

A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a muscular man wearing a cowboy hat and a white tank top. He is looking down, and his face is partially obscured by the hat. The lighting highlights his muscles, particularly his arms and chest. The background is dark.

STRAIGHT *to you*

It Took Coming Home To
Find Where I Belong

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STRAIGHT TO YOU

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Foreword

Please Note You Need to Read Broken Road before this book,
as this is the conclusion of Katie and Jake's story.

Dedication

To my readers:

When my home was destroyed in a flood, I came so close to giving up. Due to obligations I had to write books in a mere week that I wanted to spend months with. I was just about to give up. Then, I would get notes of encouragement and understanding.

That kept me from throwing in the towel.

For those of you that have stuck with me, my promise to you is that with the coming year I am going to do my damndest to make sure that my new books are filled with stories you will love and not me having to rush the characters to get the story. That begins with Jeff's story, and I'd love to see what you think after reading his sneak peek!

Xoxo

J

It Took Coming Home To Find Where I Belong

I was filled with anger when I came back to Macon, Texas.

I wanted nothing more than my son and to make those that betrayed me pay.

I ended up pushing vengeance aside.

I needed to concentrate on my kid. He was priority number one.

Being close to Katie again was like lightning in a bottle.

Old memories, emotions, and feelings came storming back.

I want my family—the family that should have been mine all along—back.

I'm on the verge of getting it all.

Then, my brother shows up again.

If he thinks he can take what's mine—he's wrong.

I'm back, and I've learned from past mistakes.

This time, I'm not stepping aside.

CHAPTER 1

Katie

It can't be good for your body to go from the ultimate high to a horrifying reality within the blink of an eye. Yet, when I see Jeff standing at the door, his face cold and filled with hate, that's exactly what happens. The change is so sudden that my knees go weak.

"Shit," Jake hisses, coming over to pick me up as my knees buckle under my weight. He carries me over to the couch, and I sit—all without taking my eyes off Jeff. He looks like a caged lion, the anger inside of him is that palpable. In all my years with him, I was never afraid to leave Lennon alone with him, but now, my instinct is to get my son away from the hostility shining on his face.

"Jeff! You came back! I knew you would!" my son yells, unaware of all the angry undercurrents in the air.

He runs into Jeff's arms, and Jake lets out an inhuman sound that should terrify me, but instead, I just hear his pain—pain I am responsible for. I guess it's never too late to be punished for your sins.

"Yeah, little man, I'm back," Jeff answers, his voice gruff.

The anger may be thick and written on his face, but he's at least gentle as he returns Lennon's hug. Jake, on the other hand, is not handling his rage at all. It's slowly sucking all the air out of the room. On instinct, I reach over and wrap my hand in his. There's every chance in the world that he will knock my hand away, stomp out, and disappear. He could even tell me to fuck off. I'm worried, but I fight through it. I squeeze his hand. He looks down at me. Anger may be

vibrating from him, but it's anguish that is telegraphed on his face.

"So?" Jeff prompts. "Are congratulations in order?"

"Now's not the time, Jeff," Jake responds, his voice a rumbled mixture of anger and frustration.

"I think it's the perfect time. Besides," he adds with a shrug, "it's a simple question. Are you marrying my fiancée?"

"Hey, Lennon? Can you go with Grandma into her room and help her find a pretty outfit for our celebration?" I ask, all too aware that the interaction and tension in the room is confusing my son—even if he's clueless as to what's going on.

"But, Mom," he whines.

"Please?"

"But Jeff's back, and I want to show him all the things he missed. He hasn't even seen my new dinosaur," Lennon insists.

"You can show him later, baby. I promise."

"You aren't leaving again—right, Jeff?"

"I'm not planning on it, Lenny. I have unfinished business here," he says, staring right at me.

"Okay," Lenny pouts as Mom uses her chair to go to him.

"Climb up on my lap, baby," Mom says.

"I don't see why I have to leave," he mutters, but does as she asks.

"Sometimes, grownups have to talk about stuff they let build up too long," she says wisely.

"I don't want to be a grown up," he says. "They're dumb."

"They definitely can be," Mom murmurs, sparing me a look. She doesn't tell me, but I can see the message in her eyes, pleading with me not to be stupid.

It might be too late for that.

The door to Mom's bedroom barely closes when Jake growls, sounding like a wounded animal. "You've got a lot of nerve showing up here."

"That's rich coming from you. Did you forget you exited out of Katie and Lennon's life years ago?" Jeff snaps.

I know I need to intercede before this gets out of hand, but right now, I'm not sure what to say—probably because I don't know what I'm feeling.

"Typical of you to point out how other people fuck up. You're not saying one word about what you did, are you, Jeff?"

"I did what I had to do to protect the woman I loved. The woman I've always loved."

"You lied."

"And you didn't? I just wonder what lies you've told Katie since I've been gone. I mean, we both know how you operate, Jake."

"You bastard," Jake snarls, lunging at Jeff.

"Stop it! Stop!" I yell when they start throwing punches.

They ignore me and keep fighting, each landing his fair share of blows. My body is still shaking, although I don't think it has anything to do with the struggle it was to use a walker. It has more to do with what's going on right in front of me—with my son in the next room.

I go to stand up, realizing the walker is still over where Jake carried me from. I lean on the armrest of the couch and force my weak legs to take my weight. I watch as Jake has Jeff down. He's hitting him continually, and I yell for him to stop again, desperate to end this.

"Jake! Stop it!" I cry, tears stinging my eyes. "Stop it!"

"Stop hurting, Jeff! He's back and he loves us! You're going to make him go away again!" Lennon yells, storming into the room. Jake freezes mid punch, and it would take someone completely blind not to see the look of pain on his face.

“Buddy—”

“I’m not your buddy. You hurt my Jeff. I hate you!” Lennon yells. Lennon dives down to the floor, hurling his body on to Jeff. Jeff holds him, blood trickling from his nose, his knuckles scraped from the hits he delivered. Jake holds his head down, and the pain comes off him in waves. I hate it. I caused all this by keeping secrets and hurting the men in front of me.

“Jake,” I whisper. He looks at me, his eyes overly bright.

“I can’t,” he chokes out. Without another word and only a longing glance at his son, Jake walks out of the room. I manage to remain standing until I hear the door slam shut. Then, I slink back down onto the cushions.

“Lennon, go to your room,” I demand. My son looks up at me, his heart in his eyes. Right now, the look on his face is so much like his father’s it hurts.

“I want to stay with Jeff.”

“You don’t talk to people the way you did to Jake—”

“He was hurting Jeff,” he huffs back.

“Sometimes, that happens with adults, even when it shouldn’t, but Jake has been too good to you for you to say those things to him. What have I always told you?”

“That we aren’t supposed to hate anyone,” he whispers as Jeff stands up and Lennon does the same, shifting to stand by Jeff’s side.

“Go to your room. I’ll tuck you in after Jeff and I talk.”

“But, Mom—”

“Go, Lennon.”

“You better go, Lenny. I’ll be around again, I promise. I’m not going anywhere.”

“This is stupid,” Lennon pouts, stomping out after giving me a mean look.

Jeff looks at me, rubbing his rapidly bruising jaw. My gaze moves up to my mother.

“I’ll just let you two talk. If you need me...”

“Thanks, Mom.”

She leaves, and suddenly I’m alone with the man I thought I was going to marry and spend the rest of my life with not so long ago. That seems like a lifetime ago. He’s like a stranger to me and I don’t even know what to say to him...

CHAPTER 2

Katie

“What gives you the right to waltz in here after giving me nothing but silence? You hurt not only me but my son, Jeff, and now, you just show up like you have authority to question what I’m doing?”

“The right? How about the fact that my fucking brother waltzed in and ruined our chance for happiness once again? Jesus, I come home to find you all just happy as can be, Katie. Did I mean so fucking little to you?”

The man in front of me is not the Jeff I’ve always known. This Jeff is emotional. He’s angry in a way I’ve never seen. I can’t say it is directed at me, but it is jarring to see this side of him after years of thinking I knew everything about him.

“Did you tell Jake about Lennon four years ago, Jeff?” I whisper.

The question hurts. It burns in the pit of my stomach. This man has stood by me through so much. The trust I have in him is akin to the belief I have in my grandmother. That’s how deep it goes. The mere thought that after all this time I’m wrong about Jeff scares me. *It terrifies me.*

“What?” he asks, looking like I slapped him.

“Jake said he never knew about Lennon until you and I were getting married. That can’t be true, can it, Jeff? You promised me you told him all those years ago when you wouldn’t let me be the one. You wanted to handle it. You said you understood that I wasn’t ready to move forward, that I still

had to deal with the past. I know I was weak, and I let you, but you *did* tell him, didn't you?"

