet on my tongue while her voice holds a drawl I’ve become accustomed to hearing from people in Texas. Dad and I may run a small ranch, but I’ve been to plenty of sales to know regional accents pretty damn well by now.

At least she’s easy enough to understand.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Adrian.” It isn’t a purr, but I sense one within her voice. Everyone surrounding us is talking—or fighting—while not paying a single lick of attention to either of us.

Except maybe Mina. I meet her mischievous yet watchful gaze for a moment before turning back to Brinley.

When I first met Felicity, I thought I knew what instant attraction was. She had the appearance of being flawlessly beautiful with shiny ruby hair she always wore in a thick braid when she came out to the ranch. I loved to run my fingers through it when it was loose because it was so soft. She never wore much makeup. At least, that's what I thought until I stayed the night with her at her apartment for the first time and saw the woman I thought I knew look completely different in the morning compared to what I saw before I went to sleep.

I let that go. If she wanted to wear makeup that took her nearly an hour to put on in order to make it look *natural*, then I was fine with it.

In truth, it should have been the first sign we weren't the right match for each other. More signs showed up the deeper we became involved until it all erupted when I discovered her getting plowed from behind by some guy in a suit.

Now, *if* I'm going to move forward with any woman, including the intrigue I have for the one standing before me, I'm going to make sure the first date which won't be set up by my friends, has us getting dirty as a way to put her through a test.

Our handshake continues far longer than what's socially acceptable, but I can't seem to let go of her. With some effort, I release her hand while the thought that this woman just might be different.

Quick being crazy.

"Sorry about that." Her voice drops a note as she shifts like she's going to take a step forward, but a hand on her

bare, tanned, and slightly pink arm with a simple bullet tattoo pulls her back. “I—”

“Come on, Brin, we came to dance!” Lexy, now free from trying to break up the typical Nash and Gentry fight alongside Julia who’s clinging to Gentry, cheers as she pulls this gorgeous woman away from me and taking her unique eyes with her.

“Right, see you around, Adrian?” Now that was a purr if I’ve ever heard. There’s something far more genuine than any of the ones Felicity ever gave me.

“Right. Sure.” I watch her leave, small taut ass perfectly on display in the rippling purple material of her tiny dress. My fingers are begging me to reach out and grab her, to feel how soft the rest of her might be.

And then she’s blocked from my view as the other girls file around the bar and over to the dance floor. Glancing around, I only find Gentry watching after them. A thumb running over his bottom lip before he’s pulled back to our group and urged to go for another game of pool, this time against Finn who poses a real challenge.

And then Gage is filling my vision and shoving me back down into my seat and telling me to scoot over.

There’s no room with Evan’s enormous size reclaiming his spot, leaving Gage to pull a chair to sit at the end of the table, and then the four of them are focusing on me.

“What?” Where I would have snapped before the girls showed up, I’m calm as I blink at all of them. Even Nash seems to be interested in something on my face. “I know I

need a haircut.” Pulling my hat off, I run a hand over my head as I continue to be perplexed as they all laugh. “Just spit it out, assholes.”

Out of all of them and how equal I think our friendships are, I consider Evan my closest. But he doesn’t speak up to clue me into what they all seem to know, and I’m no longer in the dark. And for Nash to know something is really fucking weird.

“You ready to find a girl, man?” Gage slams a rough hand on my back, nearly sending me flying into the table.

Did they just see the encounter I had with Brinley?

Are they going to finally be worthy friends and set me up with someone I actually find interesting, or are they—?

“There are plenty of girls here tonight.” Landen interrupts my thoughts as he sits up and casts a lingering glance out over the dance floor. “I think *I* could find someone worthy.” Nodding to himself, he stands, having to wait for Gage to shift away in his chair since he’s blocking Landen.

Why do I suddenly feel like I’m Mjolnir, and they’re trying to find my Thor?

The thought screaming in my head about how I only want one, urging me to point at where Brinley is at the edge of the dance floor with the girls clustering around each other and moving with ease, swaying side to side, and dammit, I want to escape to go to her.

I’m no dancer, but I’d make an exception for her.

The words don’t come, though. They refuse to escape my mind and out of my mouth, thanks to the doubt that has

eaten away my confidence since Felicity. How am I supposed to get a woman interested in me and keep her?

“I don’t think I want to go down that road again,” I grumble instead, turning back to my beer and remembering it’s empty.

Dammit.

“What? You’d rather have Miss Polly find you a match?” Landen snorts as even he doesn’t believe it. “I’m a much better judge of character than Nash Dixon. Give me an hour, and I’ll have you a girl.” Tapping his knuckles on the back of the booth, he’s off, not altogether vanishing into the crowd, thanks to his height and bulk, but he merges with them to find a woman he thinks would work for me.

I watch Finn, who’s watching Landen leave, shocked he didn’t follow him. I don’t dwell too long on the look he’s giving him before I scoff. “He’s more likely going to find a few numbers meant for him instead.”

Chapter Ten

Brinley

It feels beyond incredible to finally be able to let go and just have some fun. It feels like I've been going at lightspeed with a single-minded focus for far too long. But now I can take a much-needed vacation.

There are no early wake-ups to do drills.

No targets to get perfect.

No sponsors to answer to while having to put on a fake smile with Cannon standing alongside me.

And on the very top of the list in neon pink and underlined about half a dozen times is the fact I'm nearly 100 percent positive my stalker has no clue where I'm at, and hopefully, it'll stay that way long enough to recharge my batteries.

I've tediously gone through my social media accounts to ensure they were as private as possible. I don't post much on my professional ones unless something is going on and usually let Summer have full control of them. Hopefully, she's doing so obscure posts to keep my stalker distracted. I'm on sabbatical and just plan on having fun and relax with my friends.

I just wish Lilly could have been here as well and then this would have been complete.

My hair runs over my arms as I raise them into the sky and open my eyes, once more finding Landen prowling

through the crowd, ignoring the women who flock to him and acting like he's looking for something.

I'm curious to what he could have lost, especially since he hasn't come over to ask us about it. I haven't seen the man in years, and watching him from the corner of my eye, he reminds me of a shark on the scent of fresh drops of blood in the water.

"Don't worry about him." Mina's voice laughs, drawing me back to our little group and her, who's watching him as well.

"What's he up to anyway?" If he wanted to dance, he'd be doing so.

"They're all looking for a girl for Adrian," Julia offers over her shoulder. "Except for Nash." She chuckles before taking a sip of her drink.

Interest spikes within me, curiosity to why they're looking for a girl for the man who looks completely capable of doing it by himself. "Why?"

"He set Adrian up with a woman from the fire department." It's Clover who supplies the next part. I've missed how much we all used to feed off each other, starting one sentence or thought and completing another. It's a joy to see that hasn't changed, and I hope I'm still included in that.

"It was a complete failure, especially when Lilly's grandma showed up and basically stole him." It's Eliza's turn to add her piece of the story.

As intriguing as it is, that isn't what I was asking about. Go figure Nash wouldn't know how to make a good

match. He and Lexy are roommates, and I've heard plenty of stories about him and his cat, who doesn't get along with Lexy.

"But why does Adrian need someone else to set him up?" I turn, following them as we continue to dance. I'm not feeling the music right now. I'm too interested in the man I just met.

Tall, handsome, but not too dark, Adrian Cook has my interest, but it isn't something that can come to anything. I'm only visiting.

Or are you?

Internally shaking my head, I wait for one of them to answer.

One by one, the five of them share a look, one I don't know before focusing on me. It's Mina who steps closer. "You're lucky you got a chance to meet him." She dances around me, hands gliding over my bare flesh as we start to dance together as another song takes over from the previous. "He's usually a pain in the ass to get off his ranch on any given night. The guys somehow pulled off a miracle."

"His ranch?"

"Yes." Eliza joins us, dancing on the other side of me. "He runs it with his dad. That's what brought him here in high school. He chose to live here instead of in Chicago with his mom."

"Does he have issues with women, then?" Even though he focused on me, he seemed a little standoffish.

“He believes his ex did a number on him.” Clover rolls her eyes. “We all saw the writing on the wall, but he was too clouded with lust to see it coming.”

“And now they guys are trying to set him up?” I can’t help but look over at Adrian, unable to see anything through the thick crowd of people.

“Yes.” All of them answer together before bursting out in laughter. “We all have a wager to see who’ll be the successful one,” Julia continues.

“Why don’t y’all help? I’m sure you’d be able to match him better?” I hedge, not because I want them to give me an in or anything.

They laugh again and slowly shake their heads. “It’s too much fun.” Clover taps the side of her nose with a wink.

I can’t bring myself to join in on the joy they seem to be finding in this, though. In fact, it kind of breaks my heart. No one deserves to be alone along with thinking they’re spoiled thanks to a shitty ex.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Mina pulls me back. “My bet is on Miss Polly finding him the right match. The woman is like a blood hound, she can pick up a scent like no other.”

When I glance back over, there’s a break in the crowd almost like the parting of a tide opening up between where I’m slowly dancing with my friends and where Adrian sits on the other side of the long, oval-shaped bar.

I stumble on my heels I’m not used to wearing, nearly falling into Julia when I see he’s watching me. Leaning against

the wall by his booth, one arm is draped over the back of the seat while the other is bringing a beer to his lips, those dark brown eyes are fixated on me.

My body begins to move on its own accord while I focus on him. Without a drink in my hand, I'm free to run my hand down my sides, putting on a show for him and only him. It's like I've been possessed and can't control myself.

I feel something swelling within me I've never truly experienced, not even when I was a teen with my first crush and thought proving to a guy how good of a shot I was as well as keeping up with the boys was flattering features to set me apart from other girls.

My hands roam down my body, pulling slightly on the material of my dress. My eyes flutter closed and then shoot open to refocus on him.

Disappointment floods me as our moment is closed off with the push of the crowd, and we're once more blocked from seeing each other.

Chapter Eleven

Adrian

The morning's light is creeping in, illuminating the barn far better than the small light swinging overhead thanks to the wind.

Leaning into the pitchfork, I have no fight in me as my focus homes in on the bulb. It transforms from the swinging light I find is a bitch to change into the show I was briefly given last night.

I managed to sober up and pace myself after meeting her ... Brinley.

What a uniquely beautiful name.

The way she moved with the other girls, there was no one I could compare her to. She seemed as wild as the wind the moment she focused on me and danced as if we were the only two in the entire building. How could it be possible I know nothing about this woman other than the fact she used to live here and was—*is* friends with mine?

It has to be lust.

A means to an end that hasn't been fulfilled for a period I'm not willing to admit out loud to myself or my friends.

When the small fragment of a show was blocked from my view, Landen had returned with a number for me to call and set up a date with a woman I don't think I'm going to bother calling. She likely thought it was for him, and if she

couldn't come over with him alongside her friends to meet me, then why should I ask her out on a date?

I'm done with the sight-unseen kind of dating. Nash's was enough to scare me. Nothing against Delilah, but I'm not interested and need to figure this out on my own. Besides, I saw the way her interest perked when I mentioned my ranch and turned up her nose at the idea of me having sheep.

Most people anymore hear the word and think of some fanciful Hollywood image. Where there's plenty of time to go on a random ride and mess around or frolicking by a pond. I'm sure Delilah thought that as well as thinking I was made of money, considering how much it takes to keep a ranch up and running anymore.

There's a creak, the only indication someone is coming in, and it spurs me on to finish mucking the last couple of stalls before I move on to the next task on my daily chore list.

"Here's where you ran off to." Dad chuckles, pushing a wheelbarrow in, and moves it to the corner allotted for its storage.

"Just doing my regular chores." Lifting a shoulder, I do my best to seem like I'm completely focused on my task when I'm still thinking of the woman who never left my mind even after I came home.

The evening came to a close when Landen helped get Eliza and Julia home with Gentry and Gage's help. Brinley convinced us she was good enough to drive in order to get her and Clover back to the apartment. Lexy had to cart off Nash while Evan was taking care of Mina since he still lives with

her and Lyla above the diner in the renovated what they discovered was a former brothel.

Which left me to find my way back to the truck and the long drive home where thoughts of her consumed me even after I drug myself into the house and into bed. It's been a long time since I've taken my desire literally into my own hand when I woke at four this morning to get to work. I took a few minutes to myself which didn't take the edge off since I'm still feeling it right now.

“What's going on in that mind of yours?” He speaks up, coming to lean against the stall to watch me work.

I have a far better relationship with my dad than with my mom. She doesn't understand why I would pick this type of lifestyle over all the possibilities offered in the city. She has never got that I need open spaces and hard work to make me feel something.

The bond with my dad includes being able to talk to him about anything whereas I can't do the same with my mom who has become something of a social climber since I moved here permanently. I think the last time I talked to her; she was on her fourth marriage.

“What attracted you to Mom?” This isn't a topic we have ever touched on. He always told me he would answer any question I might have, but up until now, I hadn't wanted to know why. “She's clearly never been made for this kind of life.”

Not that I can compare Brinley, a woman I barely know, to my mom.

“No, she certainly wasn’t,” he agrees.

“Then what was it?” Once more, I’m leaning into the pitchfork. I’m putting myself behind which I’ll regret later tonight while I’m still out when I could be crashing early, but I’m ready to ask these questions.

“Honestly, it was lust. I saw a beautiful woman who was interested in me and what I did. It was a whirlwind. Now, I look back and know it was just lust and nothing more. It produced a fine young man I see before me now and I can’t regret that.” His smile is bright and it pulls on my own. “This doesn’t have to do with Felicity, does it?” The smile vanishes in an instant. “I told you that beauty queen wasn’t a fit for you. If only—”

“It’s not about Felicity. I’m ... *over* her.” Even as I say it, I can’t sound convincing. “I met a woman last night and thought there was a moment, but I can’t tell anymore.” Scrubbing a hand over my face, I end up pushing my hat up higher on my head. “And the guys all seem to think they need to set me up because I’m turning into a hermit like ...” I trail off, meeting his gaze.

“Like me,” he states with a nod, accepting this as his truth. Kicking off the stall, he comes closer. “I can’t say I blame them, but I think you’re the only one who can find the woman you believe is meant for you. Don’t let the past cloud you. Besides,” he lightly punches my shoulder. “If anyone has any luck with finding a match for you, it’d be Polly McArthur.” I swear he’s joking; the laugh is enough to make me believe that but then he sobers the moment he takes in my look of horror. “What?”

“Funny you should say that. She broke up my date the other night and is now on a mission.” I cringe.

We aren’t Catholic, but Dad crosses himself nevertheless. “Lord have mercy on you then. That crazy old bad tried to set me up after your mom and I split.”

“And it didn’t work?” Is that why he’s remained single? Did she scare him that badly?

“Do you see a woman madly in love with me around here?” He lifts his arms and glance around the quieted barn.

“No.”

“Exactly, take it into your own hands. The woman you met last night, why don’t you see what could happen there?”

“Even if she doesn’t live here and is just visiting?”

“You never know, you could be the thing she needs to convince herself into staying.” Backing away, he heads off to the tack room. “Now, let’s get back to work, shall we?”

Chapter Twelve

Brinley

It's incredible how much of a place can change since childhood, but stay the same all at the same time.

Of course, I realized that when I got here it wouldn't look exactly like it did when I left as a ten-year-old. For some strange reason, my mind wanted me to think of my past here in Morris Valley in a sepia color scheme as I took everything in.

Clover miraculously got up to get ready for work this morning, acting as if she hadn't been drunk as a skunk last night and left me with her work-in-progress car to see myself around town while being up to my own devices. She acted as if nothing was amiss with her mind as she rushed around, shoved a stale donut into her mouth and told me to have fun today, she would be back after she got off work.

The others told me how impressive as well as concerning Clover's tolerance and ability to drink anyone under the table was. I didn't see much of it the last time we were all together, but seeing it firsthand, it's a miracle she's walking upright.

And with them, I'm not sure if I'm completely impressed or concerned there's some reason my friend got herself near black-out drunk last night and not addressing it this morning even if she was in a hurry to get to work.

I do my best to let it go for now. It can be something we can address later when she's off work and I'm done wandering around town, relishing in the freedom away from

my stalker and reminiscing about what's still around from when I was a kid.

My first stop was Miina's diner which was already bustling not giving me much of a chance to visit more with my surprisingly even-tempered friend or to get much of a chance to get to know Lyla again either.

I *did*, however, get a chance to visit with some other familiar faces and was praised for my accomplishments in both the military and the Olympics. Thankfully, no one asked for pictures and as far as I know, no one was interested in linking anything to me on my social media. I can't be certain though. I won't get notifications of any tags right now anyway.

After enjoying an amazing breakfast of hashbrowns, eggs, wheat toast, and two strips of bacon, I managed to snag a newspaper from Mr. Doyle, Landen's grandpa who was arguing with a group of older men he as with and took off.

I'm not sure why I really grabbed it since anything and everything I could ever need to look up in town is accessible through my phone, but still, I found myself making the journey to the park where it was peaceful. Just young children with their guardians watching over them as they played or people walking the road that I was surprised to find half of it is now blocked to be a walking path while the other is a two-way street.

The paper was yesterday's and on the thin side, but thankfully what I was thinking of when I grabbed it from Mr. Doyle was overlooked and still inside.

There's a lot for sale here. Plenty of properties alongside homes within town. The acreage in my opinion is

overpriced and with how small the plots are, not worth it even though I can easily afford a couple of them and slowly figure out what to build on them.

What I have in mind needs to be far enough out of town to be safe and I don't think the people who can and will likely be able to afford the places I saw would appreciate someone wanting to run a gun range so close to their likely sprawling home.

When my search didn't come up with anything worthwhile, I sipped on the coffee Lyla gave me before I left the diner and then decided to head out to the rifle range I used to go out to with my dad. As I walked the dirt road that led to the pistol range from the clubhouse before it forked to the muzzleloader range, I took in as shots fired in the distance. If I was startled by the changes coming to this once sleepy, small town, I was relieved that other aspects of it are nearly exactly as I last remember how they were.

And in my wandering, I can now see where there's room for improvement, especially the small building that houses things for the 4-H and to hold meetings. They *have* added a small area for an archery range, but what good is that to people when winter hits, and they still want to shoot?

"How does it look there?" Mom's voice has been with me while I've walked around out here. I didn't think I'd have service, but much to my delight, I was able to be on the phone with her and finally filled her in on what has brought me all the way up here.

"Spread out which is good." I kick at a clump of dirt and purse my lips. "But I can see where there's work to be

done.”

“Does it look like it did when you were a girl?” I can sense her apprehension. She doesn’t want me where she feels I’m left in the open. But there’s no need for that here. Not only am I always carrying, but there’s no way whoever the person who’s been following me could know I’m here. Like any good parent, she feels the safest place for me is with her and Dad, but I’m an adult and can handle myself.

“New back boards and a small archery range, but nothing else looks different at all.” I sigh and come to a stop at the pistol range, taking in the few people of retirement age teasing one another as they shoot. “I could make something of it.” There isn’t much of the way of buying anything I can do. After all, this range and property is owned by the county, but I could make a donation of both money and my time if I decide to stay longer.

“You’re talking as if you’re planning on staying there.” She nearly scoffs. It isn’t that Mom never loved living here. Morris Valley just never held the opportunities she and Dad were looking for themselves or me. I’m sure she’s thinking along the same lines right now, especially with Cannon’s visit to the ranch.

“You never know.” Dropping my hand that was shading my eyes, I look around and then up at the endless blue sky dappled with pure white clouds. “You know I love our home, but something here calls to my soul. A piece settling within me, you know?”

“Like you’ve finally come home?” There’s resignation right alongside acceptance in her voice.

“Yeah.” Turning back toward the road I decided to walk down instead of driving, I start to make my way back up to the clubhouse. “I could easily work from here and go when I’m needed.”

Her voice sounds, but it’s as if she pulled the phone away from her ear, and that’s when I hear both my dad’s and Cannon’s voices as she explains it’s me on the phone and offhandedly tells them about my idea before she comes back to me. “Maybe run shooting classes?” she hedges and just like that, I’m consumed with thoughts.

“There’s a possibility.” Rubbing my finger over my lips, I’m striding away with determination to head back up and have a word with the range manager. “I’ll call you when I have something figured out.”

“If I know you as well as I know myself, you already have the basics figured out, my darling.” She laughs, and I hear the rumble of male laughter as well.

“You know me too well.”

Chapter Thirteen

Adrian

It appears losing the number to a woman who wasn't brave enough to come over to meet me wasn't my ticket for getting out of Landen's pick for me.

I'm a marked man by each of my friends and no amount of hiding out on the ranch is going to change that until each of them has a turn at setting me up with a woman and one sticks.

And then there's Miss Polly I need to keep wary of.

That's why, as I come back to the house just as the sun is falling behind the hills to the west, I pull the reins in my hands and bring an impatient horse who just wants a good rub down and to be put out after he gave me a good hard day's work to a standstill at the sight of Landen's car alongside a foreign rig that looks like it needs to be plugged in to run.

"Great." Grumbling and grinding my back teeth, I carry on to the barn. Whatever this is about can wait until I'm done for the evening.

Smelling like sweat and other likely foul smells thanks to my deodorant giving out around lunchtime today when the heat nearly got the better of me while mending fence, I don't give two shits about it after making sure the horse is tended to and am now heading up to the house. I can hear Dad laughing alongside Landen's with a foreign one blended in.