"Katie—"

That burning sensation inside me rises into my chest, growing in intensity.

"Answer me, Jeff." My heart squeezes in my chest. I don't know how I feel. I'm so confused. I need Jeff to tell me he did it and Jake is lying. Yet, at the same time, I'm hoping that Jake is telling me the truth.

"Wow," he whispers. "You said you loved me, Katie. Is that love so easily forgotten?"

"That's rich coming from a man who ran away and didn't even check on me when I almost died."

"Maybe Jake didn't tell me you were sick. You ever think of that?"

"Jake didn't want to tell you," I admit.

"I bet he didn't," he laughs, but there's no humor in the sound. Then again, there's nothing funny about any of this.

"But Barb called you, and I *know* she did."

"I didn't get the message until two days ago."

"Yeah, right. You live with your phone, Jeff."

"I haven't for a while. After the mess at the wedding, I just needed a break from everything. I've been driving and figuring out what I wanted."

"Yeah," I'm not sure what else to say.

"Yeah?" he repeats. "What does that mean?"

"It's just that you've laid all this at my feet, Jeff, but what about you? You wanted to marry me, but you disappeared without a word. You wouldn't accept calls. You cut me out of your life. Now, you show up like you're the wronged party, but that's not exactly true, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

“I mean, I finally believe a Ryan brother completely—at least about one thing.”

“And what would that be, Katie?”

“You didn’t tell Jake. You lied to me knowing I would trust you implicitly, and you didn’t tell Jake anything. You let me believe that Jake knew all this time and just didn’t care. You cheated my son out of years with his father. You knew how guilty I felt, how I couldn’t move on until the slate was clean, and yet, you made it worse.”

The words are thick on my tongue, weighted down and full of pain. Betrayal burns bitterly in my gut. The one man I would have sworn would never lie to me—never willingly betray me—did so much more than that. *He betrayed my son.*

I’m not blameless. I know that. I should have told Jake from the beginning. *I should have handled everything differently...*

“Fuck, Katie. What do you want from me? I fell in love with you the minute I first laid eyes on you, and you never knew I was alive.”

“Jeff—”

“Day after fucking day, I had to watch you kissing my brother, worshipping every damn thing he did. You barely gave me the time of day.”

“Jeff...”

“You won’t believe me, but I had every intention to tell my brother he was Lennon’s father. I went to him to let him know everything.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“When I got there, he was drunk off his ass with some woman in his bed, and he didn’t even know her name,” Jeff growls, rubbing the back of his head and mussing his hair. His words hurt. I struggle to keep the pain hidden. Jake and I weren’t together. It shouldn’t bother me, but I’ve always loved him, so it *does* bother me. “I stood there looking at the brother I barely recognized, and I just knew.”

“Knew what?”

“I knew he didn’t want Lennon. You knew it, too. That’s why you didn’t tell him in the first place. I looked at him, hung over, having spent the night with some woman he didn’t even know, and I realized I had to protect you and Lennon.”

“That wasn’t your decision to make.”

“Damn it, Katie. I saw the writing on the wall. Once more, my damn brother was going to waltz in and wreck your life, leaving you broken. I couldn’t let that happen again. I loved you too much then to let it happen, and I would do it all the same again because I still love you enough to want to keep you safe from my brother’s bullshit. I’m not going to apologize for that.”

“That’s not how love works, Jeff. You can’t shield me from life and take away my right to make my own choices.”

“Bullshit. You protect Lennon from pain and bust your ass to make sure he just tastes the good in life.”

“Lennon is my child, Jeff. I’m an adult, and I don’t want someone making decisions that I need to be the one to make.”

“C’mon, Katie. You could barely mention Jake’s name without the pain bubbling up inside of you. You know it and I know it. That’s the only reason you were okay with me telling him in the first place. Do you really think you could have walked in on what I did and told my brother about Lennon? Do you think you could have survived finding Jake like that at all?”

His questions burn deep enough that I can picture images in my mind that I don’t want to see. Tears sting my eyes and I do my best to hold them back.

“I guess we’ll never know because you never gave me a chance, Jeff.”

I look down at my hands, twisting them together and wondering where I go from here. As I look up at the man who I was once prepared to marry, all I know is that, right now, I just want him to leave...

Jake

I yank my shirt off and wrap my hand up in it, ignoring the splinters and mostly drying up the blood. Punching holes into the old barn might not be the best way for me to deal with my anger, yet it's what I have. I would rather be hitting my brother. That option isn't available right now. I want to scream at Katie that my son should know who I am. It's me my son should be yelling to stay with. I feel cheated, betrayed, and stupid. Christ, I feel so fucking stupid.

How did I not know that Lennon was mine all these years?

Immediately, I correct myself. I've always wondered. I saw the writing on the wall. I didn't confront Katie because I was afraid of the answer. Fuck, a part of me was relieved to think Jeff was Lennon's father.

I wasn't ready to have kids. I wasn't ready to be the man that Katie needed. I believe I am now, but even knowing I want Katie and Lennon in my life, I'm still worried that I'll fuck all this up. I've never been a husband or a father. I sure as hell didn't have a man in my life to learn from.

I'm pretty fucking sure being out here beating up the barn and leaving Katie alone with my brother is not the way that I needed to react now. I have to man up. If the opportunity arises to knock my brother on his ass, then I will enjoy it to the fucking moon. I open the door of the barn to go outside and the first thing I see is my brother's truck speeding down the drive, leaving a trail of dust. I walk slowly back to the house. Fuck, I have no idea if Katie even wants me here. I'm positive my son doesn't. I just don't know what to do about any of it. I

need to go in and get clothes for tomorrow. If I don't stay and even if Katie kicks me out, I need to get her to agree to have Callie come over. I rub the back of my neck and walk along the pathway to the house. As I step through the front door and close it behind me, I'm not sure what to expect. When I turn the corner, I find Katie on the sofa, Lennon in her arms. It's a sight that has come to mean the world to me, but tonight, realizing that Lennon is crying... it's anything but.

"What happened to your hand?" Katie asks, worry written on her face, but there's something else there, too—something that wasn't there before Jeff came. I don't know how to define it. I just know I don't like seeing it.

I shrug, clearing my throat. Lennon looks at me and the anger and hate written on my son's face is something I will never forget for as long as I live.

"I lost a fight with the barn wall. I'm going to go clean up and leave you two alone," I mutter, feeling out of place. It's hard to believe that until an hour or so ago I was starting to feel as if this place was my home—as if Katie and Lennon were my future. Now, fuck if I know what is going to happen next.

"Do you need help?" Katie asks, as I drag my gaze away from Lennon.

"No, it's fine. I can deal with it. I was thinking I should call Callie and see if she can stay here tonight."

"I...you're leaving?" Katie says. Maybe it's my imagination, but I'm almost positive I hear hurt in her voice. *Does she want me to stay?*

"I thought you would prefer it," I answer, internally willing her to tell me she wouldn't. She's silent and just stares at me. "Am I wrong, Katie?"

"If you want to leave, Jake, you can."

"What do *you* want, Katie?"

"I..." I hold my breath as I wait for her reply. "It's getting too late to call Callie," she finally says.

We both know it's not. It's not even dinner time. This is where I start breathing again—or at least it feels like I do.

“Do you still want to go out?” I murmur.

“Maybe another night,” she answers.

“Lennon? Would you like to help me fix supper? I could use a helper in the kitchen.”

“I don't feel good,” he mumbles. “I'm gonna go to my room.”

He moves off his mother's lap and jogs toward the hall. My heart squeezes in my chest, my hopes plummeting.

“Lennon, get back in here—”

“Let it go, Katie. It's been a rough evening for him.”

“For all of us,” she adds, and I nod.

“You sure you want me here?” I ask the question that I desperately need answered—regardless if it's what I want to hear or not.

“I'm not going to lie. My head is a mess right now,” she confesses.

“I can—”

“But I don't want you to leave, Jake.”

“Then, I'll stay.”

“Just like that?” she asks.

“Just like that,” I confirm. She stares at me, the moment stretching between us. She gives me a weak smile, and I take it, feeling a little bit of hope. Lennon might hate me, but at least, Katie hasn't retreated away from me. It's a small victory, and right now, I'll take any I can get.

CHAPTER 4

Katie

I sigh, fluffing my pillow before lying gently back on it. “I’ve just been thinking.”

“That’s a dangerous thing sometimes.”

“It can be,” I admit and force myself to look at him. He’s standing over my bed after helping me lie down. “Aren’t you sleeping here tonight?” I find myself asking because he’s making no move to get into bed. In fact, he’s still wearing his jeans and not his jogging pants or the gym shorts he wears at night because of Lennon.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me to,” he says, his gaze appraising me.