The house hasn't had a woman's touch since Grandma passed away the end of my senior year of high school and it

shows. Mom's nose always curled up when I was little and I was dropped off, never caring for what my grandma did with the place. There's a fine layer of dust on everything. There's enough going on around here that takes up our time, housekeeping is the least of our worries.

The floorboards creak as I step over the threshold. It's loud enough to cause the conversation within the house; either in the kitchen or living room, to fall silent.

"About time you got home." Landen's voice barks, drawing me to the living room where a woman with long blond hair sits perched on the edge of the couch I'm pretty sure is older than me. She looks out of place, eyes glancing around and barely meeting mine when I enter and see Landen regarding me with a broad, smug grin. "Welcome home, Adrian."

"Landen, what brings you all the way out here?" I give a nod to Dad who's turning his attention to the woman. "Didn't think you were the type to bring a date out here? What? The rifle range not enough to take her shooting?" All of us know that he's interested in Mina, but she refuses to give in to him.

I'm acting the fool on purpose. He knows that I know when he guided her out here, but I'm not about to let up without a fight.

Glancing back at the woman, I'm not going to deny it, she's beautiful, but so was Felicity and even just giving the woman a look tells me she's more of the same variety. I know I'm being judgmental, but some things make no sense to me.

Why spend hundreds of dollars on makeup when it could go toward something that would last longer? Why trust a man you don't know to bring you all the way out to a ranch you aren't familiar with to meet another strange man?

Her judgment just went down in my book.

Landen's kicking off the wall. His feet thunder as he moves and lightning flashes in his gaze when he turns to me, ready to match me in this fight. "Adrian, remember the woman I told you about? The number I gave you?" He runs the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip while jerking his head in her direction.

As if he struck her with that lightning in his eyes, she shoots up and mindfully pulls down at the too-short skirt of her outfit.

Clearly, she thought this would lead to some sort of date and maybe something else after.

The asshole is about ready to come out of me. I'm hot, tired, and hungry, so I don't really give a damn at the moment. "The one who wouldn't come over to introduce herself even though she had a cluster of friends to protect her?" I just barely contain the scoff that wants to come out, and I don't dare meet my dad in the eye.

I'll get my ass kicked for this after they're gone, but I don't mind.

Landen's jaw ticks, and his fists clench.

Good, he should have known better. This little competition spurred between my friends has their judgment clouded in the rush to find me a woman first.

I can't help but think of Brinley again. I've kept myself so busy throughout the day that she hasn't come to my mind since this morning in the barn. I have no hope with Gage or Gentry to find me someone and I know it's a long shot, but if anyone will have any luck, it'd be Even hopefully noticing my exchange with Brinley and will help point her in my direction.

Face it, you're at the mercy of Miss Polly.

"Adrian." Landen growls my name and lifts a hand to indicate the woman who looks seconds away from splitting, but then I see her waver on her feet. She's not running anywhere in those heels. "This is Anna. Anna, this is the friend I was telling you about, Adrian," he offers.

She must have been a small bit interested in her sober mind to willingly come out here. Albeit, Landen's a police sergeant, but he's still a stranger to her. But now that she's here, there isn't any interest in her gaze.

She's likely trying to figure out what sort of idiot she is for coming out here on a whim for a date.

I'm thinking the same. If she's so willing to come all the way out to a man's house she doesn't know in the hopes of a date, she isn't going to make it with me.

"H-Hi." She offers a small wave.

"Hello." Nodding to her, I hadn't even bothered to remove my hat. I know the moment I do, the sweat my band is holding back will come cascading down and I'll want a shower rather than remain standing here. "Anna, if you aren't

feeling comfortable here, none of us will stop you from leaving.”

It’s a small amount of kindness that leaves me and about all I’m in the mood for offering up. I don’t have to tell her twice. Teetering on those ridiculous heels, she’s skirting past Landen and I and making a break for the door which she slams behind her in her haste.

“Looks like you and Nash now have something in common, Landen.” There’s a fire in my gaze as I look back at him. He’s only a couple of inches taller than me. The storm is now raging within him. And then I startle him but patting him on the arm and laughing. “Thanks for trying, though. Now, since you’re out here, want to join us for dinner?”

Okay, I guess I have a little more kindness left in me because the gratitude was a complete lie.

Chapter Fourteen

Brinley

Clover is an equal opportunity drinker.

Last night it was fruity drinks and now there's a bottle of white wine airing between us as we work together to put dinner on her small kitchen table.

I only filled my glass to the customary level while she topped hers off at the rim.

"What?" she quips as we take our seats and she reaches for her glass before her fork.

"I know I have no place to say anything, but as your friend, I'm worried." I begin, hands slipping under my legs as I lean forward and nervous to really get into this conversation. I *know* Clover. Time and distance haven't done much in the way of our friendship like people would think. I wrote to them all the time; each got a letter from me once a month, and then when we all got our first phones, we were talking all the time. I was so excited when we were able to do party calls because it was the first time we all had our voices together at the same time without them crowding or hogging a single phone.

The internet was better but lagged out at the ranch, so we weren't able to use it much.

I know everything they went through since I left. Yet I feel like something is missing with Clover.

The usual smiling face I know so well is gone as she sets her glass back on the table.

“What’s going on, Clover?” I know about her brief marriage right after high school. It came so quickly that I wasn’t able to be here for her courthouse wedding, and by the time I could be or do something, they were filing for divorce. Which I think was actually annulled.

She does her best to force a smile and darts her gaze away from me since she knows I can’t be fooled; I saw past it already.

“It doesn’t have to do with Calvin, does it?” Their marriage was too brief to still have a grip on her.

Or does it?

“I guess since the others know, it’s about time I clue you in as well.” She sighs and turns back to me.

“Clue me into what exactly?” There’s a sharp jab under my ribs, as if a knife is slipping in there at the thought one of my best friends didn’t trust me with something. I made friends when we moved, but none of them were or still are as close to me as the ones I left behind here with the exception of Summer. But maybe, it wasn’t the same way they felt about me after I was gone.

“I was pregnant, Brin.” Her eyes flare when she looks up at me. “That’s why I got married to Calvin. It was his, even if to this day, he still doesn’t believe it was since I liked to have a little too much fun. I never cheated, though. When I found out I was pregnant the night of graduation, I knew I needed to do right for my mom’s sake.” Her shoulders shake.

Her mom had been sick for a long time when we were teens. She only has one working kidney, and I know it pains

Clover there isn't much she can do for her and that it's only a matter of time before she has to go back on dialysis.

"I thought it would make her happy to see me settled down and with a baby. I didn't want her to relive what she went through when she had me, and Calvin thought he was being noble like everyone always thought he was. I lost the baby two months in, and even before that, he hadn't touched me since I told him I was pregnant." Now, as if she isn't thinking, she reaches for her glass and takes a more than healthy swig. "We were divorced a month later, and no matter how much Mom still tells me it isn't my fault, I feel ... lost." She ends her story on a sigh and slumps back in her seat.

I ache for my friend. It's unimaginable to go through the loss she has. Without a second to think, I'm up and rushing around to wrap her in assuring embrace.

"I'm so sorry, Clover," I mutter into her hair that carries the scent of the underside of a car. Even with my heart hurting for not being told when it happened, it doesn't matter as much as her well-being does to me.

"It's nothing I can't handle. I am ... in my own way at least." Her head cants to one side with a shrug. "Now, enough about my past." She ushers me back over to my seat, which I'm slow to stand and return to.

When I do, there's a truth welling up in me that I haven't shared with anyone yet. I didn't get a chance when they rushed me for our night out. I don't think of it as payment for her opening an old wound to me, but to share in the way friends do.

“I’m freaking out, Clover.” My fork skims over my food but barely touches any of it as I watch it move over everything.

“What? Of my story? I promise you; I don’t think all of us are destined to have miscarriages like I did.” She does her best to make light of this even though it’s perfectly clear she still hasn’t been able to handle it all that well.

“No, it isn’t that. When and if that time comes, I know I have my tribe of you wild women to be by my side through all of it.” I offer up a small smile she returns. “It’s my stalker.” A small weight begins to lift.

I’ve told all of them a little, but not what I’m about to tell her. None of us are any good at keeping secrets from one another.

Except for Clover’s, I guess.

My parents don’t even have a real clue how much this truly bothers me. I don’t want them to worry more than they already are. Mom texted saying that if I needed extra muscle, Cannon volunteered to help keep an eye on me.

I bet he did.

The man thinks he’s the greatest, and I don’t want that overinflated ego anywhere near me.

“What about him? If it is a him,” she urges. The light tone we did have before we sat down has evaporated and carried away by the air-conditioning.

“No one has been able to figure out who it could be, and it’s almost like the person is a ghost.” My breath shudders. “The person had been in my trailer from the job I just left.

That's the closest the person has come to me. That's the main reason I came here, to escape, and I keep praying that the person won't look to find me up here in what most of the world considers the middle of nowhere."

"If you stay here, the person might find you sooner or later, you know?"

"I do." Nodding, I force myself to take a bite of food. "I'm hoping by then I can deal with it since it's clear law enforcement hasn't made any progress on the matter."

"And then you'll stay?" Her eyes brighten for the first time since taking her wineglass away from her lips. "You'll move back here?"

"It's been a possibility fluttering through my mind." I nod. Again, there's no reason to keep it from her now. "I just don't want to put any of you in danger if this person decides to jump off the rocker."

"Well, good thing for you. Not only do you have one crazy friend with a dominatrix personality on the police force, but three others who will do the work those big city officers are failing at." It lightens my heart to hear her words. "So you wanna tell me what you're thinking of doing if you decide to stay here?" There's a glitter in her gaze with just a touch of the dark cloud still hanging around.

So I give her what she wants and tell her of my ideas.

Chapter Fifteen

Adrian

It's a covert operation. Get into town, go straight to the feed store to get what I need, and then get the hell out before anyone can find me and thrust another unwanted date at me.

Thankfully, Landen and Nash are both off that list, and I'm not sure if Gage and Gentry are all that interested in the whole mess. Gentry has his own shit to deal with, and Gage is too much of an asshole to arrange something. Women tend to be interested until he opens his mouth and then they can't get away fast enough.

Then there's Evan. He's truly my only hope if their combined efforts are going to actually work.

Which I don't think will happen.

And last, there's Miss Polly, and no one ever knows when and where she'll appear.

And *that* isn't about to happen.

Backing my truck into my usual spot over by the loading doors, I'm out and dropping the tailgate before jumping up onto the dock to get everything we needed loaded up.

"What's the rush today, Adrian?" Hal, the feed store owner, is laughing at my mad dash as I throw stuff into the back of the truck, making it sway with each bag.

"Just have a long list of things I need to get done." My breathing is labored with the speed I'm going while trying to

speaking. “If you need to get back to the counter, I can close the doors behind me.”

Looking back, I find the older man grinning with a nod. “You’re a good man, Adrian. I’ll see you next time.” He leaves me with countless bags I still need to toss into the bed.

I can’t help but glance around as I go back and forth to the truck bed, but thankfully, I don’t spot a strangely dressed old woman lurking anywhere.

“Are you trainin’ for some sort of rancher games?” A voice, sweet with a twang, draws me from my single-minded task. My chest heaves as I lean back, feeling a burn in my lower back as I turn and look down at the woman walking over from the other end of the parking lot.

“Rancher games?” I rip my hand from my head, and the back of my arm runs over my brow in an attempt to get the sweat under control.

“You know?” Brinley comes to a stop and leans against the side of my truck, beaming up at me. “Like those highland games, but with ranching tasks.”

“So,” I drawl. “Like rodeo?” It takes a lot to keep from laughing. I enjoy watching it but value what money I have too much to give any event my entire focus.

“Rodeo.” She guffaws and waves me off before looking past me to see my pile of supplies. “I’m not talkin’ about includin’ livestock. What about the work that doesn’t require them? Fencin’, movin’ bales of hay, that sort of stuff.” She gestures to my pile.

“You know what? You might very well be onto something with that.” I point down at her. “It could be the start of something grand.”

“Oh, but alas, who has time to participate much less organize it?” I think she’s flirting with me right now, but I can’t be certain.

Am I that out of touch?

“That’s for sure. There aren’t enough hours in the day for that, and even if there were—”

“You’d be spending them doing more work.” Her small, upturned nose wrinkles before she kicks off my truck. “Would you like some help?” Her hands clap together, reminding me of the calluses I found there when we shook hands.

“I wouldn’t want to keep you from whatever you have going on.” It would be nice to have someone other than Dad around to help, but I wouldn’t dare keep her just because she’s being kind.

“Would you believe me if I told you I’m bored to death and impatiently waiting for one of my friends to get off work and I’d love to help you?”

“If you don’t mind fifty-pound bags, I won’t stop you.” Turning back to the pile, I watch her hop up onto the dock with ease. When I’m about ready to help her lift the first one, I’m taken aback as she crouches low and hefts the bag over her shoulder and carries it with grace over to the bed of my truck.

Holy shit.

“What? Didn’t expect me to offer help and then wait for you to pick the bag up, did you?” Now I’m certain she’s flirting with me.

“I-I wasn’t sure.” Rubbing the back of my head, I finally get my own bag and carry it over. “I didn’t know what to expect, I guess.” I huff out a laugh. Unlike all the other times I’ve done so for the past ... well, I don’t want to admit how long, this time, there’s humor to it.

“I’m a ranch girl, Adrian. My dad runs one down in Texas, and when I’m not workin’ elsewhere, I’m sweatin’ my ass off helpin’ him where I can.” She picks up another and takes it over.

“I didn’t know such women still existed.” I’m an ass to admit it, so I quickly rectify it. “I mean ... That is ... I wasn’t implying—”

“You didn’t offend me.” Her smile brightens after dropping a bag. “I know I don’t look like much of a hardworkin’ woman, but the muscle and skills I learned from workin’ alongside my dad and his employees beats learnin’ it from anywhere else.”

This causes me to pause all over again.

“What?” She pushes some hair that has fallen loose from her long braid, behind her ear and suddenly looks nervous as I regard her.

“I couldn’t agree more with you. Not everyone wants the kind of lifestyle I and, apparently, you live anymore. It’s refreshing.”

“Really?” Instead of going back for one of the final three bags, she crosses her arms and leans on one leg. “How very old-school of you, Adrian.”

I like the way my name rolls off those enticing lips.

“Yeah, I am. You okay with that?” Looks like I do have some teasing flirts still in me.

She doesn’t answer me right away, doesn’t even give me one, and instead, asks me a question of her own. “Are you busy tomorrow?” She comes to stand before me. Even though it’s plenty warm out, I still feel the heat of her beating against me, taunting me to grab her and see if this chemistry I’m feeling is mutual.

“I’m always busy, but I could see if it’s possible to move things around, why?” That’s a first. I normally jump at the chance to turn probing questions like that down.

“Mina is throwing me a sort of welcome home party even though I’m not sold on stayin’ here yet. I’d like to invite you.” Her elbow nudges me, and for once, I’m willing to step away from work for a woman.

Chapter Sixteen

Brinley

Was I too forward?

Not forward enough with my invitation?

Could it be he has things he needs to get done and doesn't have time for a woman who isn't sure if she's going to stay here or not? Could I have each of my encounters with him wrong and he already has someone his friends don't know about?

Wow, way to overthink everything, Brin.

Even if this handsome man I'm ridiculously attracted to has someone, I can still be friends with him.

"I'll come. When and where?"

A thrill shoots through me with his acceptance, but on the outside, I remain as calm as I possibly can manage. It's more than just him accepting that has me excited. "It's at the pool. Mina rented it out for the evening. She'll have food and drinks for everyone. You just need to bring your shorts and have some fun."

From the very first time I was told about Mina's first pool party, I've wanted to go to one. And now she's throwing one in my honor.

"Pool party, you say?" The pad of his glove-covered thumb brushes over his full bottom lip. "Yeah, I can make that." Nodding, his dark eyes focus on me. I'm confident I'm not the only one feeling the flutter of desire each time we look at each other.

“Great, I’ll see you tomorrow.” I can’t fight it; I lean into him for a brief, pseudo embrace, and then I’m backing away. “I’ll let you get to your work so you have free time.” Giving him a wink, I hop down and back over to my loaner car.

When I drove by the first time and saw him, I couldn’t help but turn around and make my way back to the same feed store I used to come to with my dad. Adrian Cook had been on my mind for the past couple of days, and while I seemed to always run into one of the other guys at various places during different times of day, he was the only one I never caught sight of until now.

Some might say he’s a man of mystery, but what I see, especially today, is a hardworking one who doesn’t give himself much time for anything unless it has to do with his ranch and life there. I’ve seen what a man like him prioritizes, what he gives up, and based on what the girls have told me, Adrian doesn’t spend much time doing much off the ranch until someone drags his ass into town.

It was Mom who finally convinced my dad to hire someone for help when he got our ranch going. I’m not about to say anything to Adrian about how him and his dad should run theirs, but they might just need someone else to pitch in even if it isn’t on a full-time basis.

If my mom could hear my thoughts, she’d say I’m making plans before establishing anything. Which, I’m known to do.

A tailgate slams shut and then a truck door follows soon after before I hear the rumble of his engine. I haven’t

even reached Clover's car when he's taking off with a wave out the window. A smile spreads across my face, and I'm feeling lighter than I have in months.

"Well, I'll be damned." A huff of indignation startles me.

Breaking my view of the street where Adrian vanishes down, I find an older woman with gray hair done up in a genuine beehive style leading down to giant sunglasses, deep purple lips, and a style one doesn't usually find on an older woman; black leather pants, a snug, off-the-shoulder top that shows off this woman's chest her granddaughter wishes she had and topped off with sky-high black heels.

"It's good to see you, Miss Polly." With confidence, I turn to her fully and offer her a warm smile. Years may have passed, but I'll always recognize her.

"Good to see me?" She tuts. "Then why haven't you made it a point to come to the house? Hmm? Why is it, I'm the one who has to track *you* down, young lady?"

Just like that, I'm ten years old all over again.

"I'm ... sorry." Kicking the dirt on the pavement, I feel ashamed. This woman, along with all the others who were related to one friend or another, helped to raise me until we moved. She's as much my grandma as she is any of the others and that includes Lilly, who is her granddaughter. "It's good to see you." I step closer to her. "You look like you've grown feistier as you've aged beautifully."

Flattering always works, right? What could it hurt to do so with the most unique woman I've ever met?

Purple lips purse and even though her glasses are too dark to see her eyes, I know she's narrowing them on me. Polly McArthur may not dress like the typical grandmother, but she isn't that vain to need nor want plastic surgery. Laugh lines curl around her mouth.

"Oh, Brinley. How I've missed my girl who was the only one with good taste." Picking up the end of my braid, she flashes me my own hair. "I *love* this shade of green on you."

"Thank you. I thought I'd spice life up a little."

Her shades drop slowly along with my braid. "Spice life up a little, you say?" She muses more to herself than me and I catch her eyes darting off toward the street. More exactly, in the direction Adrian vanished down. "So what do you think of our resident cowboy, Adrian Cook?" This time, she's fully addressing me, looping our arms together and turning us to face the road.

"He's ... He ... umm ... seems really nice?" I squeak.

"Yes, he is an extremely *nice* young man who has had a single bitter taste of love and now doesn't know when there's someone worthwhile and incredible right in front of him."

"Miss Polly, you can't mean ...?" I trail off because the moment I look at her, I know exactly what she's implying. "I don't even know him."

"Oh, that's part of the beginning of any relationship." She waves my concern off.

"I don't know if I'm *staying* here either." It's true. Sure, I've talked things over with the range manager about a

few things he could discuss with me, but nothing is set in stone.

“That could easily change if you were somehow persuaded into staying.” Nudging me, much like I just did with Adrian, she beams at me. “I do believe I just found my pick.” With that cryptic statement, she blows me a kiss and leaves with a promise to catch up with me later.

As strange as that was, I’m glad to see Morris Valley may be changing, but Miss Polly certainly hasn’t.

Chapter Seventeen

Adrian

Gut-rolling laughter erupted the moment I stepped out from the back of the house where my room is and into the kitchen where Dad was finishing up his potatoes and onion to go along with his steak dinner. As humiliating as this is, I can't bring myself to refuse a man who laughs so rarely this moment.

Even though it grates on my nerves, I let Dad get in all the laughter as I possibly can allow before I rush out of the house and head to town.

It's been a while since I had an opportunity to wear swim trunks. Hell, shorts period which is what has led to the laughter.

"Your legs ..." Dad wheezes. I've had enough. "They're glowing!"

"Yeah, yeah, old man. Ranch work doesn't call for shorts as you did well to drill into my head at a young age," I snap.

Even before I can truly remember, I was never allowed to wear shorts around the ranch unless it was to bed or if I was heading somewhere to go swimming with my friends like I am right now. With my legs looking as they do; I can imagine Dad's would be much worse. And I can't bring myself to remove my shirt for him to get an even better laugh at my farmer's tan.

Contrary to what Hollywood and romance authors write and show to the world, ranchers don't often take off their

shirts while working. I've got a permanent red neck from hours spent in the sun and a deep-set tan on my arms. That leaves the majority of my torso as pale as my legs.

"I'm sorry, son." He wipes under his eyes and continues to softly chuckle for a minute longer before he starts dishing up his dinner.

"No, you're not. You're getting too much joy out of this, but that's okay." Clapping him on the shoulder as he sits, I make my way over to the door. What makes me look even more ridiculous is the fact I don't own another pair of shoes to go with this getup. It's nothing but boots cluttering the closet floor in my room.

Swim trunks, white T-shirt I don't plan on taking off because I don't want the guys to laugh as hard as my dad, and my boots.

"You're quite the trendsetter, my boy." He isn't even looking at me when he makes the statement with another laugh.

"If you like it so much, why don't you come and join? I'm sure we can fashion you a pair of shorts out of old jeans." This is enough to get his attention. His head shakes now.

"Oh, no. You go have fun. You have me curious about this girl, you'll have to bring her out." Shoveling a bite into his mouth, I know he's hinting at more. I don't have an answer for him.

"Don't have too much fun while I'm gone. Make sure you get to bed. No sleeping on the couch." Scolding him, I head out.

As much as I wish I could convince Dad to hire at least a part-time hand, I'm thankful there isn't a soul around to witness my unique outfit on my way over to the truck. The chickens cluck as if they're laughing at me even though they're pecking away in the front yard and not paying any attention to me passing them.

Once I'm in the truck, my legs are covered, hidden from anyone until I reach the pool and am forced to emerge again.

I'm nearly to town, just within range of the cell towers when my phone rings. My truck is old with hand crank windows and an air conditioner that has long quit working while the heat nearly burns me alive in the winter. I don't have a chance of getting a flash on my dash of who the call could possibly be from.

Reaching down to the middle console, I pull my phone up and find Miss Polly's number lighting up my screen.

I saw her yesterday. There was no mistaking that brand of uniqueness she carries wherever she goes, and that's exactly why I didn't stick around to visit more with Brinley even though I really wanted to.

I also wanted to get back home as quickly as possible in order to get all my chores done so I could get a start on today's as well and give me time to get away for an evening. None of my friends understand how much work it takes just to get spare time. I can't even catch a break when I'm sick.

I may have missed the unfortunate opportunity yesterday to see what she's discovered so far with finding me a woman, but I'm not going to be rude about ignoring her call

today. Especially if she knows anything about the pool party she—thankfully—won't be attending.

“Hello, Miss Polly.”

“Don't you give me that chipper tone.” She instantly scolds at my drawl. “If it weren't for the fact that no one will tell me where that ranch of yours is located, I'd be heading out there to set you straight.”

“What do you mean, ma'am?” I continue.

“Oh, quit playing the fool with me, Adrian James,” she snips, and now it's my turn to bite back the laugh wanting to burst out of me. “You've been making it pretty obvious you've been avoiding me at every trip to town.”

It isn't often that she loses her temper, so I need to end this game.

That's just how serious she is about helping you find a woman, idiot.

“I'm sorry, Miss Polly. I've been busy. Dad's still adamant we don't need part-time help, and I'm running off fumes. I'm on my way to town now for Mina's pool party. Don't you want me to—”

“Perfect!” Her shout cuts me off. She sounds as if she just won bingo rather than learning I'm going to have some fun with my friends. I still can't believe the rec department hasn't refused Mina. Her parties are over the top. “I won't keep you then.”

“Umm?”

“I just need to run one thing past you and then you can go, all right?” Now she’s all sweet? I could live to be hundred and she’d likely find a way to still be kicking. I’ll never be able to understand her.

“And what’s that?”

“Saturday night, six sharp. You have a date with the girl of my choice and I promise you, you won’t have to worry about what fool of your friends finds you the next ill match.”

Looks like the others aren’t going to get a chance because I’m resigning to my fate. And if it goes tits up, I’m done. “Okay, I give. Where am I meeting this woman?”

Chapter Eighteen

Brinley

How has the rec department allowed Mina to keep coming back with her parties here?

It's probably a good thing there aren't any houses around here because I think there would be a noise complaint. It would likely be swept under the rug considering there are currently three off-duty officers adding to the noise.

My gaze can't help but wander around to the few teenagers being paid to serve as our lifeguards tonight and the single adult supervising them.

This is as crazy as I thought it would be. There's a Tiki bar set up at the border where the concrete meets the grass where towels are spread out everywhere. It's filled with all the drinks any of us could ask for, and if it survives the night and Clover, there'll be plenty for Mina's next party.

Where did she get all this anyway?

It looks like a small fortune I can't see her being able to afford on what her wages must be owning *and* working her own diner.

There's music coming from the speakers the pool already had spread out around the place for announcements or whatever purpose they would have them for.

And here I stand, in the middle of it all; listening and watching all my childhood friends coming together to have fun and celebrate my apparent return.

What would they do if I decided to stay?

They're also toasting and cheering for my welcome home to stay. Since no one will listen to me about how my stay is only temporary, I've resigned myself to accepting ideas of what I could do with the range—mainly from Gage and Nash. I can't help but admit, I'm starting to like it more and more outside of what I've already had running through my mind since my day at the range.

A truck pulls up, rumbling to a stop at the far end of the small parking lot and barely in sight through the chain-link fence.

Adrian's here.

There's a spike of excitement rushing at me and has me shuffling from one sandal-covered foot to the other.

With the idea of staying consuming my mind, there could be a chance to get to know the strong, silent cowboy a little better.

"I do believe I just found my pick."

Miss Polly's words ring through my head, not for the first time, since she spoke them and walked away. No one would give me an answer when I asked what the crazy old woman meant by those words. Mina and Lexy just shared a knowing look and then tapped the side of their noses before walking away.

I even went so far as to call Lilly. She was just as clueless as me but promised to get to the bottom of it and help me out since none of our friends wanted to do so.

A screech from Lexy pulls me from my thoughts, and I turn just in time to watch Nash pull her backward and land

with a massive splash into the deep end. A smile pulls on my face as she comes up, spluttering while he wears a smile and starts laughing even when she turns and attempts to dunk him.

The poor teenage lifeguard closest to them has no clue what to do. This isn't normally allowed especially with kids, but we're all capable-ish adults and there's no way Nash nor Lexy would actually want to drown the other.

"You know," his gritty timbre startles and delights me. "I always thought that eventually Nash would grow up but here we are, well into our twenties, and he's nowhere close to being there."

"Have you met his dad?" Beaming, I turn on my sandaled feet and nearly stumble into Adrian at the sight of the shaded smile under a worn ballcap. "Hi."

"Hi." He makes no move to step away from me or move closer as much as I want that to happen.

"I'm glad you could make it." I tilt my drink at him only to have it snagged from my hand. He drops it back and in two easy gulps, my beer is making its way down into his stomach. Before he can lower it, I take in the strong column of his neck and the dusting of hair peeking from the collar of his shirt. The massive expanse of his chest as he breathes and pulls the material tight.

A slight blush begins to spread over the apples of my cheeks as I take in the clear farmer's tan also peeking out from under the shirt. I don't need to go lower to win my wager with myself of what his legs look like, but I do. They're as white as bleached sheets with flecks of dark hair.

“Need a little bravery, hmm?” Lifting a brow, I don’t wait for his answer. Instead, I take his hand and guide him over to the Tiki bar to help him pick out whatever he wants to drink. “How about we do a few shots?” My challenge comes with the lift of a brow and corner of my mouth as I wait. “You don’t need to worry about being sober. Apparently, Mina managed to get us one of the local transport buses to see everyone home safely.”

“I highly doubt the driver will want to drive all the way out to my place, but I’m sure there’s a couch I could crash on somewhere for the night.” Accepting my challenge, he pours us out two shots. “What do we drink to?”

Offering me mine, he lifts his and waits for my response.

My lips twist in thought of what we both could possibly agree to. With the ruckus laughter of our friends all around us along with the music, a semi-warm breeze dusting over us, and the thoughts of what I could do here all playing as factors, I lift my glass to match his.

“To possibilities.”

His dark eyes narrow as he thinks it over. Is he wondering if I’m thinking about him as I state it? He wasn’t at first, but now I am. I want to stick around to get to know this man better.

I want to stay and vanish from the world. Make something for myself here while still remaining loyal to my sponsor when they call upon me.

And most of all, I'm now positive I want to remain here where I can hope and pray my stalker will never find me again.

There's a glint flashing in Adrian's eyes as he clinks his glass with mine. "To possibilities."

Chapter Nineteen

Adrian

Possibilities, she says.

What exactly does she have in mind for that, I wonder?

Taking our first shot together, I can't help but feel like I'm keeping something from her all thanks to the conversation I had with Miss Polly on the way here. If Brinley is thinking of a possibility of us, how am I being fair I agreed to go out with another woman?

Another blind date that'll likely not end well, so what's the worry?

I'll go and survive. Then I can dedicate some time to get to know Brinley before she has to leave.

The thought of her eventually leaving here and maybe not coming back to stay has a knot tying in my gut. I barely know the woman. I want to change that ... badly.

"What should our next shot be for?" There's color to her cheeks as she begins to fill our glasses again. I stop her, putting a hand over mine before I snag the bottle from her and hook my arm with hers.

"Come sit with me." Jerking my head in the direction of a spot under the massive cottonwood, I guide us up the small hill and take a seat. It's a relief she isn't bothered by not having a towel under her, but has to adjust her maroon bikini bottom once she's seated.

I'm a man with a great deal of willpower in many aspects of my life, but ripping my gaze away from the firm roundness of Brinley's ass isn't one of them.

How soft and firm would she be at the same time if I were to get a good handful of her, to press her against my body

“Well? What are we drinking to?”

Clearing my throat, I look out. Everyone is too busy having their own fun to pay any attention to us. I do catch Evan watching, though. He's leaning against the railing high up on the slide with a grin splitting his face as he takes the two of us in. Giving me a small nod, I know he has my back just like he should.

I give one back and then turn my full attention to Brinley. She's perched on her bent legs, completely comfortable in her own skin, not doing a damn thing to conceal herself from me.

During our limited encounters, I've seen plenty of her and have concluded it doesn't matter what she's wearing, I'm attracted to her and crave to know more about anything and everything she's willing to share with me.

“How about we just get to know each other?” I offer, hoping it doesn't scare her away.

“Okay,” she muses. “What would you like to know?”

I don't want to ask her the typical questions she's likely used to answering by now. I don't want to focus on her Olympic achievements or anything that has to do with whatever work she does now. I just want to know her.

“What’s your favorite firearm?” I know enough about her from the girls talking to know it isn’t a color or flower that’ll interest this woman. There’s a soft scent of gun powder constantly surrounding her. It’s enticing, and I crave it just as much as information.

“Hmm.” She taps the top of her glass. “That’s a tough one.” She looks up, lost in thought.

“I’ll tell you mine if that’ll help?” I suggest and wait for her nod. “I’m pretty simple. It’s a Ruger .243. Does a good enough job for all the uses I have for it.”

“That *is* a good gun and one I’ve shot while huntin’ with my dad,” she agrees. Enchanting blueish-purple eyes return to me. “But I think I’ll have to settle with the Springfield rifle. Old-school, I know, but I absolutely love loadin’ it. Maybe even more than shootin’ it. I also love the way you load a double-barrel shotgun.”

“Nothing like the sound it makes, right?”

“Yes.” She leans in to swat at me. “No one gets it. Well, other gun people do, but most just don’t understand.” She’s laughing now.

It’s addictive. Filling our glasses again, I urge her to ask me something. “Anything you’d like to know about me?”

Her eyes narrow in a teasing way. “Yeah, why haven’t you found a woman to settle down with yet?”

And here I thought I was being too forward.

“Sorry, I’m just curious. You’re quite the catch in my book, and I can’t for the life of me understand what about you

has kept the women at bay.” Then she cringes. “Sorry, I meant that as a compliment.”

I don’t have nearly enough alcohol thundering through my veins to put the blame on liquid courage. I’m genuinely interested in this woman. She’s completely different from all the others. Even the ones she calls her best friends.

She’s the antithesis of Felicity.

Moving closer until there’s barely a breath between us, I push some loose tendrils of hair behind her ear, feeling the thrill of her breath catching as my eyes slowly track down from hers to settle on her slightly parted lips.

“I do take it as one,” I whisper against her cheek. “And my answer is, I haven’t found a woman who cares to have the same lifestyle as me.” I move closer to her ear. “One who doesn’t mind the hard, back-breaking work I do from before sunup and well after sunset.”

The scent of sunscreen blends in a strange perfect way with the ever-present gunpowder off her skin. I want to run my tongue up her neck and nip at her ear. I’m barely holding myself back as I explain more to her. “I’m not a man who showers his women with things and has very little time for wining and dining. Most women don’t like that.”

Before I can give in to my urge, I pull away to find her eyes hooded and filled with the same lust I feel pulsating through every nerve ending in my body.

“That’s a shame for them then.” Licking her lips, she looks up at me. “Maybe you haven’t been looking in the right places.”

“Oh, I think I found someone right in front of me,” I
admit.

Chapter Twenty

Brinley

His breath lightly fans against my face, carrying with it the soft notes of the whiskey I had selected for our shots. It, mixed with his hooded and heated attention on me, is enough to empower me to close the distance between us.

There's a moment, right when my lips press against his hard ones, that has me readying to pull away and apologize for being too forward and presumptuous. I'm not drunk, barely even feeling anything resembling a buzz, but I'll use that as my excuse along with how incredibly handsome I find him to be.

Before I can do so, his firm lips soften and his rough hands wrap around my arms to anchor me to him as I'm pulled closer until I'm nestled on his lap.

A moan escapes me, granting him access to slip his tongue into my waiting mouth. My own hands find purchase on the front of his shirt, fisting them to make sure neither of us can be pulled away from each other.

There have been plenty of passionate kisses throughout my still young life. Most were sloppy in the rush to undress and get onto better things we certainly can't do right now. There's something about being on his lap, encased in his hold, and steadily becoming completely lost in our lips and tongues moving together that has me being enraptured by him ... us.

A deep guttural growl of hunger vibrates from his chest, sending a thrill of excitement through me.

My hands glide up from their hold on the front of his shirt, allowing the strong chest under the cotton material to sear my palms as they pass and go for his shoulders. They're just as powerful, if not a little more.

I've always been attracted to a strong man, but not the type who get their muscles from a gym—no offense to those who do, even Cannon—but the type who gain their muscle mass through a hard day's work and have no qualms with back-breaking labor.

Adrian Cook is definitely that type of man. He just said so. And that's why he struggles to find a woman who doesn't mind it. I grew up in that sort of life, and it's one I always saw in my future. Just not here in Morris Valley, but in Texas.

Could I give up the intense heat for blistering cold winters? To ranch the way my dad did when he was up here?

Slow down, quit trying to jump into lightspeed while sharing a first kiss.

Our breaths mingle, and before I know it, I've shifted from sitting between his legs to straddling his lap while my hands find purchase in his hair.

I barely feel the breeze on my nearly naked back, not until his heated hands are running up and down it. Finally, I pull away, taking in a deep breath as I feel my lips stinging. One look at him, and I know I no longer want to be here, surrounded by my friends partying in my honor. I want to be somewhere alone with this man.

“Want to get out of here?” His words are an echo of what’s going through my mind. They’re an answer to my unspoken thought.

Without an ounce of hesitation, wary of going somewhere with a man I don’t know, to the possibility of having a one-night stand with him without a promise of more, I give him my answer.

The thoughts of if I’m staying or going be damned for now.

“Yes, we can go to Clover’s.” Standing, I pull him to his feet and finally notice how truly pale his legs are. What makes it so comical is the fact he’s in cowboy boots rather than any other type of shoe.

“As long as you don’t think she’ll mind.” He rises in one fluid motion.

“Not as long as we can restrain ourselves until we’re in the spare bedroom.” My voice cracks as I do my best to hold back my laughter. He truly is a country boy. Most of the younger men who work for my dad would be caught in a similar fashion if they were invited to a pool party.

“What’s with the smile?” It’s a tease. He has to know what I find amusing. He’s quick to pull me under his arm again as we begin to make our way to the exit where we’re forced to separate in order to go through each locker room to the entrance.

By the time we emerge out the doors and I’m reclaimed to go to his truck, there are catcalls along with hoots and shouts of joy from our massive group of friends.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” Clover calls out.

“That list is pretty short,” I call back to her, not the least bit embarrassed that everyone knows what we’re about to do.

It’s tense during the entire drive up to Clover’s apartment. It’s taking everything within my willpower to keep my hands to myself. We may have not had much to drink, but there’s still a smell of it, and I wouldn’t put it past Landen, the only person who wasn’t there, to pull Adrian over and put a damper on our evening plans.

We make it there safely only for panic to fill me when I reach to my side for my small purse and come up empty. “Fuck.”

“Yes, please.” Adrian molds to my back, hands grabbing my waist as his lips find my neck.

“No, I forgot my purse.” The panic welling up within me has nothing to do with my missing purse. I trust my friends with my life and know one of them will get it safely back to me, but the fact that the key Clover gave me for my time here isn’t with me. “And the key was in it.”

His lips barely leave my flesh as he looks down at the planter, I’m surprised Clover has managed to keep a plant alive in. “I thought you said Clover was one of your best friends?”

“She is.” I’m instantly defensive. “What does that have to do with anything?” My libido is taking a dive from this.

“She never has her key on her. It’s in the dirt of that planter.” Leaving me briefly, Adrian crouches and plucks the key up under a wide leaf and quickly gets up into the apartment before returning it. “Not very safe if you ask me,” he muses. Heat returns to his gaze as the door softly clicks behind him. “Now, where were we?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Adrian

I take none of this with a light heart or make it with a quick decision.

Kissing her came as a surprise at first, but as the few seconds ticked by within my head, something more natural than breathing took hold of me and I accepted what she was so willingly giving away to me.

Brinley tasted of whiskey, one of my favorites I like to get a small tumbler of after a hard day's labor. It must be one of hers as well to select it. Her lips were soft, pliable against my slightly chapped ones. And then there was the siren's call of her body. Wrapped in that maroon bikini, showing off a farmer's tan nearly equal to my own and not ashamed of it in the least, the woman isn't only beguiling but enchanting as well.

I find myself wanting more.

More time to get to know her.

More time to spend together.

And definitely more of our lips coming together while our bodies find ecstasy in one another.

That thought didn't come to me with ease it likely would have before Felicity came into my life. With her, I learned after a couple of months that sex was more of a tool of getting what she wanted rather than bringing joy to the two of us as well as strengthening our bond.

That's why I was good foregoing female attention since I broke up with her. It doesn't mean I've become a monk in the way of giving up carrying a condom around with me.

Right now, I'm incredibly thankful for never going without one in my wallet.

There's a slight shyness blooming in her now that we're sealed away from the outside world. She doesn't answer me. That's fine. I know exactly where we were.

"Aw, yes, that's where." Grinning, I don't wait for her response before I'm scooping her up into my arms.

She squeals as I storm into the depths of Clover's apartment with her slung over my shoulder. But I'm unsure of where the hell I need to go.

"Door on the left." Brinley laughs as her hands come to support herself on my lower back so her head doesn't bump against my ass.

"Right." Not letting it be known that this is my first time in Clover's apartment, I get us in the room and turn to kick the door closed, hearing and seeing the pictures I know to be Clover's hanging on the wall rattle.

As much as I want to turn around and drop her to the bed, only long enough for her to bounce before I'm covering her with my own body to resume kissing, I gently let her glide down from my shoulder, allowing her to feel every bit of me and what she's done to me.

Did I walk out of the public pool filled with my friends barely concealing my erection? Hell yes, I did.

Once on her feet, she falls against me, bringing those perfectly kiss bruised lips back to me.

Ever since my first time at Gentry's graduation party, I've seen myself as a generous lover. I always make sure I know what will bring a woman the most desire while making her feel as special as she truly is.

I'm not about to change any of that now. All the others who came before were nothing but mere girls compared to the woman I now have in my grasp. The flare of her waist fits perfectly in my hold and against my body.

Unceremoniously, I kick my boots off the same moment I feel her flick her feet free of her sandals.

Our kiss becomes as heated as it did at the pool. But unlike there, I allow myself the freedom of giving my all, allowing groans to rumble from me freely. I'm prideful, allow that to be my only sin, and in that, I like to remain in full control of all impulses.

Unless it has to do with a man-bun wearing tourist and apparently this woman.

Breaking our kiss takes a fair amount of strength. As I pull back, I find the same desire I have pumping through every part of my body reflected back in the glow of her gaze. My knees make a slight crackling noise as I bend them, slowly holding her so she can't escape as I dust my lips over every part of her.

Her slim shoulders that reveal her collarbone sticking out slightly, over the ample swell of her chest rising and falling with her rapid breaths. Reaching up, I never break my

gaze with hers as I pull on the string at her back. It only works to free the middle of her back, but it's enough to move the material out of my way to take her into my hand as I freeze there.

Her nipples are peaked, calling to me. My eyes finally close as I take one into my mouth, tasting the sunscreen that was applied not far from this concealed area and the sweat mingling with it. I'm surprised there's no chlorine there, not even the smell of it on her flesh. She never got into the pool.

I can't bring myself to feel guilty about stealing her away from the party.

Fingers thread into my hair, forcing my head to the right angle to give her maximum pleasure. All too sudden for her liking, I'm pulling away and giving her other just as much attention.

"Adrian." My name is a soft moan on her lips as I trail kisses down her taut stomach.

"I like a woman who isn't afraid of asking for what she wants." Grinning against her, I'm none too gentle as I grab her bikini bottoms and pull them from her body. Sitting back on my knees for a moment, I run the pad of my thumb over my lips before I grab her thighs. It wasn't as noticeable in the bright sunlight as it is now. She has a slight farmer's tan down here as well, wrapping around two different parts of her legs. One is a line from her shorts and another from wearing a bikini.