“I know you’re mad, Jake.”

“You do?” he asks, sounding surprised.

“Yeah, if I had let you talk to Lennon, he wouldn’t be upset with you right now and giving you the cold shoulder.” God, that’s the understatement of the year. Throughout dinner, Lennon wouldn’t even look at Jake. He asked to be excused early and whenever Jake tried to talk to him, he was greeted with silence. I tried to get after Lennon, but Jake stopped me. Then, Lennon ran to his room. It was a tense night to say the least. Even my mother was silent.

Jake sits down on the edge of the bed. His fingers tangle into my hair. I close my eyes, relishing the sensation of pleasure that spreads through me with his touch. It’s a feeling that I will never get used to—I just hope I get the chance to have more of it.

“I want Lennon to know I’m his father, Katie.”

“I know, honey, and we will do that together.”

“When?”

“Can we give it a day or two just until Lennon’s emotions settle?”

“So, in two days?”

I swallow nervously. I knew this moment was coming, and I understand Jake wanting a deadline. That doesn’t make it any easier. There’s a part of me worried Lennon will be upset with me—maybe even hate me—for keeping his father a secret. He’s young, but he’s not so young that he won’t resent me for keeping quiet. God, I don’t know how everything became so complicated.

“What if we tell him this weekend? We can ask your mother to take Mom to bingo. Barb likes to go, too. Then, it will just be the three of us here and we can try and tackle it together.”

“Saturday night,” he says, and I can tell he’s not happy with the wait, but he nods an agreement. I feel a little of the heavy emotion in the room lift and I’m grateful.

“Saturday night,” I agree.

“You’re not going to put it off, right? I’m sick of this secret causing problems.”

“I promise.”

“I can wait that long, I guess.”

“Jake?”

“Yeah?”

“I owe you an apology. No, that’s not right. I owe you more than one. I’ve handled things so badly.”

“Katie—”

“I should have told you about Lennon from the beginning. I was hurt and scared. It turned me into a coward.”

“Katie, we were young. We both made mistakes. I wrote that letter because you kept dropping hints about growing old together and starting a family. It sucks, but I panicked. You wouldn’t even consider going on the road with me and I couldn’t see past my dreams dying.”

“I should have told you about the pregnancy instead of trying to drop hints,” I whisper.

“Sunshine, it sucks, but I still would have left.”

“I know,” I admit. Jake will never know how painful those two words are to give breath to. “I’ve always known, and I let that color my actions, but...”

“But?”

“You would have tried to be in Lennon’s life. It might not have been the version of a father that I wanted for my son, but you would have been there.”

“You sound so positive of that.”

“I am and that’s why I want to apologize to you.”

“I’m not following, baby,” he says, looking down at me. I reach up and soothe out the worry lines around his eyes. His warm skin makes my skin tingle.

“When Jeff and I were talking, I could just see it...”

“See what?”

“I could see that you were telling the truth. Jeff didn’t tell you about Lennon four years ago. When I pressed him, he admitted it.”

“Are you saying I owe my brother for telling you the truth?” he snorts—the sound full of disgust. His head goes down as he picks at an invisible piece of lint on his jeans. It’s then that I see his knuckles are scratched, bruised, and covered in cuts. I’ve been in a trance and never noticed how bad they were through dinner. I was too much in my head and trying to stop my son from lashing out at his father. I wince, immediately remembering what Jake said about the wall of the barn.

“I should have believed you immediately. It’s just...” I trail off as I carefully sit up, ignoring the pain. I reach for his hand, spreading it out against my upper thigh.

“It’s just Jeff has never let you down and we both know I have,” he supplies, and I tear my gaze away from his hand to look at him.

“Maybe it’s safe to say we let one another down, but that’s the past.”

“Is it?”

“It is,” I respond, feeling heat rise in my face. “Jake, you’ve destroyed your poor hand.”

“I’ve had worse than that just trying to hold onto a bull for eight seconds. Katie, if it’s in the past, then what do you see for our future?”

“Maybe we should just concentrate on the present,” I suggest, sparing a glance at him before hastily looking away.

“Okay, so how about you actually look at me when we’re talking. You’ve never been one to shy away from letting me have it, Sunshine. I don’t want you to start now.”

I force myself to look at Jake. I know why I’m feeling uneasy around him right now. I don’t want to explain it, though. I’m afraid to and that makes me almost *shy*.

“It has just been an emotional night. Hearing Jeff admit that he lied hit me hard, Jake.”

“And that’s all?” he asks, and I smile. It has been so long, but apparently, he can still sense when I’m holding back.

I sigh, dropping my gaze once again. “Let’s just say he told me more than I wanted to know about the day he came to you with the intention of telling you about Lennon.”

“Motherfucker. I’m going to kill him,” Jake hisses.

I cup my hand over his and squeeze it gently. “It’s okay. It had been years since we were together, Jake. It’s not like you were cheating on me.”

“Baby, it was also just two days after Mom told me that Jeff was going to ask you to marry him. I knew it was coming, but it still hurt. I went on a two-day bender...”

“Stop, Jake. You don’t owe me an explanation. It’s part of the past, remember?” I ask, putting my fingers against his lips to get him to hush. “I know where I am, Jake. I also know that without you here since my accident, I’d be lost.”

“Katie—”

“What I don’t know is why you’re doing it. What is it you want, Jake? Is it a relationship with Lennon? Because everything you’ve been doing with me is not really necessary. I don’t want you to feel like—”

I can’t finish what I was going to say because his lips are on mine. He sucks on my lip, dragging it into his mouth, teasing it, sliding his tongue against the tender flesh, before claiming my mouth and deepening the kiss. It’s a different type of Jake kiss. There’s passion in it. I can feel it bubbling near the surface. That’s not the driving force, though. This kiss is one of leisure. It’s giving, gentle, and full of promise. It feels so good that tears sting my eyes. My tongue slides against his, wanting to deepen the connection. Jake pulls back and traps my face by placing a hand on each side and holding me in place—refusing to let me turn away.

“I’ve been telling you this from day one, but I get why you’re afraid to believe in me. I need you to listen to me now, though.”

“Okay...”

“I’m going to have a relationship with my son, and no one will stop that, but the reason I’m here is because I want to be. I want you in my life. I’ve been grieving from the moment I left Macon. I wanted you with me. I didn’t break up with you because I didn’t love you, Katie. I’ve always loved you. I just wasn’t ready to settle down on a farm and have kids. I always wanted you, though, baby.”

“Jake—”

“Through all the trophies and the money, I had an emptiness inside of me, Katie. *I need you.* I’m here for you, Sunshine. I’m here fighting for you.”

“Then why do you have your jeans on and aren’t making a move to get in the bed with me?”

“Do you want me in your bed?”

“Well, I realize I’m not much fun...”

“Katie—”

“But I love having your arms around me when I close my eyes.”

He smiles. “You’re sure that’s what you want? I mean, Jeff’s back and I know there are feelings there.”

“There are feelings here, too. I don’t know about the future, but this is the present. I want you in my present, Jake.”

I can tell my answer doesn’t make him happy. It doesn’t exactly fill me with joy, either. Still, it’s all I dare say right now. I’m scared to let my walls down with Jake. Maybe I’m afraid of the past repeating itself. I don’t know. I just know I need time to sort through the muddled mess that my brain has become.

I’m just grateful that Jake seems to be willing to give that to me.

CHAPTER 5

Jake

“Hey, little man, you feel like stirring the pancakes this morning?” I ask, looking at my son.

Yesterday was an emotional day and the pain on his face? *I hate it.*

“I’m going to eat at school,” he says, not bothering to look me in the eye.

“Son—”

“I’m not your son! I don’t want you here,” he yells and runs from the room.

I drop my head down and feel tears stinging my eyes. “Fuck,” I hiss.

“It’s going to be okay.”

I look up to find Katie’s grandmother staring at me. I don’t bother to hide my tears. I feel like my heart is being clawed out of my chest.

“It sure doesn’t feel like it, Miss Hazel.”

“He’s just hurting, Jake. That’s all. It makes them lash out.”

A tear escapes and I wipe it away, shaking my head. “I know that. I know I’m the logical choice Lennon sees as the enemy. I want to take him in my arms and tell him the truth, but right now, I’m not sure that would help. I’m pretty sure it would just make things worse.”

“Give him a day or so to process what happened. He loves both you and Jeff. It’s just...”

“He loves Jeff more,” I mumble, not bothering to correct her that Lennon hates me. She thinks he’s over emotional and he is—but there’s more to it than that. He blames me for Jeff being gone. I see it in his face.