"Fucking sexy." Growling, I finally push her against the bed. She collapses with her legs spread, allowing me to begin my assault.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brinley

I'm a panting mess.

Based on his appearance along with the strong, silent type Adrian is, I would have never guessed he knew the secret to send any woman skyrocketing with the first touch.

And he hasn't even touched my core yet. His strong, work-worn hands grab my thighs, wrapping around from underneath, pulling me apart, and lifting to fit his shoulders under. The coarse texture of his stubble glide is abrasive yet thrilling against my skin as he drags his face up from my knees and stops every inch or so to press a kiss.

Just as he reaches me, Adrian pulls back and starts over from the other side.

I'm writhing, groaning, and craving so much more until he's at my pussy.

Anticipation consumes me as he nuzzles me, brushing first his nose and then his tongue against my swollen, needy clit.

"Oh!" The pant escapes me. My arms shoot out to either side of me to grab the bedding as I bow off the bed and brace myself to watch him devour me. His teeth gently graze me, adding sensation and pressure just so perfectly to me. I'm coming undone under him before he's even entered my body.

I'm trembling, but he isn't finished with me. I'm nowhere near that line either.

Pulling away from me, I blink and see the evidence of my arousal coating his face as he shuffles. Eyes locked on me as two thick fingers glide into my body, curling up to hit that bundle of nerves at just the right angle.

His chest is slightly heaving as he has me coming undone once more.

As euphoria carries me over, I'm left to wonder all over again how this man has remained single, especially if he's as generous of a lover with others in the past as he's being with me right now.

No, mine.

A primal part of me screams from the depths of my mind. Why would I dare to think of another having him when I now want him all for myself?

That isn't fair to him. I'm not certain—

Stay.

As I come back to my mind, I find him standing over me, pulling his shirt over his head in that way men do no woman can resist. Pulling from the back of his neck, the lift of his shirt slowly reveals muscles. Not well-defined but that doesn't stop my mouth from watering to get a taste of that hard skin.

His focus is pulled away from me long enough to remove the shirt and then pull a condom wrapper from his wallet before discarding his trunks.

“Are you sure about this, Brinley?” I'm excited at the rumble of my name coming out as a soft whisper of concern.

“Never more in my life.” I breathe back, spreading my legs and bringing them up on the bed to beckon him to me.

It’s a first for me to allow a man on top. I’m completely in control in my life. Ever since I made it my goal to be a sharp shooter, I have had complete control over everything, even doing my best while I was in the military. It’s extended to the bedroom and sharing the bed with a man.

The need for control evades me now. It isn’t rearing its head as Adrian crawls onto the bed, pulling my legs over his strong thighs before he rolls the condom on.

I watch, fascinated as he does so and just when I think he’s going to hover over me, claiming all my senses and consuming my body and soul, he surprises me by first guiding himself to my entrance, and in one swift move, he pulls me up onto his lap so I’m no longer laid flat on the bed.

He moves his legs to help support my weight as I wrap my legs and arms around him. My breath is stilted at first and then is forced out in pants as we begin to move together. My hands lose their hold of one another, leaving my nails to dig into his shoulders.

His angle is heavenly. With each thrust, my clit is rubbed. I’m clenching into him, greedy to keep our connection from ever breaking as another orgasm spills from me. I’m feverous as I seek out his lips, starving for his kiss as I meet him thrust for thrust.

He becomes more frantic. The only noise is the joining of our bodies and the slaps of our flesh before he’s ripping his lips from mine and crying out into the empty

apartment, likely alerting Clover's neighbors as his release stills him, hands bruising my ass and locking us together.

We're panting but unwilling to release our hold on one another. I feel the pulse of my heart all the way to the tips of my fingers.

"Holy. Shit." The laugh that follows isn't to hit the ego, and neither is the bright smile accompanying it.

"You could say that again." I'm positive crescents dot his shoulders as I reach up and push hair from his sweaty forehead and press a kiss there. "I know this might sound cliché, but I'm not the type to do ... *that*." I punctuate.

"Glad to hear that. I'll agree with you on the shared fact." Leaning forward, he presses a kiss to my forehead in return and then we begin the awkward dance of pulling our bodies apart and getting cleaned up.

"I would like to again." My statement stops him as he's bending over to pull his trunks back up. "Maybe after dinner?" I hedge, going to the dresser to put my things in after arriving and pull a nightshirt out.

His throat works before he nods. "Absolutely, when?"

I don't know how much more time I have here. Biting my lip, I think it through before answering. "How about Saturday night?"

His mouth opens as he's about to give me an answer I know we both want, but then, suddenly he's retreating. "I ... can't. There's something else I have to do that night."

"Oh, umm, okay." Grabbing my hair, I start to run a hand through it. It's what I do when I'm nervous. Thankfully, I

have sturdy hair that can handle it. “Maybe another time before I leave?”

He comes to me, wrapping me in a hug and pressing another kiss to my forehead. “Absolutely.”

Then why does it feel like that isn't the right answer?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Adrian

It feels like a betrayal as I leave Clover's apartment on a promise to see Brinley again.

This time, I have her phone number.

You don't owe her anything. It's been a single night. No promises of a relationship were made.

Then why does it feel like it?

This isn't an insta-love kind of situation the girls are all fawning over in their book club, but it's insta-attraction and possibly a connection.

Am I interested in more of Brinley? Beyond our obvious chemistry in the bedroom?

Fuck, yes. I'd be an idiot not to admit that, but the fact is simple; she's likely not going to stay here, and this is where my life resides. She has an entire life outside of the small town of Morris Valley, and I'd be an asshole to make plans to keep her here.

Stepping out the door, the soft click of the lock feels like a nail in the coffin of what I could possibly have with Brinley if I didn't leave.

"What, no walk of shame, big guy?" The lazy slur of words with a note of laughter laced within the question can only come from one person.

Clover comes stumbling up from where the bus Mina always manages to sweet-talk someone at the bus barn into

borrowing for nights like this so everyone gets home safely is still parked.

“Come on, you know I’m more respectful than that.” Trying and failing to shove my hands into my pockets mainly because my trunks don’t have any, I can’t very well play cool.

“Oh, I know that.” She nods slowly as she missteps and nearly falls over into the grass. Laughing instead, she pushes away from me when I go to catch her. “But clearly you have some game. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have been able to entice my career driven friend to have your wild ways with.”

“That’s not—”

“No need to explain to me.” The hand she lifts to silence me nearly slaps me instead. “I know *exactly* what you two were up to in there.” She leans in and whispers more like one you’d hear in a stage production put on by children, and thankfully, aside from Eliza and Julia making their way to their own buildings, no one hears her.

Rather than dignify her with a response, I point her in the direction of her planter all of us are surprised she’s managed to keep something alive in. “I put your key back. I hope you managed to bring Brinley her purse?”

A simple leather bag is lifted to Clover’s eye level with fringes dangling all around it. “Got it right here.” Tossing me a wink, she walks by and pats me on the butt before whistling her way into her home. “Have a good night, lover boy.” I hear the smack of her lips against her hand as she blows me a kiss.

It's just the way Clover is. We all know her pain. She hasn't told any of us guys, but it's likely the worst-kept secret in our group. There are a few others, but it's the highest on the list.

"Good night, Clover. I'm glad you're still able to stay upright." I can still hear the cheer of the crowd still in the bus as it leaves the parking lot. I'm certain there are a few hoots from one of the guys as I get in my truck.

I can't bring myself to start my truck. Instead, I tap my hands on the steering wheel and stare back at the apartment. The light of the living room shines through the plantation blinds of the large bay window and the glass door that leads to a small patio where there's a covered barbecue.

I could go back in there and stay the night with Brinley, hold her in my arms, and the reason I'm holding back be damned.

Why do I need to go out on a date with a woman when the one I want is just inside that apartment?

"Fuck it." Practically ripping the keys back out of the ignition they're just dangling from, waiting for me to make up my damn mind, I'm reaching over to pull my door open just as my phone goes off from the only pocket these trunks *do* have.

My ass cheek vibrates with an incoming message, pausing me with a hope it might be Brinley asking me to come back in. I saw two shadows against the closed blinds so I know she's come out of the room.

After I shift to dig it out of my back pocket, my hope is shattered when I find it's a message from Miss Polly.

Crazy Granny: Saturday night, don't forget. Be at the steak house and tell the hostess I sent you. ❖❖

I find it extremely uncomfortable that an elderly woman is sending me emoji. I don't even use them. The text message comes as a stark nearly dread-filled reminder that I have something I need to get through.

If I don't go on this date, Miss Polly will never let me hear the end of it. I could just tell her I found a woman on my own, but knowing the woman's tenacity, she wouldn't accept it until I did what she thought was best.

God forbid she doesn't know me better than myself and knows the perfect woman for me.

Growling to myself, I stab the keys back into the ignition. The truck comes to life with a pissed-off rumble. Mindful of the people who could still be out at this time of night, I throw my arm over the back of the seat and reverse when the coast is clear.

I'm pissed off the entire way home, but over what? I'm not sure. I'm doing my best to focus on the deer that'll be crossing the highway in a fateful game of chicken that won't end well for them or the front of my truck.

Thankfully, there isn't anything between the outskirts of Morris Valley and the entrance to the ranch. Pulling up in front of the house, I scrub a hand over my face and snarl. This time it's directed at my dad when I see the glow of the TV light coming through the cracks in the living room curtains.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Brinley

I'm not quite sure what I'm doing here.

The house smells and even feels the same as it did the last time I was here for our going-away party. Nearly everything is in the same place as well. The tables that held loads of food once are put away, and there aren't any children running around playing like there once was.

I can see it now as Miss Polly is darting back and forth in view of the door to the kitchen, getting our lunch ready, and see a younger version of myself and my friends running around here like ghosts of the past.

A smile spreads across my face at the thought of what it would be like for the next generation to have a safe but crazy place like this to spend their youth at. *Is that why Miss Polly has gone nuts trying to play matchmaker like the girls say?*

A hand flutters unbidden to my stomach as it flattens over the taut expanse there.

What would it be like to raise a family here? Mom always said she regretted leaving Morris Valley because it was the perfect place to raise a child. I had my friends and plenty of homes I could safely play at with an endless number of adults willing to keep an eye on us as we did what we wanted within reason.

“When will you finally admit there's plenty here to entice you into staying?” A tray clatters as the busty, strong woman with an attitude that rivals some teenagers comes

through the kitchen door and stops at the dining table with a lace doily running down the center of it.

“What are you talkin’ about?” Roughly jerky my hand away from my stomach, I take a seat across from her and accept the cup of coffee and sandwich she made for me. “Tuna with bits of pickles?”

“I know my girls.” She acts tiffed, but then sends a wink in my direction. “Tuna with pickles for you. Peanut butter and honey for Lilly. Julia and Lexy don’t like sandwiches but will eat what’s put in front of them especially in my home. PB and J for Eliza, but only if it’s raspberry jelly while Clover prefers apricot. And for Mina, it’s the simple turkey and pepper jack cheese.”

“And Lyla liked whatever. It depended on who she was copying for the day.” I point at her with the corner of my sandwich.

“Right.” She taps the side of her head with her fist. “Can’t forget about sweet, little Lyla.”

“And the boys? Do you know their sandwich preferences as well?” I’m curious, maybe to see what I can get out of the old woman about Adrian in a roundabout way.

I wish he would have stayed. Clover would have left the two of us alone. It didn’t need to be about just sex. We could have gotten to know each other a little better, but from the moment I asked him about seeing him again, he locked up and made a lame excuse to leave.

Clover never said a word. Just gave me a knowing grin with a nod before we both went off to our separate

bedrooms to crash for the night.

“Oh, I know them as well.” Cupping her hands around her steaming mug, she flashes me a borderline evil smirk. “But that’s not what I have brought you here for today.” She changes direction, and I’m left only to nod with a mouthful of the best-tasting tuna sandwich in the world.

Mom always tried to find a way to replicate it. She even went so far as to call and get the directions from Miss Polly, but never managed it. I think it’s because the old woman across from me didn’t give her the right ones as a way to bring me back.

“I need you to do something for me tomorrow night.” She places her mug down at the same time I pick mine up. In true Polly McArthur style, I pick up the scent of liquor laced in the steamy brew.

“Don’t tell me the guys are having issues with knowing how to shoot?” I tease. My smile falls from my face when I see her rare serious face. *Oh God.* “What is it?”

Taking a deep breath, she clasps her hands and gets all business-like on me. “I have a young man I think you would be perfect for.”

“Oh?” I drawl, brows rising to my hairline as I wait for her to continue.

“He’s a wonderful man and would be an ideal match for you. Both of you like the same things and I’m positive he’ll be able to keep you here where you belong.”

“Miss Polly, I—”

“I have eyes and ears all over town, young lady. I know that you’ve been out to the range and spoken with the manager.” I had forgotten how perspective this woman can be. “And I *know* you want to stay but haven’t been able to convince yourself of it yet.”

I have nothing to say for a few long minutes. I finish one half of my sandwich in that time before I finally have something to say. “Did one of the girls put you up to this?”

“Those girls want both you and Lilly back here. Don’t worry about that granddaughter of mine right now. I’ll handle that. You’re here, so you’ll get my focus for now.”

“Joy.” The sarcastic remark comes out before I can control it.

Snapping my eyes up, I see the glitter in her gaze hasn’t gone anywhere with my rudeness.

“So will you do me this favor?” She carries right on back to the issue at hand. At least the one she sees. I could use a favor to my advantage.

“What is it you think I can really do?” I understand the liquor laced coffee now. Picking it up, I take a healthy, heated drink as she explains.

“I would like you to be at the steak house tomorrow night at six. Dress nicely, and give this man a chance.” She issues my orders. “All you have to do is tell the hostess I sent you. Your meal is already paid for so you just need to enjoy an evening getting to know the man I think you could have a future with.”

“You’re pretty confident in your matchmaking abilities, aren’t you?” I run a finger over the rim of my mug.

“Oh, I’m completely confident. Who do you think helped most of the parents of your friends get together?”

“Why does that not surprise me?” I laugh.

“Trust me, all right. This young man will be everything you ever hoped for and...” She grows serious again. “He’ll help protect you from this little stalker issue of yours.”

Once more, there’s no surprise when it comes to how this woman seems to know everything.

“Now, drink up and relax. Let Miss Polly handle everything.”

Drink up? I can do that. As for the relax part, I don’t think so.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Adrian

What am I doing here?

I didn't dress up because ... why bother? Being flashy and dressing in a manner that would be more appealing to a potential partner than what I find best suits me. Instead of a pressed shirt I do have hanging in the far back of my closet and jeans that look new and are starched to an inch of their life and rigid as fuck to walk in, I'm in an older shirt, soft from how many times I've worn it, jeans that have seen better days but likely my most comfortable pair, and my boots are the ones I'm always wearing along with my straw hat that has also seen better days.

This is me. This is who I am, and if the woman Miss Polly picked out for me can't accept it, then she isn't meant for me.

Get your ass out of the truck and head inside to get this over with and find out.

The voice in my head once more urges me to get out of my truck. It's been on repeat for the past ten minutes as I just sit here and stare. I can't see into the building from this side. That was on purpose. I pulled into the steak house's parking lot through the back so no one would see me coming while also offering me an escape just in case Miss Polly found me a crazy one.

After all, what woman in her right mind would agree to a blind date set up by an elderly woman she might not know and who wears some of the most ridiculous clothing. For our

high school graduation, she had a *hot granny* shirt on and insisted each of us take a picture with her.

I could back out of this spot, track down Brinley, and give her the time she asked of me instead. Even though it sounds like a much better idea, I can't bring myself to do so, though. Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I take another glance at the lot. Or what I can see of it. There isn't a single vehicle I recognize.

Thank God for small mercies.

Okay, I'm going in, meet the woman, and see how it turns out. I'll be polite and then tell her my lack of attraction has nothing to do with her and get out of there in time to track down Brinley and salvage the night.

The idea sounds solid, but so does the weight in my gut as I get out.

My feet drag with my body's reluctance to move up onto the sidewalk in front of my truck. I freeze as I start to come around the corner of the building. I'm at a complete standstill when I clock the car parked at the opposite end of the lot from me.

Clover's car, not the one she usually drives, is right there plain as day.

"What the hell is she doing here?" If this is some sick joke Miss Polly is getting a good chuckle from than the joke is on her. I like Clover. She's a great friend, but there's nothing else between us. We aren't a match, and if Miss Polly thinks we are, I think it's time Lilly has her grandma committed.

With a shake of my head, I turn back around and waste no time getting back into the truck. Am I aware that it could be a coincidence she's here at the same time and likely has nothing to do with my blind date?

Yes, but if I go in there and find my date, Clover would likely have a front-row view to the next doom that waits for me.

My hand rests on the door handle of my truck, a siren's song of freedom to escape and get away from here while I don't have an excuse to offer up to Miss Polly when she calls to berate me later.

Just tell her your interest is in Brinley.

Turning back around, I start to march back to the corner. I owe it to myself to give another woman a chance. It doesn't feel like an easy decision. There's an obvious connection between Brinley and me, but what good does the simple attraction and explosive chemistry in the bedroom do when she's not going to stay here?

Another thought strikes me that has me turning around once more to face my truck.

What if it's enough to convince Brinley to stay? I've overheard the girls talk well before her visit. Each of them wants Brinley here but isn't selfish enough to do any form of convincing because they want their friend to live her life. I'm pretty sure they want the same for Lilly as well.

Stopping midway between the corner and my truck, I'm certain I look like quite the sight if anyone cares enough to

watch me. Not that I care much. People's opinions have never mattered much to me.

As long as Clover isn't witnessing this.

Or Miss Polly for that matter.

The two of them would give me way too much shit, and then the guys would find out ...

All of a sudden, my head jerks up, and I search everything once more. The parking lot, the busy street that doesn't allow anyone to pull over and park on unless they're getting stopped by the cops, and the buildings surrounding this area as well, and find nothing looks out of the ordinary.

Miss Polly seems to have eyes everywhere with how much she knows of what is going on. I wouldn't be surprised if she has a source camped out on the second floor of the *Eagles* building across the street.

"Fuck it." Marching over to my truck, I get myself back in, crank the engine, and get the hell out of here. Consequences with Miss Polly be damned. I can hide out at the ranch until she's settled down and moved onto someone else. That'll mean I'll likely not get to see Brinley again before she leaves.

I can't allow that to happen.

Pointing my truck in the direction of Clover's apartment complex, I'm impatient with the early evening traffic along with the lights constantly turning red right before I reach them.

"Come on, dammit." Snarling, I hit the steering wheel.
"Can you just go my way?"

Seeing as I'm currently stopped at the only light in town that takes forever to change, I glance around and find a woman in a minivan glaring over at me. My windows are rolled up, so there's no reason she or her kids can hear me. Shooting a glare back at her has her head snapping forward right before I look back and thankful the light has changed.

My rush is for naught, though. I reach the apartment complex's parking lot, park where I did the other night when I came here with Brinley, and am rushing to the front door to knock, but there's no answer. Not even a single person stirring within the place.

“Dammit!”

Pulling out my phone, I call Brinley to find her, but the call instantly goes to voicemail.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Brinley

Lips twisting while my finger circles the rim of the glass, boredom has a firm grasp on me.

Where is this guy?

Miss Polly told me the time and to be there right on the dot, and I'm guessing she would have told the guy the same. I just wish she would have told me what he looked like so I could keep an eye out.

Dropping my hand, I start tapping the table as my impatience shows. I can be as patient as a saint when it comes to taking a shot and even more so when it takes reaching a new goal. This, right here, isn't where my patience shines.

Maybe I should have had one of the girls come with me to sit close by just in case this turns into a shit show I'm worried it'll become.

At least I was right on that part.

Plucking my phone from my purse, I bring it back to life. There's nothing popping up while I stare at it except for the time. It's now fifteen minutes past the time this date was supposed to start.

"Fuck." The grumble to myself is followed by the clearing of a man's throat, drawing my eyes up to the server who has been kindly checking in on me.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but if you aren't going to order, I'm going to have to ask you to leave." He looks sheepish, but at least he has manners for a teenager.

Miss Polly had said this would be on her, so rather than ask for a couple more minutes, I reclaim my menu and select something that sounds good. “I’ll have the ribeye, medium, mashed potatoes with a side of green beans.” Snapping it closed, I hand it up to him. Might as well make the most of it and get a steak dinner.

“And to drink, will you be sticking to water?” I’m suddenly struck with the feeling that they’re used to people being stood up here.

“Yes, I’ll just have water. Thank you.” Turning back to focus on the front doors, I watch as all the men who walk in since I sat down have been in the company of either a woman, family, or another man.

It’s a long wait for my food and in that time, not a single person approaches who isn’t staff. I’m just about to pick up my phone again to text one of the girls or, better yet, give Miss Polly a call to put her in her nosy place when my meal arrives.

I’m not ladylike in the least as I cut and ravage my food. It isn’t the best steak I’ve had, but it’s filling and far more satisfying than this date was supposed to be. It feels a little strange to be leaving without paying even with leaving a tip for the server who was kind enough to give me space and helped me with my to-go bag. My focus is on my phone as I head past the hostess stand only to be stopped.