“My baby loves everyone. It’s just he knows Jeff more than he does you.”

“I—”

She holds up her hand to cut me off and I snap my mouth shut like a good southern boy. Besides, when Miss Hazel wants the floor, it’s always wise to give it to her.

“Do you want a life with my girl, Jake Ryan?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then I’m going to give you advice that I gave my daughter this morning before I came in here.”

“What’s that?”

“The past is dead and gone. You can’t relive it. You can’t change the choices that you made. You only have the here and now, and hopefully, what you do now will make the future better.”

“It’s hard to put the past behind me when it keeps coming back to bite me in the ass, Miss Hazel.”

“You weren’t the only one who made decisions you regret, Jake. Everyone involved here has—”

“But—”

“*That* includes your brother, baby.”

Hardly anyone calls me baby. To be honest, only three women have—Katie, Mom, and Miss Hazel. All three women are people I love and adore. When they speak you listen, but right now I just can’t.

“All due respect, I know where you’re going with this, and I just can’t get there. I’m not going to get over Jeff not telling

me I had a son. It's not only that but he also went a step further and let me believe Lennon was his. He robbed me of years with my son—years in which *he* was the one forging a bond with my child. I'm not going to be able to forget that, Miss Hazel—not even for you.”

“I'm not asking you to do it for me,” she murmurs.

“I'm afraid I'm not understanding then.”

“Your son loves your brother. He's helped Katie and held her up when she couldn't keep going. She may not be in love with him, but she loves him. You want to claim your family, then you need to do it without causing more pain because, heaven knows, there's been nothing but pain in the past. That's what is hurting your son. Be the bigger person here and heal your family, Jake. It may not be easy, but I know you have it in you. *I know it.*”

I watch her walk away. So much is running through my head. My eyes close. I think Katie's grandmother has too much faith in me. I can't find it in me to forgive my brother. It's just impossible. I lift my gaze up to the clock and frown. Lennon may want someone else to take him to school, but he's getting me. Maybe we can talk on the way to school—although, I have no idea how to connect with him.

Shit. I have no idea what I'm doing. I feel like I'm swimming against the current and I just might be drowning...

Katie

“Katie? Are you okay?”

I look up at Callie and frown. That’s the million-dollar question right there. Jake is at his mother’s with Lennon. Lennon only went because he thought Jeff would be there and he wanted to see Barb. I’m not sure how it went when he found out Jeff wasn’t there. He’s staying at a hotel in town. I know because he invited me out to dinner tonight to talk things over. Jake was pissed when I told him. He became irate because I thought it would be a good idea if I agreed to go. I even asked him to come along in hopes the three of us could sit down like the adults we’re supposed to be. In response, he left. Of course, he only did that after making it clear that tonight was supposed to be the night that we talked to our son. Jake felt I was just delaying everything yet again.

At this rate, I feel like nothing I do is going to be right. I called Callie and cried on her shoulder when she came over. Now that I’ve got it all out, I just feel dazed and exhausted.

“Sorry, I must have zoned out,” I finally respond, shaking off my thoughts.

“Katie, it’s going to be okay.” Callie reaches over and holds my hand, giving it a squeeze to show her support.

“I don’t see how. If I go to dinner with Jeff tonight, Jake will never forgive me. I need to talk to him, though. I need to talk to both of them. I don’t want any of this ripping Lennon apart. He loves both Jeff and Jake. Right now, Jake can’t see that because Lennon is lashing out at him, but I know my son. He’s hurting.”

“What did your grandmother tell you?”

“Mom? She muttered something about the past being the past and I needed to bury it. She said I needed to get my house in order, and I know she’s right. I’m just not sure how to do it.” I laugh, the sound full of stress even to my own ears.

“Well, I know what I do when I want Reed to calm down and listen...” she murmurs.

“Yeah, but Callie, have you seen me? I’m on a walker. It’s not like I’m able to do the horizontal mambo with Jake.”

She laughs. “You have hands and a mouth, girl. Don’t try to play me.”

“Yeah, but right now, he seems to hate me. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to get him in the mood when he’d rather growl and pout. Besides, we’re in a house with Mom and Lennon. It’s not so easy to have sexy time, you know?”

“Well, your mom went with Jake and Lennon so she could go to bingo with Barb later, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, call Barb and tell her you want to seduce her son and would appreciate it if your mom could stay there tonight.”

“But Mom’s medicine and stuff...”

“I can drop it off, along with clothes and anything else.”

“God, Callie, this is so embarrassing. I mean my mother and Jake’s will know I’m having a bootie call! Shit, kill me now.”

“You know they’ll both be cheering you on. They want you and Jake both happy. They always have. C’mon, Katie, you know I love Jeff. I didn’t make a secret of it, however, I knew you didn’t love him like you needed to. You would have had a good marriage because Jeff is a good guy. You love him, but even you have to be honest and admit that your feelings for him never touched your heart in the way the ones you have for Jake did. Marriage can be hard. You need to love your man completely to ignore the irritating things they do.”

“Reed does something you find irritating?” I laugh.

“Girl, that man is killing me. He is obsessed with basketball. Like, why? We’re in Texas. Football is king. Everyone knows that. He makes me watch game after game. I swear one of these nights, my brain is just going to shut down I’m so bored.”

I giggle. “Okay, fine. I’m going to see if I can seduce a man who may not even find me attractive anymore.”

“Do not tell me you just said that.”

“I’m serious. I know he once found me attractive but that’s been a while. Plus, Jake could always have any girl he wanted. Rodeo queens pant after him constantly. Then there’s me.”

“The woman he told Reed he never stopped loving.”

My heart squeezes in my chest with Callie’s words. “I’m scared,” I admit quietly. “Walkers and scars aren’t exactly runway material. Not to mention, a hand job isn’t exactly a wild eight second ride my cowboy is used to.”

“First of all, you are beautiful. Jake is not superficial, and that man loves you, Katie. He’s barely left your side since the accident. So, don’t even hand me that bullshit.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Second of all, if he only lasts eight seconds, kick him to the curb, woman.”

“Oh my God,” I laugh. “That isn’t what I meant, and you know it.”

“Katie, tell me you wouldn’t rather have just a kiss from Jake than a night of wild sex with someone else?”

“You mean, Jeff,” I respond with a sigh.

“I *mean* anyone, but if your mind went to Jeff, then you should truly know what your heart wants, right?”

“Jake,” I answer. I’ve known that since the conversation that I was having with my mom the day of the wreck. Those feelings have only grown stronger since Jake has been by my side all this time.

“Call Barb,” she instructs. “You’ll be surprised how much better both you and Jake will feel when you find common ground.”

“Are you really calling a make out session common ground?” I squeak out with a startled laugh.

“You’d be surprised how much better everything is when you connect on an intimate level.”

“I don’t remember intimate. Jeff and I... we were getting married, but we didn’t do *that* a lot. We just never seemed to have time....”

She gives me that look and hands me the phone. I don’t have to ask what she’s thinking. I know. If what we had together was natural and passionate, we would have found the time. If I’m honest, I had that thought myself more than once while Jeff and I were dating. Eventually, I just stopped questioning it because it became normal. I take the phone with a sigh. Then, I dial Barb. I hope to God I’m doing the right thing...

Jake

I was at Mom's mucking out the barn when Callie called upset because she couldn't get anyone on the phone. I knew it was a bad idea to leave Katie alone. She promised me she would be okay for a few hours. I can't believe I was stupid enough to let it happen. Honestly, I just needed a break. She's planning on going to dinner with my damned brother and I couldn't sit around and wait for him to show up. If I did, I'd probably go ballistic on them both when he got there. She said she would call Callie, but apparently, that didn't happen.

My mind is going in a million different directions, and I can't seem to figure anything out. It's hard for me to believe that in just a few short days since my brother arrived in town that my life feels like I'm surviving the fallout from a nuclear war. I haven't had to see Jeff yet, and that's a good thing. Mom says he's upset with her and staying at a hotel in town. I'm more than okay with that. I wish he'd go back to wherever he's been since the wedding was called off. Everyone keeps expecting me to forgive him—to be the bigger person. That is not me because, mostly, I just want to kill the asshole.

Visions of Katie on the floor in pain because she fell going to the bathroom or something assault me. If you had asked me last week, I would have thought I was ready to be the man she needed. Now, I just feel like an idiot.

“Katie!” I call out again as I move toward the bathroom, praying she hasn't broken a hip or her bad leg. Panic claws at me as I yell once more. “*Katie!*”

“In here,” she finally answers. I immediately shift direction and go to her bedroom. My heart is pounding as I open the door.

She’s sitting on the bed, wringing her hands together. Her hair is brushed out and down, the golden tresses are almost glowing from the sunlight filtering through the windows. She’s wearing a black silk robe that is loosely tied and creating a deep ‘V’ at her neck that allows me to see the valley between her breasts.

“If you think you’re going to look like that when my brother picks you up, you are out of your fucking mind, Katie.”

“I’m not waiting on your brother.”

“You’re not?” I question, suddenly confused.

“I was waiting on you,” she confesses, grabbing my full attention.

“I feel like I missed something here,” I finally say, taking off my hat and putting it on the dresser. I thrust my fingers through my hair. I’m so damn tired of this rollercoaster. I just want to rewind the clock and give Katie and I more time to connect. I’ve loved her my entire life, but still, we were just getting accustomed to one another again. We needed more time to get on solid ground.

“I told Jeff he could come by the house tomorrow,” she says.

“I’m going to go out and check on the horses,” I mutter, hate and bitterness burning in my gut. As I turn around to walk back out, her words stop me.

“I told him the three of us would meet and discuss how best to put the past behind us and do what we need to do to make things easier for Lennon.”

“Fuck that. I don’t want the past behind me, Katie. I want my brother fucking gone,” I growl.

“Jake—”

“Don’t start, Katie. You aren’t in my shoes. You don’t see what I do.”

She just stares at me. I hate yelling—*despise* coming at her with all this stuff because I know she’s dealing with a lot. Still, she won’t let it go and I’ve got too much bottled up inside of me to hold back.

“What do you see?” she asks, her voice soft.

“I look at my brother and I see a man who lied to my face while planning to take everything that should have been mine. Everything that...”

“Finish it, Jake. Admit you blame me for bringing your brother into this. Admit that you resent me.”

“Fuck, Katie, I don’t. It’s not you I blame. Hell, I don’t even blame him for loving you. I mean, look at you. You’re beautiful. You steal my fucking breath.”

“Jake—”

“It’s not just that, though. You are just as spectacular on the inside. You have a heart the size of Texas, giving love like most people breathe. It just comes naturally. I can’t be next to you without getting caught up in your pull. My brother saw that from day one. That’s why he couldn’t stay away. I knew it back then and it irritated the hell out of me. Still, you were mine, so I ignored it. I knew you would never go there with him. It was me you loved.”

“So, you are blaming me,” she answers.

“No, damn it!”

“Jake, you need to explain this to me. I know we’ve always had problems communicating, but we have to change that—if only for our son’s sake.”

“I blame me!” I snap. “I’m the one who couldn’t give you what you needed. I’m the one who hurt you so much that you didn’t feel safe in telling me about my child. I’m the reason you were alone and had to rely on my brother. It’s my fault that my own son hates me!”

“Lennon doesn’t hate you, Jake. He’s just confused and hurting.”

“That’s easy for you to say, babe, but I’ve seen the anger in him when he’s around me. Hell, I hear it in his voice when he talks to me, or gee, when he tells me he hates me.”

“Lennon doesn’t hate you. Honey, he’s a kid. They’re just over emotional.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been around kids. My son is a stranger to me.”

“That’s why we need to sit down with Jeff and present a united front.”

“I don’t want him around my family, Katie.”

“But he is your family, sweetheart. He’s your brother. You said you don’t blame him or me—”

“I don’t blame him for loving you, Katie. I most assuredly blame the asshole for lying to me. It’s because of him I lost four years with my son. *Four years*, Katie.”

“You lost seven years with your son, Jake. I was responsible for all of those if you want to get technical. Why would you want to have a relationship with me if you’re going to hold that much anger inside?”

“Because I forced you to do it. I didn’t force Jeff to keep the truth from me, Katie. I made it impossible for you to talk to me.”

“Jake?”

“I want to build a future with you. With you and Lennon. I want the family that we should have always had.”

Her words cause my heart to stutter in my chest.

“Katie...”

“I love you, Jake. I’ve never truly stopped loving you. You haven’t left my side. You tell me you want me—”

“Fuck,” I hiss, closing the distance between us.

I go down on my knees in front of her, reaching up to frame her face with my hands. “You love me...”

“You’ve always been it for me, Jake. I’m willing to do whatever I need to do to make it work this time.”

“Baby,” I breathe, leaning so that my forehead is against hers. I drink in her words, letting them simmer inside of me.

“I need you to help me. We’re all to blame here, Jake. Me, you, and Jeff. We’re all three to blame for the mess around us.”

I know she’s right. I understand what she’s getting at. She wants me to let go of the past and the rage that I have aimed at my brother. I would do anything for Katie. *I would*. This might prove impossible, though.

“I’m not sure I’m strong enough to give you this, Sunshine.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re the strongest man I know. You can do anything.”

“You sound so positive.”

“That’s because I am. You made me feel safe to admit I love you. You made me believe that together we can make this work. If I’m wrong and you don’t want me, Jake—”

“Katie, I love you. I’ve always loved you. That’s never been in question. I’m here because I’m not letting you go again. I keep telling you this.”

“Then tonight, let’s close out the outside world and just concentrate on me and you. Tomorrow, we can face your brother together—”

“Damn it, baby,” I groan, wanting to give her this but not sure I can.

“We can do it because I know that in your heart you want Lennon to be happy. You want him to look at his father when he’s older and learn that a good man puts his child’s happiness ahead of everything.”

“That’s not fair, Katie,” I respond with a sigh, closing my eyes. “You know I want to give you everything you ask for. It’s just—”

“Everything?”

“Always,” I admit with stark honesty.

“In that case, I have one more request.”

“God, you’re killing me, Katie.”

My gaze drops down to her hands, watching as she undoes the belt of her robe.

“I want you, Jake.”

My heart clinches in my chest. I never thought I’d hear those words from her again. I knew we were getting closer, but I won’t lie. Most of the time, I felt like I’d never break through Katie’s walls.

“I want you too, Sunshine,” I finally manage to say, bringing my lips to hers and kissing her gently. I place my hands over hers to stop her. If she reveals her body to me, I’m not sure I’ll be able to have the will not to take what she’s offering, and she’s not physically able to enjoy making love yet. I would end up causing her pain. That’s the last thing in the world I want. I pull back, licking my lips, and enjoying the sweet taste of her. “We can’t tonight. You still need to heal.”

“I know I’m not ready for everything *but...*”

“But?”

“It’s been a while, but I remember how much you used to love when I would—”

“I love everything you do, but honey, we got time. We can wait until we’re sure whatever we do together will be pleasurable for both of us.”

“That’s the thing, Jake. Pleasure is a mild word to use when it means you’re coming in my hand—”

“Fuck, baby,” I groan, thoughts of her hand wrapped around my cock make my balls instantly ache.

“Or my mouth,” she finishes, her face pink with embarrassment but her eyes full of need.

“If we do this, you have to promise to tell me if it hurts you and I’m talking the slightest pain.”

“Um...”

“I’m serious, Katie.”

Her hands pull away from mine. I watch as she slowly unties her belt again. The silk robe slides slowly from her shoulders and...*I’m lost.*

There’s no going back now.

CHAPTER 8

Katie

“I think it’s the best idea I’ve ever had. All I need from you is a little cooperation.”

“That’s it, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

I can feel my face heat from the look in his eyes. It spreads through my entire body and seems to settle between my legs. I want to give this man pleasure more than I could ever explain. That said, I’m dying to have him inside me again. I know that’s not possible right now, but it’s going to be hell to hold back from taking what I need.

“What do you want from me, baby?”

“Well, in an ideal world, I’d love to undress you myself, but my legs won’t let me stand that long. Soo...”

“You want me to undress?”

“Please?”

My cheeks are bright pink. I don’t have to have a mirror to know that. Still, Jake doesn’t make me feel silly. He leans down and kisses me. His lips slide down to my chin, my neck, and dip lower as his hands cup my breasts. It makes me feel beautiful. It’s tantalizing, filling me with so much pleasure that it’s also bringing torment.

Torment because I need more and know I can’t have it.

I put my hands over his. “I don’t want you to take this wrong, but you have to stop.”

“Changing your mind, Sunshine?” The regret in his voice wars with understanding.

This man is so hard that I can see the rigid outline of his cock pressing against his jeans. He needs relief—I know that because I feel the same. Still, he’s willing to call a halt to everything just by my say so.

“I want your touch, but I’m afraid I still can’t... What’s that saying? The mind is willing but the body not so much?”

I watch as his beautiful lips spread into a smile. “I’m not sure that’s the correct wording, but I get it. What are we talking here? You want me to just enjoy the pleasure you give me, and you get nothing? How is that fair, baby?”

“Love isn’t about being fair. Love is just given, Jake.”