“Miss Moore?”

“Hmm? Yes?” Blinking, the hostess is smiling at me.

There's no missing the pity in both her gaze and her words as she speaks. "There was a gentleman who came in. He looked pretty nervous and asked me to give you this." She lifts a folded piece of paper. "Before I could encourage him to deliver it himself, thinking he was the man you were waiting for, he was gone."

"Thank you." I take the piece of paper. It looks stained from sweaty hands but still crisp. "When?" I can't help but ask.

"Just a few minutes ago. I believe you were almost done with your meal. Maybe that's what frightened him away." With a lift of her shoulder, she turns back to her job and leaves me with the note.

Maybe I was being too harsh. The man was likely nervous as well as pressured into this thanks to Miss Polly. I'm sure she's as well-known in Morris Valley as Mr. Conrad, the one-time high school history teacher.

Poor man.

Me giving in to her is one thing. Having someone who is likely a stranger to her is another.

With a shrug of my own, I make my way out to Clover's car to get out of the way of others who are coming and going. It's a good thing that's exactly what I do in order to read the note by the mystery man.

When I unfold the letter, my smile is gone in an instant. In the solitude of the car, no one can hear or see my freak-out.

Roses are red,

Violets are blue.

I will always find you.

The game is over now, my dear.

Prepare to become mine once and for all.

Love, X

“Oh my God.” My hands tremble so badly I can barely focus on the words I just read. The bastard found me. Just when I thought I was going to be safe here. I was certain no one around here would pay enough attention to know that a gold medalist was here in Morris Valley. At least, not enough to let the rest of the world know about it via the internet.

Panic controls my next move.

Bringing Clover’s car to life, I flee the parking lot and don’t stop until I’m at the apartment. I’m mindful of any vehicle that falls behind me, and thankfully, none seem to be following me.

There is absolutely no way Miss Polly accidentally arranged a blind date for me with my stalker. The old woman knows a great deal and told me she knows all about who’s been following me and making me feel unsafe anywhere I go.

It looks like my time here is coming to an early end.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Adrian

Turning my back to Clover's front door, I trudge my way back to my truck. I've wasted nearly an hour going back and forth, I'm surprised no one has called the cops on me.

They have to be out somewhere. Knowing Clover, she's likely drug Brinley off to sing karaoke or some crap like that while getting drunk off their asses and didn't want to be bothered.

It's Saturday night after all. Maybe they could be at the Brickhouse. Not ready to give up just yet and confident Miss Polly isn't going to make a surprise appearance tonight, I find a purpose in getting to my friend's bar.

Maybe some of the guys will be there, and I can use it as my opportunity to apologize to Brinley for being evasive the other night with a response to her.

I'll tell her the truth and hopefully can move on from there.

As much as I want to remain in town, spending as much time as she's willing to stay here with me, I'm going to have to leave, and dammit, I'm a coward because I'm going to hide from a meddling old woman.

Maybe she'd like to come out and see the ranch? Spend some time with me in my natural environment, and we could shoot at my range? That sounds like a damn good idea to me.

My door is opened, and I have one leg up in the cab when a voice stops me.

“The hell she is!” The raised voice comes seconds before the slamming of a door. My head snaps up to find Eliza making her way over here. Barefoot and filled with a rage that should have me running far, far away. “I’m marching over there right now.” She’s aggressively explaining to whoever had the nerve to call and piss her off. “Adrian’s here. He’ll help me.”

The hell I will!

She may be a police lieutenant, but that doesn’t mean she’s trustworthy when it comes to doing the right thing. Her go-to-hell attitude has many questioning how she managed to climb so easily through the ranks when she prefers to do things by her own methods.

“Okay. See you in a few ... I won’t let her go anywhere. We finally got her home; I’ll be damned if we’re going to let her leave now.” Aggressively, because that’s the only way Eliza knows how to be, she ends the call and shoves her phone into the back pocket of her shorts. “Glad you’re here.” She nods as if I’m here to serve her.

If I don’t get moving and come up with an excuse, I’m not going to get much of a choice. She’s nearly as bad as Miss Polly. “Umm ...” Rolling my lips into my mouth, I don’t have a response for her. I don’t know what the hell is going on. I can wager a guess it has something to do with Brinley, though.

And that’s the only reason I’m not fleeing before Eliza can get me into any form of trouble.

“Brinley is on her way back from one of Miss Polly’s harebrained blind dates ...” Eliza keeps talking, but I’m not listening. Her voice morphs into white noise while realization nearly sweeps me off my feet.

I am a complete ... absolute fucking fool.

A woman who would be a perfect fit to me? Someone Miss Polly was confident enough in to set up a date?

“I’m a fucking idiot.”

“What?” Eliza takes a step back, suddenly confused at my outburst. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Sorry, I ... umm ... spaced out for a second. You took me by surprise.” Rubbing the back of my neck, I fix my hat and refocus on Eliza and her death glare. “What were you talking about?”

“Brinley is on her way back here from her failed blind date.” She starts off slow, shifting from one foot to another.

Yes, the one I was supposed to meet her at.

Or, at least, I’m pretty damn positive I was supposed to.

“Right.” I drawl with a single nod of my head.

“When she was leaving, she got a note from the person whose been stalking her, and now—”

“Someone’s been stalking her!” My question cuts her off as I roar. She doesn’t cringe. That isn’t Eliza’s style. Very little startles her.

“I figured she would have told you since the two of you ...” She threads her fingers together and raises her brows.

“But...” It’s her turn to drawl. “Since she hasn’t, I’ll fill you in.”

I slam my door and cross my arms as I listen to Eliza rapidly tell me everything she knows about this person who has been following Brinley since she won gold at the last Olympics. The more I listen, the more my blood begins to boil.

“And now the person because we can’t assume it’s male or female, has found her here.” Eliza ends with an angry sigh and recrosses her own arms. Even through the fog of my anger, I’m positive her police mind is going a mile a minute with a way of tracking the individual down and making sure they won’t bother one of her best friends ever again.

I know mine is going at lightspeed with finding a way not only to keep Brinley here, but safe. I can’t imagine anything happening to her, nor do I want to see it forcing her into fleeing from here.

“What do you need from me?” It didn’t take me long to get up here, so she’ll be here any minute. A car pulls in at a rush, but it’s Julia who is quickly followed by Clover who has Lexy with her.

Minus not having Mina here, all the girls start to speak at once when they’re out of the vehicles and trying to figure out a solution before Brinley arrives.

“We’ll find a way to track the person down through legal means.” Julia nods along to Eliza’s statement.

“In the meantime, how are we going to keep her safe?” Lexy steps in. “All of us work and she’d be bored with

me since I spent most of my days with my face in my computer.”

Wasn't I just thinking about inviting Brinley out to the ranch?

“What if I take her home with me?” All of them turn at once, likely just remembering I'm standing here with them. “There's no cell service.” I step closer to the group. “Just in case the individual is tracking her through her phone, and even then, we can shut it off. What better place for her to disappear to than in the middle of nowhere?”

Each of them turns, shares a look, and then nods as one before Eliza answers. “That's an excellent idea.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Brinley

I'm a grown, independent woman who can manage a lot of things on my own. But right now, as my hands tremble on my drive back to Clover's that seems to be taking longer than necessary, I'm on the cusp of calling my mom and having her send my dad north to collect me so I know I'll have absolute protection.

Nothing like having your big burly cowboy of a dad to make you feel shielded from the outside world and more importantly, the person who seems to think they want you for themselves and doing so in the creepiest of ways.

No matter how many stops I come to, I couldn't bring myself to call my mom. In a strange way, it felt like I was admitting some sort of defeat in a battle I wasn't fully aware of until now.

I want to stay here.

Having my safety threatened by a damn note I flung away the moment I read it for a second time now has me wanting to get as far away as possible. And that breaks my heart. It isn't the first time the thought of leaving here has done this to me, but it hurts far greater than it did when I was a child.

I'm becoming one with my friends again, getting to know Adrian even though he's acting strange, and most of all, I felt like I was finally in a place I could call home.

None of that is happening now.

Rather than call my mom, my phone trembled in my right hand as I pulled up the last number I called.

Mina.

Her sweet voice soothed me enough I wasn't going to crash and insisted I come to her and she would rally the troops, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. Instead, I told her I would be fine going back to Clover's.

What I wasn't about to tell her was that I was heading there to pack my things up, call the only cab driver in town to get me to the airport, and run without goodbyes because I know it'll keep them safe and prevent the stalker from using them against me if the person decided to get off their rocker.

Coming around the corner by the apartment complex, I wasn't expecting my friends to work so quickly in making sure my plans would not be accomplished.

Julia, Clover, Eliza, and Lexy are standing next to Adrian and his truck as I pull into the spot next to them.

"Hey, everyone." Steadily, I get out with wide eyes as I do my best not to let on what I was planning on doing. I can still accomplish it but it's going to be a great deal harder with all of them here. I should have known better than to call Mina.

You're grateful for them.

That I most definitely am.

"You're not leaving Morris Valley." Eliza shoves her way through the others to storm up to me. "We aren't allowing it. We finally got you back."

"Eliza, I—"

“Don’t even start, Brinley Amber!” Lexy, the usually collected one, comes up next to her.

“Ladies, can we take this inside?” Adrian comes to my rescue, placing himself between the girls and me. If I were in need of protection from them, I’d be glad for him.

See, you don’t need your dad right now either.

As one, they all realize that having any form of conversation might not be the best out here. We move into the apartment with Clover leading the way after grabbing her hidden key. The moment we are sealed inside, everyone talks at once.

Eliza and Julia offer police protection and will figure out who this person is. Lexy offers the couch at her place since people would be insane to come after me with Nash there while Clover reassures me I’m safe with her.

I’m overwhelmed with how much they want to protect me but unable to get a word out.

“She’s coming out to the ranch with me.” Adrian’s voice isn’t booming, considering there might be eavesdroppers out there, but it’s enough to silence my friends and cause all eyes to turn to him. His fists are clenched at his sides, and he looks like he’s about to tear something up. “We’ll smuggle Brinley out of here, and she can come stay out at the ranch with me.”

No one speaks. At least I should have something to say. Surprisingly, it’s Clover who does, but not before she rushes off to her room, slams through something, and then comes back out. “Good thing I have a collection of these.” She

dumps a bag filled with wigs. “So blond or redhead and who’s staying the night here to help cover her tracks?” Her wide brown eyes blink at us in innocence while we all gape. “What? I have a life.” She scoffs before jiggling the wigs in front of me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Adrian

“Quit messing with your hair, *Lexy*,” I practically growl as we leave town in the rearview mirror and head to the ranch.

“Sorry. I just never thought I’d be blond or have to be smuggled out of town like some sort of criminal.” Brinley blows out an exacerbated breath as the hair of the wig gets in her face once more. She needs to keep it in her face long enough to ensure no one will notice her. Even though we are past the final, small subdivision past the old drive-in and have nothing but open country before us, I’m not willing to let her be seen until I’m positive no one will follow us.

So far, we’ve been in the clear.

I made a fuss about taking some garbage out for Clover when it was just everything Brinley threw into trash bags while the girls made it seem like they were being forced to leave Brinley in Clover’s capable hands.

If the stalker happened to have seen where Clover keeps her house key, even though we are all urging her to put it with her damn car keys, the person will have hell to pay if they try to get in. And with *Lexy* staying, I’m sure they’ll be fine. Even so, when I got in the truck, I sent a text warning Nash she wouldn’t be back to their place for the night.

His response was that it’d be fine. Joy, his cat, is perfectly fine by herself since he’s already at the fire station for his shift.

“Do you think I can take this off yet? It’s making my scalp itch like crazy.” Brinley snarls as she viciously scratches at her head. “Why did she have so many anyway?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I deadpan, unsure why she had a shit ton of different wigs.

“And what would your guess be?” she muses, finally turning to face me in her seat just as the road curves and opens up to wide fields with alfalfa to one side and cattle grazing on the other.

“It’s Clover,” I start. “I have a feeling she wears them out, you know, to the bars she’s likely been asked not to come back to?”

“There can’t be *that* many bars in Morris Valley, much less ones she’d be kicked out of and would have to come in a disguise. Besides, Clover’s the life of the party. Who would want to kick her out?”

“You’d be surprised.” She’s just fortunate Beckett gets a kick out of her and allows her to remain a patron of the Brickhouse.

Her laughter lightens the air in the cab. I’m still vigilantly glancing back at all my mirrors as we drive on. I won’t feel at ease until we get to the ranch in forty or so minutes, and even then, it will be strange having her out there with just Dad and me as her company and protection.

“What were you doing tonight?” Her question has me jerking on the steering wheel and having us going over the rumble bars for a moment before I correct. “Sorry, I just mean ...” She sighs and then tucks a leg under her and puts an arm

over the back of her seat. “I figured you wouldn’t be in town. That you were busy on the ranch ...” She trails off and looks back toward the road.

“I was ... kind of busy,” I admit. “I was supposed to go on a ...” It’s my turn to trail off, but I man up and finish my truth. “Miss Polly had me go on a blind date, but I chickened out.”

“Oh.” It’s more of a grunt and definitely not a question.

“The woman had it in her mind she had the perfect woman for me, but I couldn’t bring myself to go into the restaurant and meet her.” She doesn’t speak, so I continue. “You see, I couldn’t do it because I’m pretty confident I found her all on my own.”

We are on a straightaway with no traffic in front of or behind us, so I chance a long glance at her.

“I was at a restaurant when I got the note from my stalker.” Her voice starts off small. Even though I’m pretty damn certain I know where she’s going with this, I need to know she was the woman waiting on me. “For a blind date set up by Miss Polly as well. The guy never showed and then ...”

“And then everything happened with your stalker.” I finish for her after she quits speaking.

“Right.”

“I think it’s safe for you to take the wig off now.” Without a second thought, I reach over and grab her hand dangling from the back of the seat. “I hope I’m being obvious, but I thought of you. I thought it was betrayal going into the

restaurant when all I wanted was to get to you. That's why I was at Clover's apartment when you showed up. I know we don't know each other, and you haven't settled on if you're going to stay here or no—"

My words are cut off, and somehow, I manage to keep us on the road as she practically attacks me. Our lips smash together as I slow and pull over on the highway just as our tongues tangle. It's quick yet filled with more passion than I ever thought possible with the press of lips and tongues roping around one another.

Just as soon as it began, her attack is over, and she's falling back into her seat. I didn't even hear her unbuckle and thank God the blond wig was already gone.

"If I'm not being obvious enough, I'm into you as well." She's wiping the corner of her mouth, bringing out a carnal part of me that just wants to reach across the cab, pull her back to me, and maul the shit out of her, anyone passing be damned.

"Right." What else am I going to say? I'm struck brain-dead from her kiss.

"So are you going to show me this ranch of yours or what?" Her nose scrunches with a tease. It takes me a moment to collect myself as well as adjust myself before I'm pulling us back onto the highway and getting us to the ranch where I can keep her safe.

Chapter Thirty

Brinley

The kiss wasn't the wisest decision for me to make.

Having to remain in the truck for a while longer before we're pulling off the two-lane highway onto a country road and then another turn that was marked with the Cook mailbox felt like the trip lasted a lot longer than it truly was.

As much fear that was consuming me at the time this idea was quickly thrown together and I was taming my wild green-tipped hair into the blond Lexy look-alike wig, I'm surprisingly at ease now. There was a safety quickly taking possession of me the farther from Morris Valley we got.

And then the truths came out.

My blind date *did* stand me up, but not in the way I was allowing myself to believe. Why is it so simple for our minds to instantly jump to a bad conclusion rather than a reasonable one?

That's why I kissed him, because of my own guilt over assuming I had been stood up because the guy just didn't want to show up. Adrian didn't come in because he felt like it was a betrayal to me. Sweet, even though we don't owe anything to one another.

Now you do.

Glancing over at him, I can't help but be okay with owing him something. His strong jaw is tense as he focuses on the road. We haven't had much conversation since he took off again and I'm okay with that. The truck rolls to a stop, the tires

crunching and popping the gravel underneath us as we slow and I'm pulled to look back out the windshield.

"Welcome to Casa Cook." His hands abandon the steering wheel and spread wide in front to present his home to me.

All of a sudden, I feel like a snobby bitch. The house is small, looking a little rundown on the outside but still standing strong enough to shelter Adrian through the winter or any storm. It's nothing like the sprawling two-story house my parents built on their ranch.

The screen door sways slightly with the evening's warm breeze as we step out and grab my things in the garbage bags out of the back end.

It's definitely a bachelor pad.

I haven't asked much about Adrian's mom. Partly due to the fact it's none of my business—it's something he can share with me when he's ready—and the other part is because the girls kind of filled me in a little already.

I've managed to find a man I'm interested in who likely has no faith in women in a romantic way.

He's told you he's interested in you.

"I know it doesn't look like much. We haven't had much in the way of a feminine touch for ... a long time." He sounds resigned and if I'm not mistaken, a little ashamed.

I feel worse, but force a smile to my face in order to reassure him.

“Your home is beautiful.” I wave a hand to encompass everything surrounding us. “I’m pretty sure there’s no safer place for me to be.” Tossing him a wink, I encourage him to lead the way up the small front porch of his home and into the house.

The interior isn’t any better than the exterior. Adrian clearly is a hard worker, just not when it comes to his home.

Could definitely use a woman’s touch.

Not that in this small fantasy manifesting in my mind has me hanging around cleaning house and doing whatever homemakers in the 1950s did since I love being outside and working the land, but I could see some changes in here.

The smell, for one, would have to be worked out. Dirty and sweaty boots is all my nose can pick up on as we enter ,and he guides me through the house to the guest room.

“Sorry about the mess. Dad and I don’t have a lot of people out here, and well ... things pile up.” Rubbing the back of his neck must be a nervous gesture as he steps out of my way and allows me to lead us into the room.

“You live with your dad?” Why did I think this was his place, and his dad had a bigger house elsewhere on the property?

“Umm ... yeah. I thought maybe someday I would, you know, build a house for myself, but for now, I’m content living with him.”

Placing my things down on the bed, I close the distance between us and cup his face. “That’s very sweet of you.”

“It is?” He’s taken aback by my statement as if he’s never heard a woman say that before. He proves as much with his next words. “You don’t think it’s pathetic?”

“Who the hell would think that? You live and work out here, why bother moving out of your childhood home just to seem like an adult? I technically still live with my parents,” I admit.

A chuckle reverberates from the hallway, pulling the two of us apart but only enough to see where it came from. Adrian’s hands have a firm possession of my waist as he moves and reveals a man who looks like the typical cowboy. Big bushy mustache with flecks of gray, darker hair peering out from under his sweat-stained hat, eyebrows slowly losing their color as well. He’s wiry thin and bow legged from years of being in the saddle.

“Hello.” There isn’t an ounce of nerves anywhere to be seen as I step away from Adrian and stretch out a hand to introduce myself to who is clearly his dad. “I’m Brinley Moore.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Moore. I’m Wayne Cook, that one’s father.”

“It’s easy to see where he gets his good looks from.” I’m not kidding. Wayne is much too old for me, but I can see so many similarities between him and his son.

“You, I like.” He waves a finger at me. “What brings you out here? It isn’t like Adrian to have female company here.”

Before I can say a word, Adrian's hand takes up position on my lower back and answers his dad. "Brinley is going to stay out here with us until we can track down and deal with a person who has been stalking her. I thought it best to bring her out here, and I knew you wouldn't mind. Brinley grew up on a ranch and—"

"I offer up my services in exchange for your protection," I interject.

Wayne's caterpillar-like eyebrows come together before he nods. "All right. I won't see any harm, but I also won't demand labor out of you. Unless you want to work." There's a twinkle in his dark-brown eyes, and I know I don't need to run anymore.

Chapter Thirty-One

Adrian

“Night, Brinley. I’ll be just across the hall if you need anything.” I shuffle from one foot to the other. My body is acting like it doesn’t want to leave her.

“Good night, Adrian. Thank you again.” The door closes with a soft click, sealing her away from me when I want so badly to crawl into bed and hold her just so she knows she’s perfectly safe and can rest at ease.

My feet drag my way not to my bedroom where I probably should go, but back out into the living room and find a beer waiting on the coffee table for me. Dad is in his chair, staring at the late-night news and nursing his own drink.

“Thanks.” With a huff, I fall onto the couch and groan as every stiff muscle I didn’t realize I had begun to loosen up.

“She seems like a nice girl,” Dad notes, not breaking his eyes from the weather.

I don’t even know why he bothers watching. The news station is hours away and never even remotely accurate for us. I wish he’d just listen to the radio instead. At least then we’d have a better chance of knowing what the weather is going to do. Things I wish I knew when deciding I wanted to be a cowboy—I could get an education in meteorology and be paid to be wrong the majority of the time.

“She’s really nice. You saw her during the last Summer Olympics too.” The beer glides down my throat with ease, helping to further release me from this stress. She’s here

now, and I can keep her safe. I'll have to remain vigilant. Who knows what this person is capable of? Clearly, they know how to track her.

"I thought her name sounded familiar," he continues in a monotone. "I just thought I had heard it from the past, though."

"Meaning?"

"I believe her dad had a ranch here a long time ago, not too far from here either." In other words, the ranch could have been anywhere between our border and the county or state lines.

"Her dad runs a ranch down in Texas now." This finally gets more of a reaction out of him in the form of a cringe.

"Texans." He shakes his head but says no more. I get it. Like most older people, my dad has it in his mind that Texans, along with Californians are total pains in the ass. I'm not going to point out that Texans tend to think more like us. That's not an argument I want to rehash tonight.

"She's from here. I know you can't tell by her accent, but she grew up here until her parents moved down there. She's really close with the girls and knows the guys." The beer continues to glide down easily.

I shouldn't be sitting here mindlessly trying to have a conversation with my dad. When it's this time of night, he tends to go into zombie mode. What I *should* be doing is making sure the house is secure along with double-checking that the motion lights are still working. With the random barn

cat to a meandering skunk or raccoon, they're going off all the time and could be out. I'll need them just in case.

"I remember her dad now. Theodore Moore. Nice man, hard worker, and did good raising his daughter it seems." He sniffs and finally breaks his focus on the TV in favor of me. "So what are you going to do if that stalker somehow manages to find her out here?"

"Protect her the best I can." I don't hesitate. "She can help me with my chores and stick close to my side. Hopefully, someone in town will figure out who this person is so we can deal with it. Press charges and all that."

"And if they just vanish?" His bushy brows jack up on his wrinkled forehead. "Are you going to let her go?"

"Don't see much choice in the matter," I grumble. "I can't put a claim on her, now, can I?"

His lips twist before he answers. "Spending day in and day out with you might form some sort of a connection." That's all he gives me before he's slapping the arms of his chair and getting up to first head into the kitchen and then his bedroom.

The floorboards creak, telling me exactly where he is before a hand comes down on my shoulder. "I always wished there was a way I could have kept your mom so we could have been a family, but then I realized she was never meant to be mine—"

"Or any of her other husbands," I quip before he can continue.

“That too,” he begrudgingly admits. “I should have tried. I’m sure there’s another woman out there for me. I don’t want the same for you.” With a squeeze, he leaves me to puzzle together what his meaning is. “Night, Son.”

“Night, Dad.” I stay out, staring not at the blank TV but the big bay window we really need to get curtains or blinds for. The sky is midnight blue with speckles of glittering stars. Finishing my beer, I get up and take care of the bottle before I head to my room.

Before I can go in, I take one long glance at the closed door opposite mine. When I finally go in, I leave my door open. I can hear better if there isn’t a barrier blocking me.

Finally kicking out of my boots and pulling my socks off, I shuck off the rest of my clothes until I’m down to my boxers. I’m barely in bed when I hear the creak of floorboards. Soft and barely there, a clear indication it isn’t my dad moving around.

It’s pitch dark thanks to the almost new moon outside the windows. I can still see shadows move as the door across from mine slowly opens and then the patter of feet against the hardwood comes closer.

There’s a soft rap on the wall next to my door.

“Adrian?” Brinley’s voice is barely audible.

“Yeah?” The sheets fall from my bare chest as I put an arm behind the pillow right under me.

“I ... can’t sleep.” Her admission is reluctant.

“Is it because ...?” I don’t finish because it might not help.

“Yes. I know I’m safe out here, but ...” She’s quick to respond only to trail off.

“But you don’t know for how long.” I finish for her and quickly make room for her in my bed. It feels like instinct, natural to bring her comfort. We’ve already slept together just not through the night. “Come on, I’ll keep you safe.”

Without hesitation, she’s slipping into my room, closing the door, and crawling under the covers to cuddle up to my side.

“Thank you,” she breathes before placing a chaste kiss on my lips and resting her head on my shoulder. I don’t know how long I lay awake, hand mindlessly gliding up and down the curve of her side when her breathing evens out, and I’m only moments behind.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Brinley

When was the last time I got a peaceful night's sleep?

My answer comes as quickly as the question does. It was the night before I left for the Olympic qualifying rounds. I was cuddled into my bed in my childhood room with the window open and the distant sound of cattle.

I haven't slept soundly since or with a window open, not after the messages started to appear. I've been in complete lockdown especially when I began to get letters.

Last night, I couldn't relax even though I knew I was safe out here in the middle of nowhere with Adrian just a few feet away. I even opened the window to get some fresh air, seeing as their house doesn't have air-conditioning.

Plenty of gentle sounds came in, including the distant yipping of coyotes.

I tossed and turned even with the muted mutters coming from wherever Adrian was talking with his dad. That was when I heard the creak of the floorboards and the gentle thumps of men's feet that had me crawling from under the cocoon I made for myself and bravely left the room to tell Adrian I couldn't sleep.

I was a little surprised he was willing to share his bed with me. Unlike the one in the guest room, his was a queen with plenty of room for both of us to sleep comfortably side-by-side while barely touching. I had planned on that until I got under the covers and his scent wafted around me. There was

no controlling myself. I cuddled right up to him, finding his warmth the most inviting thing I have ever experienced, and quickly fell asleep to the soothing glide of his hand up and down my side.

I was adrift in a dreamless ocean until the sharp blast of an alarm woke not only the person it was intended for, but me as well.

And I'm thankful for it. I don't know what I would have gotten up to if I woke hours after they had left without me to do their regular work.

You know damn well. You would have found something to clean or straighten up while glancing out every window to make sure no one unknown lingered outside.

"I don't think I've ever gotten through this many chores this quickly." Adrian's near breathless as he comes to stand next to me and takes in the line of stalls that have been cleaned out and fresh straw laid down.

"It's always better with help. This used to be one of my main chores I had to do by myself as well." Taking a deep breath of the slightly musty aroma laced with the straw air, I feel like I'm at home. The heat included just without the jacked-up humidity Wyoming loses this time of year.

"Well, thank you. I haven't had help in what feels like a long time unless it's my dad working alongside me." When he turns to regard me, the thought I was about to share I'm positive I've proven his dad wrong about needing help flies away from my mind and all I want to do is kiss him.

He didn't relegate me to stay in the house where it was safest and I'd end up driving myself crazy. No, he asked me if I had clothes I could work in, which are the only ones I own aside from the few dresses and shorts I brought with me. When I came out in my boots, jeans, and a long-sleeve shirt to protect me from the sun, I think his dad's jaw clattered to the floor.

We are at a standstill now. My gaze focused on his while his is homed in on the slight part of my lips. I want him to kiss me. To show me it really isn't just me initiating all of this like I did last night before we got here.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you." I take a step to close the distance between us, offering more of myself to him for the taking. "I haven't felt like I've needed to look over my shoulder at all today." Another step closer, I feel him even though we aren't even close to touching.

"It's the least I can do." I practically come apart at the simple motion of him grabbing my elbow, locking us together. "I won't *ever* let anyone get to you." His head lowers, coming closer to me with each word spoken as if he's saying them to God.

"I believe you," I whisper back. My eyes flutter closed as his lips take possession of not only mine, but my mind, body, and soul.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Adrian

It wasn't my intention to bring her out here and have my way with her.

Even if she's the one who's luring me in, I didn't want this seclusion to only be of the physical type. I want to keep her safe as much as I want this stalker found. I need to find some relief that whoever this person hasn't turned to being violent and threatening toward her, just continues to admire her in a creepy way.

Her lips are warm and pliable against mine, feeding me with desire while also sending my need for her higher than ever before.

It's shaded in here. Even with the breeze, there's some semblance of a decrease in temperature, it's still enough of just stand still and make you sweat. I back her into the wooden slatted wall of the stall closest to us.

I tried this once with Felicity. I thought it was romantic to bring her out here and then take her for a ride with her sitting in front of me on one of our calmest horses. She freaked out the moment her back hit the stall and berated me about messing up not only her hair but her outfit as well.

Brinley does nothing of the sort. Her hands clench the front of my sweat-soaked shirt, pulling it away from my body while also bringing me closer to her as she gently moans. I'm a shit for comparing the two women. They are so different there's no need to make any comparisons.

Felicity also never cared to be near my dad. She found him too strict and felt like he never gave her a chance.

Stop it, you fucking idiot, and just take what Brinley's so willing to give you.

Hands glide down her body, rolling over every delicious curve. This woman... Fucking hell, this woman is made for sex and sin, to entice any man into giving way to primal instinct to take possession of a woman.

No, not any man ... me. She's mine.

That drives me crazy, deepening the kiss as a way to brand her as my own.

A gasp rips from her as my lips trail down to her sharp jawline and then her neck. God, that long creamy neck hidden under her bandanna tastes incredible. It too needs to show my mark, my ownership.

My hands come down to paw at the glorious globes of her fine ass and then I'm lifting her. There's still no protest, only long legs wrapping around my waist. There are too many clothes in the way.

"You're so fuckin' perfect," I growl, coming back to her lips and savaging her. Unbidden, thoughts of how I couldn't do this with Felicity come back. Lipstick would be ruined. I never thought I'd find a woman who would allow me to be unrestrained with her.

There are too many damn clothes in the way, but even in the back of my mind, I can't bring myself to lay her bare here, where my dad could and likely *will* walk in sooner or later.

My intentions with her were noble; protect her while also showing her who I am and that there could be a possibility of more of us. A way to keep her here that would both please her friends and me.

It's the only thing that has me pulling away from her, helping me regain some semblance of composure. "Will you go for a ride with me?" I'm heaving air into my lungs. It's doing me absolutely no good because with each breath, I pull in her scent.

She smells of sweet sweat. Nothing about her fragrance is fake. It makes my dick rock hard.

"And what kind of ride do you have in mind?" she purrs.

Sweet hell. How am I going to manage this?

"Horses." I step back. Her legs release me, but I don't let go until I know she's settled on her own two feet again. "Come out and see the small piece of heaven my dad and I have worked hard to cultivate together."

See me, fill in my blanks, and accept all of who I am.

I can't bring myself to plead for those things. Instead, I'll show her my life and hope it's enough. I'm not like Gage who'll likely bombard the woman who catches his eye, the same goes with Landen, nor am I as gentle as Evan or Gentry, and thankfully, I'm not completely clueless like Nash.

In a way, I'm a mix of all of them and determined to make this woman mine all while protecting her. I can tell it isn't the response she wanted to hear. She smiles nevertheless and quickly agrees.

“Don’t be expecting me to ride with you, though.” She pokes me in the chest. “It’s been a while since I’ve been able to go for a ride.” Taking her hat off the hook next to the stall door, she puts it on. “Lead the way, handsome.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Brinley

I was moments away from giving myself fully to this man. It isn't something I've done with very many men. Not that I've ever allowed someone to get close enough to do so.

I'm choosing Adrian. Based on his little attack in the barn, I'm pretty certain he's picking me as well.

As willing as I was to give myself to him again, I really want to get to know him better on a personal, non-naked scale before we dive back into each other like that.

The proposal of a ride threw me but was just the cooling down we both needed.

Being on the back of a horse is far more freeing than ever firing one of my favorite guns can be. There's a release giving up to the powerful animal under me and trust in him to not only keep me in the saddle but not be a shit to me.

I was apprehensive about it at first when Adrian returned with two beautiful stallions. This is a male-run ranch without a woman in sight, and a gender most of the horses have likely never really been around.

I had a stubborn old gelding once. He was a man's workhorse his entire life and was welcomed into retirement at my dad's steadily growing ranch after we moved. He was the first horse on the ranch and all mine. It didn't matter how spoiled he was, thanks to me. I combed him, gave him treats, and all around made him feel like a king. It didn't stop him from not listening to a damn thing I instructed of him, and one

time, while sitting on the tailgate of my dad's truck with the brim of my hat hiding my face, he came up, tilted the hat back, saw it was me, and blew snot in my face.

This fine black-and-white-spotted gentleman has been far kinder and a better listener than my old buckskin. I do miss that horse. When I started to get busy with shooting, I gave him away to a young man whose dad worked for mine as his 4-H horse.

He did him good until he passed away of natural causes.

The only wind that exists is the one created as we pick up speed and stay right alongside Adrian and his own stallion.

A laugh rips from me, carrying up into the daylight sky much like the calls of the coyotes last night. To run wild and free without anyone following me is how I want to live my life. To be able to vanish but for those who care about me know where I'm at is all I can ask for in this life.

My ambitions seemed to have wandered off since winning the gold. I've done the odd in and out job since getting back, but nothing has settled me. Not like this is right now or when I was working alongside him all morning or even when I was out at the rifle range with ideas running wild in my imagination.

This could easily be home.

I turn to look at Adrian. We come to a slow trot and then a stop just at the top of a hill. My admiration of his rugged face shaded by the wide brim of his sweat-stained hat doesn't go unnoticed. I've been around plenty of handsome

cowboys, but none who have captivated me like this one. It isn't only his good looks but how brightly his golden heart shines.

I look out at the land before us. Many may see dried ground with very little green to be seen, which is typical for this time of year and nothing much else. I see freedom and so much possibility to be had.

"It's breathtaking here," I muse.

"I know it isn't as endless as what you're likely used to in Texas, but it's mine and my dad's." Tall, handsome, and with the appearance of an alpha male, which I wouldn't mind seeing in the future, yet Adrian is being sheepish with me.

"But it *is* yours." I nod, turning back to him and getting off the horse. "I can see why you work so hard."

Hands come down on the flair of my hips as he comes to stand behind me. "I'm glad you do." His voice is a husky whisper against my ear. "Not many get it and even fewer understand what it's like to keep land like this. Even if our acreage is small compared to a lot of the places surrounding us, it's enough to keep the way of life Dad and I want alive."

Again, I wonder how a woman especially one who lives in a small town and surrounded by ranches hasn't come into his life yet.

"What about your mother?" I'm not sure why I ask. The moment instantly feels soured, but I want to know him as much as I want to tell him all about who I am. When he doesn't answer me, I think of something to say. "My parents lived separately when we first moved. I didn't fully understand

it. I was with my mom in town where her new job that had brought us down for was located while my dad was constantly gone in order to get the land he had purchased ready. I spent two years barely seeing him until the house was built, and Mom and I could move in with him.”

“Our childhood is both similar and completely different.” His voice rumbles once more when he finally speaks. “My parents were divorced, though. I spent summer out here while my mom did her best to find the man who would fit her ambitions back in Chicago. I never came to town in that time, and when I was old enough to pick where I wanted to be, you were already gone. I haven’t regretted it since.”

“Don’t you miss your mom?” Turning, I look up to find him glancing out at the land.

“Not really. We weren’t ever close. I was raised by nannies when I was with her. It’s always been my dad who made me feel wanted.”

“Why didn’t he ever re-marry?”

“He didn’t want to bother with it. When I broke up with Felicity, I decided I didn’t want to either.”

“Felicity? Your ex-girlfriend?” I hesitate.

“Yeah, she didn’t want this.” He abandons his hold of me and fans his arms out to draw me to everything before us. “She wanted a ranch life like on that show everyone’s into right now. The whole massive amount of land to feel like royalty and money to do and say whatever the hell you want. Not the simpler life.”

“No work?”

“All play.” He nods with a purse of his lips. “She cheated on me, and I was done until I met you.” Finally, those dark brown eyes look down at me.

“Her loss.” Roping my arms around his neck, I pull his face closer to me. “She didn’t see your shine, Adrian.”

“Do you?” My loose hair is gently pushed from my face as he cups my cheek with hope laced in his voice.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Adrian

She has no idea how badly I want an answer, and it better be the right one.

My breath is stilted in my lungs as I wait.

It's a struggle not to pull her closer. Her hands are already fanned out on my chest, her forehead just a stretch away from my lips, and her eyes staring into mine. When the answer isn't instant, I try not to panic.

She has a lot to think about before the answer can come out. She knows that if she gives me a yes, it'll change what she thought was just going to be her visit. It'll bind her to me in a way I won't be willing to let her go, even if I know that's what she might want.

And if she says no, I'm not sure what I'll do or say. There's no way I could allow this to just be a fling. Hell, I might even go completely alpha on her delectable ass, haul her away, and show her just how perfect we are for one another.

Either way, the answer will eventually be the same, because deep within my soul, I know she sees me in a way no woman ever has.

"I do." The words are the sweetest melody to my ears. Nothing's holding me back now. Whatever words she was about to follow up with are swallowed as I capture her lips and lift her into my arms.

We pay no mind to the horses. Neither of them will go far. They like it too much close to the house and how spoiled

they are if they don't ditch us. There's water just at the bottom of the hill from us if they need a drink.

There's nothing I can offer to make this gentle. Not even a tree to brace one of us against as the hunger of our kisses increases.

Steadily, somehow, I manage to drop to the ground, my knees digging into the ground as my entire body begins to quake with need.

And then, I'm flat on my back, Brinley over me looking like an angel. The sun is bright, shining down on her while her shadow casts me in darkness. My hands roam over her.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." Pulling her down to me, I recapture her lips. My breath is stolen from me with the gentle rock of her hips against my rock-hard dick. "Fuck."

"I'm game if you are." Nipping at my bottom lip, she pulls it away from me just as she stands and makes quick work of getting her jeans off. They aren't the skintight type. Otherwise, they would be difficult for her to peel away from those strong, shapely legs that glisten with a fine layer of sweat.

I'm not gifted a chance to gaze at her, bare from the waist down for me before she's helping me get my own jeans and underwear off, or at least down around my ankles seeing as I have a hell of a time getting my boots off after sweating in them all day.

She's straddling me all over again.

“Sweet Jesus.” Her warmth engulfs me as she slowly sinks fully onto my lap until we’re locked together.

The thought of a condom was ripped away from me the moment I began to feel every heated, velvety inch of her that the perfection has left me brain-dead except for the nature taking possession of me.

“Oh God.” She pants, fingers digging into the front of my shirt as she begins to move, gyrating over me, hypnotizing until only she is in my focus. Not the endless blue sky or the tall grasses that surround the bed I’m likely going to regret, but not now, not when I have her and could never regret giving this woman a piece of me as well as the truths I never plan on giving to another.

The focus one can only give someone who is locked intimately with them is broken as her eyes flutter closed on a cry of pure ecstasy, moaning into the open air of the world to hear.

I take possession of her hips, guiding her to allow me in deeper until I too am reaching that pinnacle of pure satisfaction with a cry of my own. Jolting off the ground, I wrap my arms around her body as I come deep within her and savage her mouth, showing her just how hungry I still am for her.

Her body slows, but I still feel the pulsing of her from our connection, and soon, our kisses follow as we both begin to drag in the dry, hot air.

“You are the most perfect creation in this world and the next,” I say between both breaths and scattered kisses.

“Maybe in your eyes, handsome.” Fingers thread into my hair in order to pull me away. Those enchanting blueish-purple eyes come into focus. “I think you’re pretty damn perfect too.” She brushes a hand through my hair now, allowing some coolness to creep in. “That’s why I’m really, truly considering staying in Morris Valley and finding my way here.”

Our foreheads connect as her words bleed into my soul. “You could find your way out here with me. Be a Wyoming rancher?”

She doesn’t pull back, just places her hands gently down on my shoulders to keep from letting me go too soon.

“I’ve been thinking about seeing what I can do out at the range, offering up some money to get a better indoor setup out there since there’s plenty of land and becoming an instructor.” Her breaths fan out against my lips. “Now that I’ve accomplished my goals with the Olympics, I don’t really have a true north to guide me.”

Finally, she pulls back. “I think being a teacher and still leaving on occasion for my sponsors could be the start of the next chapter of my life.”

“And I’m here whenever you need me,” I hedge because not once has she said anything about *us*.

“*And ... maybe I can come home to my boyfriend?*” Getting to know this woman has shown me a strong individual who never seems nervous about anything. Seeing her biting down on her already abused lip, I’m not going to linger with giving her an answer.

“Are you asking to move in with me, Miss Moore?”

There’s a flash of surprise in her eyes followed by a blush. “No, *Mr.* Cook. I’ll live in town until we get to know each other better. Besides, me being there will give you a reason to come in more often and for me to come out here. That is, if I’m to be your girlfriend.”

Rolling her onto her back, she still has a hold of me as I grow stiff again and nip at the tip of her nose. “There’s no other woman for me, beautiful.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Brinley

She keeps droning on, making my ear heat and ache to pull it away, but I can't bring myself to do that otherwise I'll miss her latest update.

Maybe I should have called to check in with Summer before this?

It's been a couple of weeks since I got here. I'm positive I have countless missed calls and emails from my sponsor and whatnot, but I refuse to turn my phone back on. The only communication I've had with the outside world is through the landline Wayne insists on keeping at the house.

My mom wasn't thrilled to hear about what was happening here and pleaded with me to come home so we could deal with all of this in a legal way down there. I can't bring myself to leave and she understood more when I explained I want to stay and make a life for myself up here.

"Who am I to get in the way when you sound as passionate as you do right now?" She relented and then commanded me to tell her everything about Adrian. Thankfully, I called when he and his dad were still out in the barn and was able to tell her everything.

And now, I'm on the phone with Officer Shaw. Eliza is completely in business mode, proving why she actually makes a great police officer.

"There has been no movement at Clover's the night you left or any other since." Eliza's statement sounds more

like a command than it's meant to be. It's just the way she is, and I love her for it.

“Too bad, one encounter with Clover would have sent anyone running away.” I laugh, but it lacks humor. I'm relieved to see my friends have been left alone, but it does nothing to ease my own nerves about who this person might be. “Any notes left?” The crisp bite of the apple nearly echoes in the quieted kitchen I have all to myself.

It's a first. I've been practically plastered to Adrian's side since the first morning.