“I’d rather wait until we both can—”

I shake my head, stopping him from saying anything else. “I need this. We were barely finding our way back to one another before Jeff showed up.” Immediately, Jake’s body tenses. Even the mere mention of his brother upsets him. I force myself to push through this, though. “I doubted you when I shouldn’t have. Whatever else our problems were in the past, we didn’t lie to one another.”

“No, our biggest problem was not talking at all,” he admits, his hand moving to my hair, his fingers massaging me.

“I need this because I want to prove to both of us that we’re on the same page here.”

“A blow job is going to do that?” he asks with a smirk, the twinkle back in his eyes.

“Well, no, but I’m horny and haven’t had sex in a very long time. You do the math.”

“Katie...” he sighs.

“If you don’t want me, Jake, you need to tell me now. Because, for me, there’s no going back. I’m all in with you. When I look at you, I only see the future.”

He studies me and my heart squeezes inside my chest. For a moment, I'm afraid he's going to call a halt to everything. I reach for my robe, needing to cover up. Before I can, Jake reaches down and grabs my hand.

"I am your future, Katie. We've been in love with one another most of our lives. It's time we put away fear and walls. There's just you, me, and the family we build, Sunshine. There's no room for anything else."

I pull my hand back and sit up. "Undress for me, Jake," I whisper bravely. This wasn't how I saw the night going. I didn't mean for us to have a deep conversation, but maybe this is where Jake and I are now. We spent so much time in our past not talking that we both want to make sure we keep a dialogue now.

I like that idea. Hell, I like everything about being with Jake. He pulls his shirt over his head, revealing his toned abs. I lick my lips as he continues. His hands move to his belt. The breath stalls in my chest.

"You keep showing me that pretty pink tongue of yours and I'm not going to be able to hold back, Sunshine," he growls.

"Less talk, more stripping, Cowboy," I grumble, making him laugh.

"Life is never going to be boring around you, Katie," he jokes, pushing his jeans down, revealing that even after all these years he still goes commando. He always comes to bed in loose clothes to sleep. I just didn't investigate to see what he wore through the day. Jake and I have a lot of discovering to do with one another.

I swallow when he stands in front of me completely nude. Jake has always been beautiful, but I swear the man has just gotten better with age. My mouth goes dry as I take him in.

"Like what you see?"

I force my gaze to move away from his hard cock—that's so swollen and tight you can see the rigid contour of his veins—to his face.

“Come closer, Jake, please?” I beg. You can hear the aching hunger in my voice, and I don’t care. I need him.

He groans as he does as I ask. His cock bounces with just the few steps he takes. When he gets in front of me, I reach out and wrap my hand around his cock, squeezing. He’s hard as a rock and yet soft in my hand. The heat rolling off him floods through me as I stroke him.

“Fuck, yes...” he hisses as my thumb slides against the head of his cock, gathering precum and painting it all over his head.

With each stroke, more and more precum gathers. There’s so much that it begins drizzling down his shaft.

“Do you know what I’ve wondered since we’ve been sharing a bed, Jake?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

“What’s that, baby?” he asks, and chills move over me as I hear the need in his voice.

“If you taste the same as I remember. For almost a year after you left, I used to stay awake at night remembering the taste of you and needing it so much that it physically hurt.”

“Christ, Katie...”

“Now, I have you again and I’m never letting you go,” I confess.

I run my tongue over the head of his cock, tightening my hand as I stroke him. Instantly, precum coats my mouth. I hum around his shaft as I begin to use my hand and mouth in tandem.

I feel his fingers sifting through my hair, hear the way he breathes my name, and it all just adds to my hunger. I slide his cock deeper into my mouth now, feeling him push against the back of my throat. He’s so big that it’s a struggle to take him in, but I manage it. I suck harder as I pick up speed. I need his cum. I want it.

It’s mine... He’s mine.

I palm his balls with my free hand, rolling them, lightly massaging them while I continue to suck. I work his cock in

all the ways I remember he loved the most in the past. I moan because, I swear, I could come like this.

“Fuck, Katie... I can't hold back much longer. You need to take that sweet mouth away or I'm going to fill it up.”

I lift off his cock long enough to look him in the eye. “Give it to me,” I order, and then I slide my mouth back down on his cock, sucking with renewed vigor. I'm going to drink every drop he has.

“Son of a bitch,” he rumbles, his hands tightening in my hair as I continue moving up and down on his shaft.

Jake's hands move to my head, and he thrusts deeper. I know he's holding back to not hurt me, but I also know he's completely lost in passion and that brings me almost as much pleasure as sucking him off does. *Almost.*

“Give it to me,” I plead.

I suck him back into my mouth and when I look up, I see it written clear on his face. I feel his balls tighten in my hand and then, jet after jet of cum begins rocketing out of his cock, overflowing my mouth. I drink him down, listening as he cries out my name. I keep sucking, drinking every drop until he has none left to give.

When it's over, he puts pressure on my chin and makes me look him in the eyes. I lick the remnants of his cum from my lips.

“I love you, Katie. I'm never letting you go.”

“I'm not going anywhere, honey,” I promise. He devours my mouth, not caring that he can taste himself, and for some reason, that turns me on more.

Jake

I look at my woman—and she is completely mine now—shaking my head. She called my fucking brother and asked him to come over while Lennon was at school. Now the three of us are staring at one another as if we're preparing for a world war. Hell, in a way we are. I still don't completely understand what Katie hopes to achieve by having the three of us talk, but I'm giving her a chance to get whatever it is off her chest. I'm not going to magically forgive Jeff. I don't have it in me.

Jealousy is written all over my brother's face. He looks at Katie as if his insides are being torn apart. It's a look I'm familiar with because I felt it every time I would come home for holidays. It was hell seeing Katie and Jeff together. I imagine it's just as bad, if not worse, on my brother because he's never wanted anything but her love. A gift that the two of us know he never truly had. There's a world of difference between the love and emotion Katie feels for me and what she feels for Jeff.

"Breathe, sweetheart. I'll make it worth your while later," Katie whispers in my ear as Jeff leans against the counter, taking entirely too much of my oxygen.

I grunt, because as wonderful as last night was, I'm not sure anything could make the fact that my brother is in the same room with me worth it. I want him gone. That's it, pure and simple.

"What we have to say to each other Katie doesn't concern my brother," Jeff says, as I tighten my hand into a fist.

“That’s where you’re wrong asshole. Every damn thing to do with Katie involves me.”

“Bullshit. You left her. You turned your back on her when she needed you most. She may be willing to forget all that, but not me, brother. You’re just going to hurt her again.”

“Keep spouting your bullshit, Jeff, and you’ll be breathing air through a tube. What happens between me and Katie is our business. You’re nothing but a pathetic outsider like you’ve always been.”

“Outsider? I wasn’t a fucking outsider for the last year sharing Katie’s bed and that’s really what gets you isn’t it, Jake? You’re pissed because Katie finally loved me and left you behind.”

“She didn’t leave me behind you asshole. If you had told me the truth to begin with, none of us would be here.”

“What do you think you would have done? Do you really think you would have stayed in Macon and been a husband and a father? You wouldn’t have and we both know it. Hell, we all three know it. Katie’s just in denial.”

“Katie is here and if you two are done with your pissing match, I need you both to listen to me,” my woman snaps.

“Katie, you can’t trust this asshole. I told you—”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Jeff. I’m not stupid or blind. I know if Jake found out the truth about Lennon earlier that he still wouldn’t have been able to give me what I wanted and needed back then.”

“Katie,” I breathe, her words cutting me. “I—”

“*But,*” she interrupts, “he would have loved Lennon and been in his life.”

“Yeah right,” Jeff scoffs.

“He would have. You know your brother as much as I do. He wouldn’t have turned his back on his son, not after what happened with you guys and your father.”

“So, what is this meeting about? It’s clear you’re already forgiving and forgetting every fucking thing Jake has done to you over the years. Why are you even bothering to talk to me?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” I huff, resenting the fact that my brother and I are in agreement for once.

“We need to come together to make things better for Lennon. He’s what is important now, not us and not your wounded pride—and I’m talking to both of you,” Katie says before I can argue.

Jeff and I both look at one another like we could kill each other. There’s more to it than wounded pride, but I’m not about to explain that to her right now. I grunt under my breath. Jeff shakes his head.

“Why would I want to make anything better for him?” he asks Katie while looking at me. “He’s just going to hurt you and Lennon again.”

“You’re going to help because I know you love Lennon and want him to have a relationship with his father.”

“Katie, you’re wrong,” Jeff denies, drowning out my snort of laughter because I know that’s the last thing Jeff wants. He doesn’t want me anywhere near Katie or Lennon.