It isn't required of me, but after the first night of experiencing what Wayne and Adrian pass as dinner, I've taken over the kitchen. First by reorganizing the place of chaos and then made edible meals that wouldn't clog up arteries.

“Unfortunately, we haven't been able to make any headway on who your stalker could possibly be, Brin.” Eliza sighs. She sounds exhausted but my heart is happy hearing I have a friend who cares enough about me to use everything in her arsenal to help. “Gage has even gone to several of the hotels looking for someone who might fit the loner who might give the staff the creeps, but it's been no good.”

“I'm sure his method of questioning scared the crap out of them.” The laugh that follows is laced with humor because it's funny to imagine. I would love to go back to town to do a few things I can't do from out here, but I'm staying put until I'm given the all clear. It just stinks they don't even have internet out here.

We've made quiet yet passionate love in his bed almost every night. We haven't tried outside again since we

got back and had to pull a few ticks off one another after our romp in the field with only the horses as our witnesses.

“Maybe the person thinks I left and did the same?” I know it’s wishful thinking. I ran when I should have found a way to confront this person. Nothing I’ve gotten has been violent, but it still violates my personal space.

“It’s possible.” I can see her nodding in my mind. I can also hear the various sounds of the police station in the background along with what sounds like an argument. “I’ve been thinking—”

“That I need to make an appearance in town to find out?” That perks me up. I have never ever minded being away from it all, to have more nature surrounding me than people, but I’m uneasy and just want this over with so I can move on with my life.

“I’m glad to see time and distance haven’t dulled our likeminded connection.” She chuckles. “I was thinking maybe we have another girls’ night out. Of course, we’ll have the guys help keep a watchful eye on everything we can’t ourselves at the Brickhouse and maybe—”

“We can finally draw the person out?” I turn and lean against the counter and take another bite of my apple, liking the sound of this idea.

“If you aren’t comfortable with being the bait ...” She trails off, allowing me to fill in the blanks. She would never willingly put me in any danger, not unless I’m up for it.

“I want to know who this person is and have it dealt with, Eliza. I’ve spent way too long fearing I’m going to wake

up having someone standing at the foot of my bed. I've also had reoccurring nightmares of this person finally losing it and taking me."

"Okay then." I can see the look in her eyes; calculating what move we need to make next. "How about you post something about the Brickhouse on your social media? It might be a boost for Beckett as well with people knowing an Olympic gold medalist frequents there."

"Sounds good. I'll recruit my bodyguard." Smiling, I speak a little louder toward the end when I hear Adrian coming in the door and blow him a kiss when he comes into the kitchen, stopping when he catches my words. "What night are we doing this? The sooner, the better."

"Tomorrow night. It's too late to recruit everyone for tonight and most will be off then, so we'll have the whole crew."

Ending the call, I blindly put the phone down behind me and brace myself for what's to come. I know that look of determined hunger well enough by now to know I'm about to be pinned to the counter and assaulted with kisses.

Instead of capturing my lips, he comes down and takes a healthy bite of my apple. "What are you up to?"

"Plotting," I tease before taking a bite of my own.

"Plotting a way to drive me crazy?" His nose rubs against mine. "I've got news for you, beautiful. You just need to stand there, and you accomplish that."

"Well, if that works on you, it should work on my stalker as well, right?" I hedge.

This draws him away from me, all teasing cast aside as his soft expression morphs into a glare. “What?”

I don’t jump at the barked question. I was expecting it.

“That was Eliza on the phone. They haven’t had any luck with finding my stalker. Even releasing Gage hasn’t done any good. So we’re going to draw the person out and deal with this in our own way.”

“I won’t let you go on your own. You know that, right?” He comes back to me, hands taking possession of my hips. I swear it’s his favorite part of me to hold. “You’re my girl, Brin, I won’t let anyone ever harm you.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Getting up on my tiptoes, I press a kiss to his nose. “You’re just going to have to deal with keeping a little distance unless I tell you otherwise.”

His growl is my only response as I turn with a smile and get back to working on dinner. I’ll call Summer after dinner and let her know what’s going on.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Adrian

I don't like this.

Not at all.

No matter how much I grumble to myself and nurse the lukewarm beer I got when we first arrived, *not* together, I can't accept letting Brinley play this role even if I'm forced to stay put.

I was instructed to drop her off in the alley at Mina's diner where she was going to get ready, but not before swinging by and taking a quick picture of the front of the Brickhouse. I proceeded to go to Gage's where I waited until we got the text it was time to move in.

Gage and I were met at the front doors by Gentry and Nash arguing but then turned all serious the moment we stepped through the doors into the busy building. Evan, Landen, and Finn had already claimed a pool table and one of the high-top tables close to them. We were to act like we were meeting up with them for a guys' night especially since the girls hadn't made their appearance yet.

And now, after a game of pool under all our belts and each of us taking our time nursing our drinks and having Beckett making the rounds, the girls have shown up to unwind and have a good time.

They're *acting* as though this is a farewell to send Brinley off.

Brinley came walking in wearing sky-high heels I wouldn't guess she'd be able to walk in with ease and a sequin dress that's meant to make her stand out like a shiny lure in the water.

Even if she wasn't my girl, I'd still be drawn to her. The dress has one bare shoulder while the other is encased in a long sleeve but every move she makes, she sparkles in the bar's lighting. She's a beacon for everyone to watch.

"Quit watching her." Evan slams a massive shoulder into me, jostling me out of the stupor Brinley has put me under.

All I can think about is someone else taking hold of her, stealing her away from me when I've just got her myself.

"I can't help it." Speaking more to my bottle than my friend, I turn my gaze to the middle of the table. "I don't want her out of my sight and then something to happen."

"We need somethin' to happen, though," Gage practically growls from across the table. I should be the one close to losing it, not him.

Gage used to be a pretty bad guy. As a teenager, he was always getting into trouble, causing chaos and mayhem wherever he went. His change came when we graduated from high school and his dad kicked him out of the house. He didn't want to leave his sister in the drunkard's care, so he straightened up to take care of her himself. He's championed himself as some great protector ever since he graduated the police academy and got custody of his sister. Not being able to locate this person has to be eating away at him.

“Right.” I bite back, and without another word, I get up and make my way over to the pool table. It might not cheer me up, but it’ll do me some good to school Nash at a game. He can’t call Lexy over to try to distract me. He fails to realize she doesn’t do it for any of us.

I manage to break and sink a couple of balls before my attention is once more stolen to look over at the dance floor where the girls have taken over a good portion with their virgin drinks and are acting like they aren’t close to sober. Beckett is making sure the girls are getting their drinks only from him to safeguard each of them.

I’ll hand it to Eliza. She knows how to coordinate this little sting operation to ensure everyone comes out of this safely, especially Brinley.

“Come on, man, I know my game hasn’t improved *this* much since I last played you,” Nash whines, drawing me back.

Shaking my head, I turn back to him and find Gentry doing the same. “Only you would whine while winning a rare game against one of us.” Looking for my next shot, I bend and take it, sinking another one of mine with ease.

“You haven’t improved at all, dumbass,” Gentry quips. It must be his turn to check on the girls. Turning away from us, he takes a slow sip of his beer. “Excuse me, I see a woman who needs a dance.”

I can’t help but watch him rather than take another shot as he makes his way around the massive bar and goes straight to the girls. But rather than grab mine, he offers his hand to Julia, which she accepts by crushing herself to him.

“When do you think he’ll finally cave to her?” I muse, thankful for something to take my mind off the worry consuming me.

“Huh?” Nash swings around, but clearly doesn’t see what I do. “What are you talking about, man?”

“Nothing.” Shaking my head, I go back to our game. Before I can take my shot, a deep red dress that looks scrunched up as well as being a second skin to the wearer is just beyond where I’m lined up.

“Hey there, handsome.” There’s no mistaking the seductive purr of an all-too-familiar voice.

I’m already losing, so there’s no way I’ll let her mess up this easy shot for me. Nash may know how to sink a ball, but he’s shit when it comes to making sure the ball doesn’t stop in just the right place for the next person to have a great shot.

Slowly, I stand, coming eye to eye with heavily made-up, hooded eyes. Her red hair is curled to look wild. I’m sure there’s more hairspray there than any beauty queen’s because her hair is usually straight. Gold bangles run up her right arm, and there’s a pendant doing its best to disappear into her pushed-up cleavage.

“Felicity.” My voice is a growl, barely audible over the bar’s noise.

For as dense as the man can be, Nash is glaring at her with as much venom as I feel pulsating through me.

“Is that any way to greet the woman who has your heart?” she purrs, twirling a lock of hair around two fingers.

She has more care for her hair than she ever did for me.

“My heart?” I scoff, finally over her. “Yeah, I don’t think so.” When I cross my arms, my pole digs in a little as I stand across the table, glaring at her. She has some fucking nerve.

“Oh, come on, you know we’re meant to be.” She tries to take a step to get closer to me, but Nash blocks her to one side and Gage is quick to be on the other.

“No, we aren’t, and I thought that was clear when I told you we’re done.” Standing my ground, I get a little thrill seeing her look uneasy. None of my friends ever cared for her, and she the same with them. None of them tried to hide it either. I don’t even care why she is coming around now of all times.

God, I was a fool.

“We have no business, so you can scamper off to wherever you’ve been lurking. I’ve moved on and found someone far better.” Without giving her another glance or word, I get back to my game and sink the ball with finality. When I move to take another shot, my eyes go over to check on Brinley. My pool stick clatters to the ground when I don’t see her ... anywhere.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Brinley

My phone has been going off constantly since I posted the picture of the Brickhouse and a selfie of the girls and me on my various social media pages. It's mostly likes, and a few comments about having to check the place out if they're ever in the area. Nothing creepy ... yet.

It's extremely dangerous to post on social media, especially if your accounts are as open to the public around the world as mine are. I know what I'm getting myself into by tagging the location and now having to glimmer like a shiny lure.

I can't help but feel the eyes on me already. Not just the amused yet watchful ones of my friends, but everyone else; people I don't know and maybe ...

Taking a sip of my nonalcoholic drink and acting like it's going to my head, I sway along with my friends.

"Anything yet?" Leaning into Eliza, I whisper which she gives a subtle shake of her head before beaming and throwing her arms around me.

"I'm going to miss you so much! Why do you have to leave?" she whines.

My heart pains just hearing it. I know it's just for show. I'm not planning on going anywhere in the near future, not when I see that where I'm meant to be is here among my friends and Adrian.

It still doesn't make hearing the sadness in her voice any easier. It has my own coming out knowing that if we don't get this person and deal with this obsession once and for all, I might have to run again anyway.

"I have to. Work calls, and I need to go home. It's been a while since I've seen my parents." The words are stilted, broken almost as I utter them, not because it's so emotional even though I'm sure that's what it sounds like to the outside world, but due to the fact it isn't easy for me to lie.

My mom always said that my *Pinocchio* affect was the stammering of words coming out whenever I went to lie.

Thankfully, no one outside my little tribe knows that.

"Boo to work," Clover cries. Even she went virgin on her drinks for the night, but has absolutely no issues acting the way she always does when she drinks. "We finally got you back and then there's the way Adrian looks at you." She nudges.

"Just look at the way he's watching you." Mina sighs. Julia would likely join in if it wasn't for the fact she's currently dancing with Gentry while he's doing his best to listen in and be closer to us. Julia's in seventh heaven being in his arms as they move together to the music.

I want so badly to go over and steal Adrian from the pool tables. Maybe after he finishes schooling Nash at their game, I could go over and ask for a dance. One wouldn't hurt, not in the scheme of things. It might even help to lure my stalker closer to me. See me get close to another man and then

...

Turning as if it's all part of my dance, I give each of my friends attention, but in truth, I'm glancing at Adrian.

What I see isn't him bent over the table to line up a shot. Instead, he's glaring across the table at a woman who's dressed as provocatively as me and flanked by Nash and Gage who I can see from here don't look happy either.

Leaning back into Eliza, I ask. "Who's that?" Jerking my chin in the guys' direction, I draw her attention over there.

She's been pretty lax tonight. I know it's just a show for the sake of our little job we're trying to accomplish, but the moment she turns that fiery head of red hair in that direction, she's stiff and looks beyond pissed.

"That little two-timer." She all but barks, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stick straight up. "That's Felicity," she snarls, whipping around to look at me. There's so much intensity in her glare I'm thankful it isn't meant for me. "You need to go get him away from her."

"But—"

"It might work to get your stalker to come out fueled by jealousy." She cuts me off and points in the direction of the pool tables. She doesn't need to tell me twice. I don't know his ex, just know what she left behind when she cheated on him. I'm not about to let her do anything to him now. Not after admitting my feelings and the two of us being together now.

"Right." With a nod of determination, I figuratively roll up my ... sleeve and start to head over.

The crowd thickens as I start to make my way over.

“Excuse me.” I have to shout to be heard over the DJ as he puts a new song on, louder than the last. Very few actually hear me. I end up losing sight of Adrian, the guys, the pool tables, and even the girls at my back for a few seconds before I’m coming out the other side of the dance floor only to have my wrist captured and I’m swung into a firm chest.

“Going somewhere, my beauty?” The voice is a deep rumble, pulling a frown across my brows before I look up from the wall of muscle and at an all-too-familiar face. Messy brown hair styled to flop over one of his eyes that isn’t practical for shooting. There’s a dusting of stubble across his sharp jaw and a hint of a mustache.

“C-Cannon?” What the hell is he doing here?

“I found you, Brin.” His face is gentle, his hand soft as it glides down my cheek as he leans closer. “God, you smell as good as you look.”

I’m petrified. Frozen for once in my life with a man’s attention on me. How is it he’s my stalker? It makes no sense. He is a glory hog, attention seeking chauvinist.

“Did you dress up just for me?” he purrs into my ear and then before I can pull away, there’s a prick in the side of my neck.

Everything falls away.

I’m left drifting away, without any ability to cry out, and then it’s nothing but darkness.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Adrian

Where the hell is she?

Fuck the plan. And fuck if I'm overreacting and she's just in the bathroom. I need to get to her *now* and never let Brinley out of my sight again.

"What the hell, man?" Nash stumbles backward, falling into Felicity, which has her releasing a scream seeing as he's able to catch himself with the pool stick I had picked up and thrust at him, but she wasn't.

Gage makes no move to help her up either. That's not his style. He may be a police officer, charged with upholding the law, but his loyalty to me beats out helping a woman to her feet mainly because of who the woman is.

"Brinley." It's the only word I'm able to get past my lips as I charge over to the girls.

Even though the music is louder than normal tonight, I can still hear when each of the guys get my meaning. Every one of them falls in step behind me. As I pass the bar, I give a single look at Beckett who pulls out a radio to message his bouncers.

No one is allowed in or out of here, especially Brinley.

I have to hand it to Eliza; she has orchestrated this perfectly. I'm not sure how she's settled with just being a small-town officer when she's talented enough for the FBI or some similar agency.

That's not the point right now.

My jaw is locked, beyond tense as the guys and I make our way to the girls. Julia is still dancing with Gentry, but the moment they see the rest of us, their smiles fall and soon all of us are together.

“What’s wrong, Adrian?” Mina is pulled to Landen’s side, leaving her brother at her back.

“What did the wicked woman have to say?” Eliza snarls, but then her glare falls as something occurs to her. “Why isn’t Brinley with you?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing?” Crossing my arms, I only drop them as I start to look around. “Did she go to the bathroom?”

“No.” It’s Lexy who drawls the answer. “Eliza sent her to help you with ... that.” She waves a hand over to where I left Felicity who might still be struggling to get up.

I knew they were too far away. Eliza thought it would be good to put some distance between us and them. The girls are closer to the opposite wall than the bar and not their usual area they like to take over when they come out.

“Did she make it over?” Clover goes up on the tips of her toes to glance around, but her friend ... my girl is nowhere to be found.

“Fuck,” I roar, causing several people to take a step back from our group. “Where the hell is she?” Not waiting for a response, I shove my way back through the crowd. I’m not being polite in the least as I search. My attention pulled every time I see a flash of sequins only for it not to be her.

“Adrian!” Beckett appears, jogging through the crowd to me. “Calm down.” His hands come down on my shoulders, halting me with a jerk.

“I can’t. I need to find her. We don’t know anything about this person. I can’t—” I cut myself off when I notice no noise except for people talking.

“I have the exits closed. Come on.” He pulls me over to the bar and is quick to stand on it.

While he explains to everyone what’s going on and that we’re just looking for Brinley, I’m drowning in my pool of frustration and worry. I was powerless to stop her when she presented the idea to me. I didn’t want to leave the ranch and just leave it to our friends who have the resources to find the person.

There she could be safe, especially since only three of us were out there.

“I want this over with, Adrian.” The pleading bleeding not only through her words but in her eyes as she hugged me had me caving.

And dammit, I wish I had just manhandled her into staying at the house with me.

“If you’ve seen this woman I just described, please tell us where and if she was with someone,” Beckett calls out to the quieted crowd of drunks and partygoers.

I’m gnawing on the inside of my cheek, likely going to draw blood soon if I don’t get my girl. There’s murmuring, but no one steps forward. I’m about ready to lose my cool and shout at everyone to line up single file in order to locate her.

She should have spoken up by now.

“No one?” Beckett’s shoulders fall in defeat. “I really hate to do this because you know I’m always up for a party, but I need to close down for the night. The main door is the only one you’ll be able to exit from. Please form an orderly line.” He waves toward the door I now see Landen and Gage flanking while the bouncers move to the other doors with Evan, Gentry, and Nash.

“She’s not here.” I turn to look at the girls crowded around me.

My hands are trembling. I’m seconds away from grabbing a barstool and hurtling it across the room, not caring who or what it might hit.

And then the girls are standing, united, in front of me. Each is wearing a serious expression. “Come on, Adrian,” Eliza snaps. “Now isn’t the time to lose your temper.”

“How can you say that?” Spittle is flying from my mouth as I snarl at her. She remains unmoving. “We don’t know where she is.”

“Yes, we do.” Lifting her phone, I don’t want to give it the time of day until a flashing red light snags me.

“Give me that.” She releases the phone freely as I rip it from her grasp. It’s a map of Morris Valley with a little red dot flashing as it gains distance from here. “What the—?”

“I sewed a tracker into her dress,” Mina supplies.

“And we’ll know exactly where she’s going. Now, come on.” It’s Julia who speaks as she takes my hand and begins to lead us to the front of the line.

These girls, they've really thought about everything. It's kind of scary if I give myself a moment to think about it, which I'm not.

Brinley is my main focus, and I need to get to her before it's too late. I don't even want to think about what might happen.

"Let's go."

Chapter Forty

Brinley

Announcers in various languages come over the speakers in the arena behind me. My knee is jittering as I try to drown everything out as I wait to step forward and get my gun ready.

I've trained for this since I was fourteen years old, but it wasn't until I joined the Army that I was certain I could make this dream a reality.

Now, here I am, in a foreign country with plenty of people surrounding me; new friends and a few familiar faces, but none of them are going to steal my attention.

My mom is here as my coach and comfort. She's seated behind me, out of view of the range before me along with the men's gold medalist, who is also an American. It's just the shooter from the UK up here now and me.

Sixty shots have led to eight of us up here until there was just us left for the final two shots.

I can do this.

The thought flitters through my mind as we're instructed to load and take our shot. Resting my cheek on the stock of my gun that looks like something out of a sci-fi movie, I let everything vanish.

My parents' smiles and encouragements are able to bleed into this moment where I convince myself I'm deaf. The only senses I possess are my sight and touch at this moment.

Slowly releasing my breath, I squeeze the trigger. There's no kickback like that of a regular rifle. I had to work

on it when I picked my first rifle like this one, which I now feel is an extension of myself.

I just barely hear the other woman's gun go off, but my face is turned away from the targets, eyes sealed shut as I steady my nerves. Who can say this is their first time in an arena as big as the Olympics and so close to the gold she can taste it?

I can.

After a minute, we're instructed to load for our final shot. This is it. This is the last shot I'll take at this Summer Olympics and maybe ever.

In. Out. With one final exhale, I slowly squeeze the trigger with my target in my unblinking sight and then it's out and beyond my control now.

“Hey, beautiful Brinley. It's time to wake up.” There isn't a slap to my face or cold water. Just a gentle waking with my mouth feeling dried out.

“Wh...?” It takes effort to blink and then to keep my eyes open. Whatever happened to me isn't wanting to leave my system.

“There you go. I knew I gave you the right dose.” Heartbeats go by, I can't see who is speaking to me but familiarity is pulling at my foggy mind. It isn't until a hand is cradling the back of my head and a glass of cool water is pressed against my lips that I'm finally able to pull it all together.

Going to Adrian.

Being grabbed.

And ... Cannon.

Panic like I've never experienced before has me ripping free of his hold and scrambling away.

"Easy. Easy." His tone is gentle. I'm anything but easy and calm. This fucker drugged and stole me!

"What the hell, Cannon!" I scream, voice raw as my hand reaches up to rub my throat. How is it this is the person stalking me? We've been thrust together by our sponsor ever since our Olympic wins. He's never shown an ounce of interest in me.

Was I too polite and made him believe in something happening between us? My confusion is too intense that I can't even think straight.

"Take it easy, love," he coos. Thankfully, I'm not tied down. I can kick out at him right now if I need to. "Your head is going to hurt for a little while longer. Please, drink the water." He pushes the water back at me, but I'm quick to move off the bed in the opposite direction of where he sits. My head is instantly spinning, causing me to fall to the ground and hit my knees hard.

"I don't want water, Cannon." Snarling, I flail out when he tries to reach for me. "I'm not your love. You fuckin' drugged me! What the hell is wrong with you?" I scream, hoping someone will hear me. Not that I have any clue where I'm even at.

This can't be happening. I just don't understand any of this.

“I think I’ve been patient long enough, Brinley.” My body freezes where I remain on my hands and knees at the sudden change to his tone. “I’ve allowed you to have some free time, but it’s time to accept what we both know to be our future.”

Roughly, I’m hauled up until I’m draped over his shoulder and then unceremoniously dumped back on the bed.

My head hits the headboard with a resounding bang, causing my vision to spin. “Allowed me?” I ask in disbelief. I need to take in the room and find a way to escape, but I’m too nervous to take my gaze off him. There isn’t a smile now. His head cants to the side, giving him a menacing look that’s creeping me the fuck out.

“You knew I love the chase, but I’m over it now. It’s time for you to finally realize that we belong together.”

“What the fuck, dude? I don’t even really know you.” Pushing all the ailments trying to hold me back, I get to my feet once more, thankful my heels are off. Marching up to him, I don’t allow his bigger build and towering height to get the better of my nerves. “Get. Out. Of. My. Way,” I snarl.

Before I can blink, let alone get my defenses up, he has a hold of my upper arm, and I’m pushed once more to the bed, but this time with him on top and wedging his way between my legs.

His breath slams against my cheek as I try to twist and turn away from him as the rest of his body presses into me.

“You. Are. Mine,” he snarls back. My struggling is nearly worthless, but I’m not stopping even as he gets the

upper hand to put my arms over my head. I'm completely exposed under him.

Cannon pulls back just as an idea comes to me. I could hope and pray for someone to come to my rescue in time. I'm certain the tracker Mina put in my dress will lead everyone to where I'm at, but who knows what sort of lead this pervert has on the rest.

Just as he's coming back down, I relax to allow him to think he's won. When he's a hair's breadth away from me, I draw up my leg and twist, doing my best to slam it into him while jerking my head up to connect with his.

Chapter Forty-One

Adrian

There isn't a siren to be heard or flashing lights to be seen.

In fact, if it wasn't for the squealing of my truck tires as I try my best to push my older vehicle to keep up with Eliza, no one would be alarmed at my speed. Thankfully, she had the foresight to call the station and let them know what was happening and for any officer on duty not to stop us.

Lexy braces herself against the dashboard while the seat belt cuts into her lap, and Nash holds tight to the door.

The moment I saw the red flashing dot, we were moving, charging out into the parking lot, grateful all of us had some sense to park next to each other. We split into as few of the vehicles as we could. I have Lexy and Nash in the cab with me as well as Gage holding on and hooting with his creepy laughter in the back seat.

Turning off one street onto the other main thoroughfare in town, I'm shifting gears in order to keep up with Eliza's smaller and faster car until we're turning again and going to one of the four hotels at the south end of town.

It's also the biggest one with the most rooms.

Fuck.

Our caravan comes to a shrieking stop at the front doors. It's probably a good thing it's later in the evening so no guests will get in our way.

The engine is cut after I'm already out and rounding the front to keep up with Eliza's determined strides. Likely

Lexy using more brain power than me, I don't really care right now. All that matters is getting to Brinley.

"How accurate is this tracker?" I'm grunting out as I catch up to her.

"Excuse me, you can't just—"

"It's okay. I'm a police officer." I'm not exactly sure where she had stuffed her badge and nor do I want to. Eliza cuts off the front desk person with a flash of her badge and a don't mess with me glare before going back to her phone and carrying on. "And they're all with me."

So no answer for me then.

All right. As long as we can get to Brinley.

Heading through the doors over a small bridge where the hotel's water feature is, we delve into the depths of the hotel until we take the stairs. Eliza is like the bloodhound leading us to a lost child. But instead of a scent, it's a tracker I'm still amazed they had the forethought to put in her dress.

It's like they knew this was a likelihood and that right there, pisses me off because I wasn't informed of that part of the plan.

What the hell was Brinley thinking? What were any of them thinking?

For such a large group of us, we're surprisingly quiet as we march up the stairs. A glance behind me clues me into the fact that at some point, we split, and Landen is likely leading the other half up the opposite staircase just to be on the safe side.

What could go wrong with four officers, two firefighters, a woman who writes things like this all the time, and a woman who can be a she-devil alongside her muscle-head brother?

In a pitch maneuver on the second floor has us stopping close to the staircase we came up. All is silent, even the pounding of my heart can't be heard as I listen for anything. Eliza's hand is up in the air, squeezed into a fist to signal the halt order as each of us remains silent.

There's shuffling around in the room at our backs.

And then comes a muffled grunt. Through the door, it's impossible what kind, but it's enough to drive me to the same kind of rage as a bull being unleashed from a chute.

Barreling past Eliza, I take a firm grip on the doorknob, and I'm slamming my body with all the strength I possess into it.

With two consistent slams, the door gives, and I'm the one leading the charge into the room just as a man is falling off the side of the bed.

Barely a heartbeat goes by as I take in the scene. Brinley's practically laid out flat on a made bed, the skirt of her sequin dress hiked up with one leg up as if she just nailed the man in the nuts.

I can't see her face. I can't see much past the red that fills me as I turn my entire focus to the man writhing on the floor.

Fists clenched tightly at my sides, I march over to him, grab hold of his collar, and turn him to face me before my

fist connects with the center of his face.

Chapter Forty-Two

Brinley

The moment my knee connected with nuts and my head with his surprisingly thick forehead, I had a plan to get the hell out of here. I didn't care how I looked as I ran out of here like a one-night stand that ended badly, I was going to run screaming. Maybe waking every person in whatever hotel he brought me to will help me in my escape.

How did Cannon even get me past the front desk?

All of that goes flying out the window the instant the door bursts. Wood splinters with the sound of metal popping under the powerful force that makes it come loose.

My head is spinning, preventing me from lifting my head where it fell on the bed after the impact I bestowed to Cannon's. There's a chance I might have a concussion, but hopefully only a mild one.

I have no rush to get up and make my escape. I know with all my heart it's my friends who have arrived, and I'm beyond grateful that Mina and Eliza insisted on the tracker now.

I had fought it, thinking that none of us would let it get that far, considering how the simple task of luring my stalker ... Cannon ... out into the open turned into a full-blown operation where there shouldn't have been a chance of him getting me out of the Brickhouse.

How had he managed that as well?

It feels like everything has happened in slow motion after waking up in here to a side of Cannon I don't think the world even knew existed to bashing him in the junk and head, and now the sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Not in some seedy way either. I made sure that if he had any other plans with me, it won't be happening anytime soon even if my friends hadn't gotten here.

A cry of agony follows, finally bringing about a willingness to get my elbows under me and lift my upper body off the bed.

Standing at the side of the bed with the back of Cannon's polo shirt tight in his fist while the other is going to town on the man on the ground's face, is Adrian. Straw cowboy hat pushed far enough back on his head, it could come flying off at any second.

His shirt sleeves are rolled up, showing the strain there.

I'm unable to speak, much less move as I watch him beat the crap out of the man I would have never guessed was my stalker. Now that I have a moment of reprieve, I can think back to figure out if there was ever a hint.

I didn't meet Cannon until the start of the Olympics. Before, I had only heard his name but had never seen him in person. Even then, he didn't have a girlfriend or, at least, never spoke about one. Because, let's face it, people today tend to overshare with perfect strangers. I've been in a store plenty of times, minding my own business and had someone come talk to me about their life's problems as if I were sent there just for them.

But with Cannon, I just thought he felt himself too self-important to bother until the right time came to find a yes woman who would do and be what he wanted. That's the vibe I got.

He was always there, though. When the first message came, we had just been at a dinner hosted by our sponsor. Demonstrations he was there. Hell, he even knows exactly where my parents' ranch is and has been there several times, including the last time I was on the phone with my mom.

That was when I was out at the range. How long has he been here after that call?

Never once did I suspect him because I believed he had no interest, and quite frankly, I don't really care to know now.

"All right, that's enough." Gage's deep voice penetrates the room, pulling me from staring off into nowhere while I thought and blinking hard to find him pulling Adrian away while Landen and Julia are moving in around Cannon.

I see cuffs come out. Even though I don't think any of them are on duty right now, one of them had the thought to bring them along.

Likely Landen.

"Brin? Are you okay?" Lexy's soft question has me blinking once more before turning my head to find her hovering with Gentry and Nash at her back. Evan and Mina are stationed at the door with Eliza already on the phone, likely with the department to get a squad car here.

“Y-Yeah.” I nod, but regret it instantly as my head begins to pound. “Shit.” I fall back on the bed as I move to grab the sides of my head, which doesn’t help in the least. Each time my eyes close, I have to force them open only to have spots dancing across my vision.

“Brinley!” Lexy’s shout causes my ears to ring. I twist, trying to bury my head in the unfamiliar and, frankly, scratchy bedding to get the pain to go away.

In an attempt to save myself from Cannon, I used every ounce of power my body possessed into both of those blows. Thankfully, my knee doesn’t hurt, and I’m glad I didn’t have to run now. I don’t know how far I actually would have made it.

My stomach twists and churns with the movement. I’m lost in the pain of it all until I’m scooped up and nestled into a strong chest. I don’t need to force my eyes open to see it’s Adrian who has me. I just need his scent and my body’s natural reaction to him to know. His heart is beating wildly much like mine was when Cannon pinned me to the bed.

His lips press gently to my forehead, more of a ghost of a touch than an actual kiss. “I’ve got you now,” he addresses me softly before directing his next statement to I’m assuming Eliza. “Tell them we need an ambulance as well.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Adrian

A mild concussion.

That's all Brinley had to deal with, and once a full examination was over and done with, she was released from the ER to go home with me.

Never have I been more grateful for my group of friends and the connections they have in the community. Even with all the changes coming to Morris Valley, the heart of it really does stay the same. That includes the emergency response people along with the staff of the ER.

I wasn't sure I was going to be allowed to go back into the room she was wheeled into after the ambulance ride. Whatever sway Mina had over the ER staff, she got them to allow me to be by her side. Apparently, boyfriend wasn't enough, but after she strong-armed them, I was there by her side but out of the way whenever someone came in.

Not sure why it had to take most of the night to realize she had a mild concussion and would otherwise be fine since there was no one else I could hear in the entire part of this building. Now having her lying across the bench seat of my truck, head balanced against my thigh I'm doing my best not to move and thankful it isn't the one I need to shift, I'm taking her back out to the ranch.

Clover promised to get in touch with Brinley's parents. Chances are, they'll be on the next flight they can catch to come up here and take their daughter away since I failed to protect her.

That's likely why I snapped when I saw the asshole on the ground. It didn't matter Brinley had dropped him already. I needed to make up for where I let her slip through my fingers and out the door with the bastard.

Along with the whole part of the plan the girls kept from me, I learned that Landen was on duty as well. Explains why he didn't have even a single beer. He made the arrest as I was making my way out of the hotel room with Brinley in my arms.

How is she resting, maybe even asleep next to me when I couldn't get to her in time? To be distracted by getting rid of Felicity when I should have been watching Brin's every move.

Guilt has consumed me by the time I'm pulling up in front of the house. Brinley doesn't move as I put the truck into neutral and the parking brake. Gingerly, I move out from under her and still, as I come around to pull her out and have her in my arms once more, she doesn't stir.

I'm still careful as I place a kiss to the top of her head and am thankful when I see Dad standing in the doorway, coffee cup in hand, as if he's about to head out to get work done for the day.

"Where the hell have you been? It's not like you to be out all night."

"Shh." I hush him and dart my eyes down to Brinley moving in my arms to cuddle deeper into my chest. I likely stink and look like the dead, but that doesn't matter right now. I don't give him an explanation as I head into the house and back to my room where I place her gently in my bed. Even

though it's hot as fuck both outside *and* inside the house, I pull a blanket over her.

Running a hand over her head, I give her one last lingering look before I back out of the room, leaving the door open so she doesn't freak.

I don't find day anywhere in the house when I come back out and decide it'll be better to fill him in with everything away from Brinley so she's not disrupted.

I don't want to leave her side, but Dad needs to know.

He's just heading into the barn when I come out the front. By the time I reach the barn, he's coming back out with a saddle from the tack room.

"What happened?" He's gruff, likely from stewing all morning wondering where I was.

Just another reason he needs to cave and let us hire someone.

"Her stalker showed up, took her, and we got to her just as she gave herself a mild concussion by headbutting the bastard." Even now, my temper wants to resurface.

He's locked up. Away from Brinley once and for all.

"Cannon Jones," I state, causing Dad's frown to deepen.

"Ain't he another gold medalist?" He doesn't continue to stand still but starts to head out to where he has a horse waiting.

"Yes. We don't have many answers. The last I checked, aside from Brinley's attack, I beat the shit out of

him.” Taking my hat off for the millionth time, I run a hand over my greasy hair. “Landen hauled him away.”

“Good.” He sniffs.

“Not good enough. I should have prevented him from ever taking her. I should have ... done ... something more.” Ashamed, I look away. He must think less of me now. He raised me to look out for others, and I failed that.

“It was good enough.” A soft, twangy, music-to-my-ears voice comes at my back. Whipping around, I nearly fall on my ass. Not from finding Brinley wrapped in the blanket leaning against the barn door but from how fast I moved.

“You should be in bed.”

“You showed up, Adrian. That’s what matters the most to me.” Slowly, she makes her way over to Dad and me. “I knew the risk when the girls and I made this plan and knowing that you were there within minutes of me waking up has my heart swelling so much.” She reaches me, head not dropping against my chest but gently coming down as she fists my shirt. “Don’t be so harsh on yourself. Nothing happened to me that I didn’t do to myself. You aren’t the failure you think you are.”

I have no clue if Dad is still right here with us. I’m too absorbed in Brinley to care.

She pulls back, those enchanting eyes no less dull from her ordeal than when she got the message after our failed blind date. “If I’m going to stay here, you need to forgive yourself, got it?”

Dad chuckles somewhere behind me.

Cupping her face, I bring mine down. My lips dust across her lips as I speak. “I can do that if you promise never to put yourself in that kind of situation again.”

“I can do that,” she breathes.

As much as I want to kiss her, there’s something else I want to say and fuck it if it’s too soon.

“Brinley?”

“Yes?” Lashes flutter up at me.

“I love you.”

The softest, sweetest smile takes over her face as she wraps her arms around me, letting the blanket fall to the dirt floor. “I love you, too, Adrian.”

Epilogue

Brinley

Shots ring out, pops coming one after another that I can't even hear the distinct sound of each bullet hitting the board on the other side of the room.

One by one, each of the people who are here for my conceal carry certification class stands upright and begins the process of making sure their pistols have their safety on before turning to me.

“Great job, everyone.” Clapping, I walk over until I'm front and center of them to wrap the class up. To my left, Summer pushes the button to bring the targets over to us.

Once a month since the building was finished, I've held a conceal carry class out here at the rifle range in Morris Valley. My sponsor ended up playing a huge part of building it as well as this and the other classes I offer. So much so, I haven't had to do much traveling in the six months I've officially started calling the Cook Ranch home.

After the whole Cannon stalker incident, Adrian wasn't willing to let me live in town. He wanted me where he knew I would always be safe.

“A restraining order is just a piece of paper,” he had stated when we argued about me moving in with Clover.

My friends found it hilarious. For the first couple of months, Adrian had me helping him with his chores so he could come here with me. Now, he's loosened the worry a

little, and I'm out here more with Summer than with anyone else.

Each of my friends—at least the ones who weren't already certified to carry—have gone through my class and told me I was a natural at it. They aren't the only ones to tell me that either. Everyone who has come through my class finds it enjoyable as well as educational.

My class begins to pack up while I tell them they need to have the paperwork back to me before they leave in order to get certified. By the time class is over, I can't help but pull out my own gun and fire off a few rounds. My sponsor has asked if I plan on going to the next Olympics, which I politely turned down, but it doesn't mean I can't keep in top form when I shoot.

The massive building is quiet as I shoot. Even the archery range across the hall has no thumps of arrows hitting the various blue face or 3D targets we have set up. So when the steel door just outside this room slams, I'm a little jumpy that someone has arrived.

Or it could be Summer coming back in to complain about the cold.

She hasn't gotten used to the cold like I have.

When I turn, a smile quickly takes over my worry when I see Adrian striding in. There's a slight limp to his walk, likely from riding all day, but damn, I think it's pretty sexy, especially when he removes his heavy *Carhartt* coat to reveal the sleeves of his thick flannel rolled up.

What about his forearms is such a turn-on?

Hopping up onto the shooting bench, I swing my legs back and forth only a couple of times before his big hands take possession of them.

“What brings you here, cowboy?” His hat gets tilted up as I rope my arms around his neck.

“I’ve come to collect my woman.” His voice rumbles, but he isn’t closing the distance between us. “Haven’t seen her around, have you?”

“Maybe,” I drawl. “I’ve heard she’s crazy possessive of you, so maybe I should let go of you before she shoots me in the ass.”

His smile is stunning. I’ve thought that since the first time I saw it. It’s framed with whiskers, making it look darker than he means it to be. “I’m sure she’d leave your fine, firm ass alone.” Humming, he finally comes to me, cupping said ass and devouring me. I love gentle Adrian, possessive Adrian, but right now, I’m glad I have carnal Adrian.

“Hmm.” I’m moaning with the invasion of his tongue into my mouth. But all too soon, it morphs into a protest when he breaks away. “Hey, I wasn’t done with that.” Try as I may to pull him back to me, he puts more distance between us, and that’s when I notice the revolver in the holster on his hip. “So you came to shoot?”

“Yep. Along with a wager.”

“Oh, yeah?” Quickly, my focus shifts, and I’m jumping down to get us a couple of new targets. I’m not watching him get in position next to me. “What’s your wager?”

“You win, Dad and I agreed to let you do whatever you want with the house, and that includes bringing it into the twenty-first century. Repairs, decorating, the works ...”

“And if you win?” My own revolver is ready.

“That’s a surprise,” he teases.

“Shame then, since you’re just goin’ to lose,” I tease back.

“We’ll see. I have a trick or two up my sleeve.” He winks before I turn my focus to the targets. “Ladies first.”

With a roll of my eyes, I have at him. “Please, this is your challenge.” He doesn’t need to be told twice. Adrian may be a gentleman from time to time, but it’s clear he wants something now. He fires off all his rounds, and I’m impressed but not surprised with his grouping.

“Your turn, my dear.”

Not giving him another glance, I get into position to fire my first round when I feel his hands on my waist.

“You know, you’re the sexiest damn woman I’ve ever seen?” he whispers. I have to block him out. My shot hits the target but it’s nowhere close to the center.

“Adrian,” I snap, but he doesn’t stop.

“You’ve got this, gorgeous.” His lips dust against my ear. I try to focus, but the second and third shots are just as bad. The fourth is better until he speaks again. “I love you so damn much, Brinley. I can’t imagine another woman more perfect for me than you.”

My last two shots are shit, even with the final one when I don't feel him wrapping around me anymore. He purposely sabotaged me. I spin around, and my fists connect with my hips when I glare and then freeze.

Adrian isn't standing. He's down on one knee and holding up not a box but a simple ring. "I need you to breathe, Brinley. When I think of my life, I can't imagine it without you there. I may have messed your shots up, but if you agree to marry me, you'll get the run of the house anyway. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Six months. That's all it took to truly fall in love with this man right before me. I can't see a future without him holding my hand and walking with me. My smile splits my face when I answer him. "Yes."

Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for taking a chance at this brand new series. It was inspired by a manga/anime series, and if you're a fan, try to figure out which one. I won't say because I don't want any backlash.

There are many *many* more books to come in this series so I hope you're ready for this wild ride!

Next up will be Lilly's story.

Love,

Brooke

Acknowledgements

Always and forever, first and foremost, I thank God for giving me this gift and the courage to put my stories out there into the world.

The warden and boys; thank you so much for making my life anything but easy. You three keep me on my toes, give me strange inspiration, and I would be lost without you.

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Tracie, thank you for being able to read my mind and put creating each of my covers just like I picture them in my mind, including the premade ones.

To every single blogger and fellow author out there, thank you for doing what you love. Thank you for inspiring me with your written words and for the bloggers who love to read and spread their love to everyone they can.

And, of course, to you the reader, thank you for finding my book and reading it. Thank you for taking a chance. Without you, none of this would be possible. Thank you for your support, your reviews, wonderful words, and your encouragement.

About the Author

Born and raised in Northern Wyoming. Brooke spent a great deal of her childhood and even well into her adulthood in her imagination and creating different stories. With an overactive imagination life has been truly entertaining.

A mother of two wild and reckless boys and a wife; Brooke keeps busy year-round doing things with her pups and family. When she isn't writing, can usually be spotted walking somewhere in town, at the library with her youngest, or up in the mountains four-wheeling, hiking, fishing, and some hunting. A notebook and camera are never far from her side when she is out on her adventures with her family.

She loves hearing from readers and anyone who feels like talking. Feel free to pay her a visit whenever.

Sign up for Brooke's mailing list for information on new releases at:

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For a chance a free swag any time feel free to send an email to bmay3129@gmail.com with your full name and mailing address (international okay). If you mention gave my book some love by writing a review I might include some extra presents.

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