“I’m not. Jeff, if you didn’t want that you never would have told Jake the truth. You would have put that ring on my finger, and no one would have ever found out. You let things play out like this for a reason.”

“You’re wrong.”

“I’m not. I know you. You have this overwhelming need to do what’s right and to protect people. It is who you’ve always been, and I love that part of you. I couldn’t have made it through everything without you.”

“You love that part about me. You used to say you loved me. It hasn’t been that long ago, either, and yet, here we are.”

“Jeff, I don’t want to hurt you. I really don’t. The truth is, Jake claimed my heart years ago and there’s just not enough of

it left to make room for anyone but him and Lennon. I tried to tell you that four years ago. I love you...”

I hiss out a breath. No man wants to hear the woman they love admit she loves someone else—especially if that someone else is his brother.

Katie squeezes my hand, but she doesn't take her eyes off Jeff.

“I remember what you told me. You love me. You just can't love me like a woman ought to love the man she wants to marry. I told you it didn't matter. We could be happy together. You just need to put the past behind you.”

“That's just it, Jeff. The past is never going to be behind me. Jake and Lennon are my future—they're all I've ever wanted and if you're honest, you've always known that. I haven't exactly made a secret of it.”

“Whatever you say. It's not like any of this matters. My brother will fuck up again. He'll hurt you again, Katie. When he does this time, though, I'm not going to be here to pick up the pieces again.”

“You bastard!” I snap, having heard enough.

I lunge at Jeff, only to see him laugh. The asshole wanted this. He's dying to lay into me as much as I am him.

“Jake, stop!” Katie cries, as my fist connects with Jeff. Jeff delivers one in my stomach that doubles me over. I deliver an uppercut to knock that satisfied look off Jeff's face and he stumbles back against the cabinets.

My blood runs cold as Lennon screams. “Stop!”

He's staring at me with tears falling from his beautiful blue eyes. I freeze, all my attention going to my son. I feel tears sting my own eyes. Fuck, I can't believe this is happening again.

“Shit, the bus was early,” Katie whispers.

“Lennon,” I start, my voice hoarse.

“I hate you! I hate you! You’re ruining everything. I want you to go away and never come back!”

“Lennon! Stop that right now. You can’t talk to Jake like that.”

“I can! I want him out of the house. He made Jeff go away. He’s ruining everything.”

“He’s not. Jake loves us and he’s going to be living here now. He wants you to love him.”

“Well, I don’t! I don’t love him. I hate him. I hate you all!”

He runs to his room, and I feel the tears sliding from my eyes. I can’t stop them. Katie may be optimistic, but I can’t be. My son hates me. This is the second time he’s told me so. I can’t ignore it.

Katie reaches for her walker. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“No. I’ll talk to him,” Jeff responds, instantly putting me on edge.

“No fucking way,” I deny him.

“I’m not doing this for you, Jake. Hell, I’m not even doing this for Katie.” Jeff shakes his head and I see something I’ve never once seen on his face before. *Resignation*.

“Jeff—” Katie starts, but my brother shakes his head.

“This might be the only thing I can do for Lennon to help and he’s hurting. He needs this from me. If I don’t talk to him, he’ll never give Jake a chance.”

“Don’t start acting like that’s what you want,” I mutter, wiping at my own tears.

“It wasn’t, but I saw something I wasn’t expecting.”

“What’s that?” I ask, feeling damned old.

“You love Lennon. Whatever else our differences might be, we both know that boy needs the love of his father—his *real* father. It’s something you and I never got a choice in. Lennon does.”

I nod, my throat tight. “If you hurt him again—”

“He’s *my* son, Jeff.”

I see the pain those words deliver, but they needed to be said.

“I’ll go talk to him.”

“I’m not sure I trust you to do that. I think Katie and I—”

“Lennon trusts me more right now than he does you. It needs to be this way,” Jeff counters.

“Whose fault is that?” I snarl.

“Believe it or not, Jake, that’s never what I wanted. I’ve never stopped feeling guilty over lying. That’s why I told you before the wedding. I wanted you to know the truth and I wanted Katie to finally decide if she could truly love me and put the past behind her.”

“You always knew what I would do, didn’t you, Jeff?” Katie whispers, emotion thick in her voice.

God, I’ve been so blind.

My brother gives her a sad smile and nods. “Yeah, Katie. I knew it was always Jake. I was just hoping I was wrong. I need you both to let me do what I can to salvage this. I need to make things better for Lennon. Katie’s right. He’s the only one important here.”

Katie and I share a look. She nods yes, but I can’t say anything. I don’t object though. I’m not truly sure how to make any of this better. Jeff looks at both of us and turns to go to Lennon’s room.

“You think this is okay?” I ask Katie.

She squeezes my hand. “I think this is a beginning. We’ll all work to pull Lennon out of this and together you and I will make sure our son is happy.”

I find myself praying she’s right.

Jeff

Lennon's head is buried into the dinosaur pillow that he has to sleep on every night. His entire room is decorated in T-Rex and other assorted dinosaurs with bright blues and greens with orange accents. Katie worked herself to death redoing this room about a year ago as a surprise for him. I helped her paint one wall in chalkboard paint and Lennon uses it often.

"Jeff!" Lennon says, hurling off the bed and throwing himself into my arms. I somehow manage to catch him and sit down.

"Shh...I'm here," I tell him, kissing the top of his head and breathing in his scent. My heart aches. I love this boy like he was my own. Giving him up is even more painful than walking away from his mother. Still, I know the answer here. I can't live in my brother's shadow anymore. It took coming home to figure out that I don't belong here anymore.

Hell, maybe I never did.

"Don't leave again," Lennon begs.

I clear my throat as emotion threatens to clog it. The last thing I want to do is hurt Lennon more, but I don't really have a choice in this.

"I'm afraid I've got to, buddy. I have a job and responsibilities in Tennessee, and I need to get back. I belong there now."

"No, you don't! You love me and Mommy. You belong here with us!" he pleads, barely getting the words out as he yells them at me as if to make me believe them more. His little

hands are wiping his tears as they fall and he's sniffling, his face panicked.

"You have no idea how much I wish that was true, Lenny, but it's not. It's you who belongs here with your mommy and with Jake."

Lennon slides off my lap and sits on the bed, grabbing his pillow as if it might comfort him. "You mean because Jake is my daddy, right?"

Shock hits me. "You know?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't matter because I don't want him as my daddy. I just want him to leave!"

"Where did you hear that Jake was your father?" I press, certain that Katie hasn't told Lennon yet.

"I heard Mommy and Jake talking the other day. Jake said he didn't want a baby—he didn't want me."

"Lennon—"

"It's okay because I don't want him either. I want you. You can be my father, Jeff."

His words nearly cut my heart out, but I push them aside. I need to try and do damage control here. It is Lennon who matters—not my pain.

"Buddy, you should never eavesdrop on people. You never really hear the whole story and sometimes what you do hear is not the whole truth."

"Jake doesn't want me," Lennon says again, sounding lost.

"If you hear someone talking about you, then you should ask them about it. Maybe they can explain, because sometimes adults say stuff but it's not exactly what they mean."

"That's because adults suck," Lennon grumbles.

I laugh a little and agree. "Yeah, sometimes we do." I go down on my knees and look directly at him, a hand on each of his little legs. "Let me ask you something, Lennon. Do you trust me?" Lennon nods his head yes in answer. "Then listen when I tell you that your dad does want you very much."

“He said he didn’t. He even left Mom all alone.”

“The thing is, buddy, your daddy never knew you existed until he came back into town.”

“He didn’t?”

“Nope, and that’s kind of my fault. That’s why Jake is so mad at me. I kind of kept you a secret and I shouldn’t have. The minute Jake found out about you he came straight here.”

“Jake came here for me?” Lennon asks.

“He did. He loves you very much and every time you say you hate him, it hurts him.”

“Why did you lie?”

I close my eyes as a wave of pain hits me and I don’t even try to stop my tears. I look at the little boy who has owned my heart from the first breath he took. “I lied because I wanted you to be mine and I didn’t want to lose you,” I admit, my heart breaking. “I was afraid there wouldn’t be room for me in your life any longer.”

Lennon wraps his body around me, startling me. I was scared after I admitted what I’d done he wouldn’t want me anywhere near him again. “It’s okay, Jeff. There is room. I love you. I could love my daddy and you, too.”

“Yeah, you can do that, buddy. You can do that,” I admit, squeezing him before letting him pull back.

“We can still play and spend time together.”

“That we can,” I murmur, my heart breaking.

“You promise?”

“I promise,” I vow. “And I need you to promise something, too, okay?”

“What?”

“I need you to give your daddy a chance because he loves you.”

“You think he does?”

“I know it. In fact, Lennon, you’re a very lucky man because so many people love you and want to be part of your life.”

“I guess so,” Lennon grouses as only a child can.

“If you’re honest, you love Jake, too.”

“Kind of. He takes care of me and Mommy since Mommy got hurt. He makes me pancakes and reads to me, too.”

“See, Lenny.”

“Sometimes he colors with me, too. Although, he always colors the sky blue and that’s not right. Sometimes the sky is orange, purple, or even yellow.”

I ruffle his hair, wiping away my tears and trying to keep anymore from escaping. There will be time for crying later—when I’m alone. “Then, that will be your job, buddy. You will have to show Jake how to color.”

“You really think Jake loves me?” Lennon asks.

“I love you more than anything in this world, son,” Jake says. My gaze moves up to see my brother standing in the door, tears running down his face.

Hell, I guess it’s the day for crying because Katie’s doing the same just behind Jake and I feel tears stinging my eyes again. Lennon turns to look at Jake and then, without warning, he goes over to stand in front of my brother.

“Did you really not know about me?”

“I really didn’t.”

“I can love you and Jeff, too, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jake says, his voice gruff.

“So, you won’t fight anymore, because family shouldn’t fight.”

“They shouldn’t?”

“No, because families love each other.”

I get up and slap my brother on the shoulder in a small show of support as he hugs Lennon to him. “I love you,

Lennon,” Jake says, hugging him close.

I leave the room. I need some air.

This is right. This is how everything should be. It’s how it should have been all along.

It doesn’t change the fact that it’s not painful as hell.

Jeff

“Thank you for that, Jeff,” Katie says, following behind me with her walker.

“I didn’t tell Lennon about Jake. He already knew,” I quickly tell her, not wanting her to think I’d do something like that to hurt anyone.

“We heard,” she admits.

I feel a little bitter inside realizing they listened in because they didn’t trust me to talk to Lennon on my own. I realize I probably brought that distrust on myself, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t still hurt. I push it aside. It’s just another sign that I don’t belong here. We all need distance right now.

“Lennon’s right, you know? There’s still room for you in his life—in all our lives. Just because things are different doesn’t mean they can’t be good, Jeff.”

“I will still see Lennon on holidays and things. I just...” I stop talking and look up at the woman who has owned my heart for most of my life. “I need some space, Katie. I need time to heal and find the man I used to be.”

“What happens next?” she asks, and I hate the sadness in her eyes, but I can’t fix this. This is how things are meant to be—no matter how much I don’t like it.

“I’m going to head back to Tennessee.”

“You really live in Tennessee now?”

“Yeah. I’ve been working on a horse ranch there. I’ve enjoyed it and I’m not ready to leave just yet. Besides, we both

know I need to give you and Jake some space—Lennon too, for that matter. You all need time to build your family and you don't need to do it with me standing in the wings. I've done entirely too much of that in my lifetime."

Katie sighs. "I'm so sorry, Jeff. I truly never meant to hurt you."

"I know that, sweetheart. That's the thing about love. You can't really control it. It has a will of its own."

"It does," she whispers.

"Stop feeling guilty. I don't want that. Hell, you tried to warn me constantly. I'm just stubborn as a mule and didn't listen. I do hope my brother will finally realize how lucky he is."

"I do," Jake says, coming out of the bedroom. "Lennon wants to talk to his mommy," he adds, kissing Katie's forehead.

"But—"

"It's okay, Katie. We've said all there needs to be said between us. Besides, I need to be leaving."

Seeing them together hurts like hell. There really is no place for me here now. I don't guess there ever was—no matter how much I tried to create one. This was always Jake's family. I clear my throat. I need a fucking drink.

"You and I should talk, Jeff. I would do it now, but I need to be with my son. Still, we need to discuss everything. Lennon is right. We're all family."

That shocks the hell out of me. It is the last thing I expected to hear from Jake. I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I just nod. "I'll be at Mom's. I'm not heading back to Tennessee for a bit. I have some loose ends to tie up first."

"Tomorrow," Jake agrees, helping Katie to maneuver her walker as they turn toward the hall and to Lennon's room.

I watch the woman I love—have always loved—walk away with my brother and the pain burns, but there's a sense of completion too. This is it. There's no questions, no

uncertainty any longer. My past with Katie is just that... *my past.*

She looks over her shoulder and I know she can see the sadness on my face. I see some in hers, too. This is our ending. *It's over.* I give her a sad smile and she gives me the same. Then, Katie walks away from me.

Forever.

Jake

“You’re quiet tonight, Sunshine,” I murmur, hugging my woman tight.

We’re lying in bed just enjoying the silence. Katie just got done tucking Lennon in. He let me read to him earlier and he hugged me. It’s a simple thing, but it makes me feel as if I won the damn lottery.

“It’s been a busy day,” she finally responds. I breathe out, silently agreeing. “It’s been a good one, though,” she adds, turning so she can look up at me. “Our son finally knows the truth.”

“It’s been a very good day,” I admit. “I think he might even like me now—at least a little.”

“Lennon loves you. He just heard something he shouldn’t have and didn’t know how to process it,” Katie argues. I know she’s right. I don’t know if Lennon loves me, but I finally feel like there’s a chance he could and for now, that is enough.

“We have time. I’ll win him over completely.”

“I have no doubt. I mean, you won his mother over not once but twice,” she jokes while I tilt my head down to kiss her. It’s a kiss that is way too brief. Still, having Katie in my arms and in this bed is a gift that I thought would never be mine. *I’m grateful.*

“Please don’t fight with Jeff tomorrow,” she pleads. “We need to put the past behind us.”

“Stop worrying, sweetheart. I’m not going to say I completely forgive my brother. I’m not sure that’s possible

right now. He did, however, make it easier for Lennon and he asked my son to give me a chance. I also saw the regret on my brother's face. It doesn't make everything between us magically go away, but I can't say I don't understand."

"Understand?" she asks, and I force myself to look down at her.

"Baby, if the shoes were reversed, I can't say that I wouldn't have done the same thing. I fucked up so epically it's scary. If I suddenly got the chance to get you back in my arms, I would have taken it. Having your sweetness? I couldn't willingly give that up, Sunshine. So, how can I blame my brother?"

"You wouldn't have lied," she argues adamantly.

"How do you know?"

"Because, despite everything, you have always been honest to the core—even when it hurt."

"Fuck. Katie, I love you with everything inside of me. I'm so sorry that I hurt you. I was such an idiot."

"We were young, Jake. If you were an idiot, I was a coward."

"We need to stop living in the past. We only have the future ahead of us now."

"Now, I can totally agree to that," she sighs happily.

I turn over on my side and look down at her. I slide a finger along the side of her face, relishing the feel of her soft, warm skin. "Tell me, baby, do you think you can handle a little exercise tonight?"

She grins up at me, her heart in her eyes. "I'm thinking between the two of us we can make it work, Jake. Together we can make anything work."

"God, Katie," I groan. "I do love you more than you will ever know."

"That's not true, honey. I *do* know because that's exactly how I love you."

I take her mouth in a kiss that is meant to express all the feelings and emotions I'm having but don't have words for. My best friend Reed once told me that his love for Callie was bigger than any dream he ever had. That she made the dreams worth it. I never understood. For me, being a champion in the rodeo and living under the lights was all I could see. Now I realize just how blind and stupid I was. The world is right here under this one roof.

My family.

And it's all I will ever need.

Jake

“You realize there’s not a one of us that wants you to leave, Jeff.”

Jeff looks up at me with surprise. It has been three weeks since we met at the house and my entire world changed. I didn’t realize I could be this happy and it’s a feeling that I will never take for granted. It also feels so good that I can allow myself to be a little generous where my brother is concerned, and I admit that I’d like to see him find happiness.

Just not with Katie.

“I know. This is something I need to do, though. I don’t really belong here anymore. Besides, the last thing you need is seeing me around as a reminder, Jake.”

“I wouldn’t mind you being around,” I tell him and I’m not really lying.

We’re never going to be super close. That is impossible at this point, I think. Yet, we’re brothers. We’re family and those are ties that bind us together. Lennon might be seven but he’s very smart. There’s room for all of us. My son loves his uncle and if that day at the house taught me nothing, it taught me that Jeff loves my son and wants the best for him. I can even see why Jeff made the decision he made. It was wrong, but at least I understand it now.

“Maybe not,” Jeff allows. “If I’m around, though, Lennon would want time with me and right now, he needs time with his dad.”

“I know this can’t be easy for you,” I respond, not sure what else to say because he’s right.

“It’s not. I figure it’s my fault, though—at least a lot of it. I can’t say Katie led me on. If anything happened at all it was me fooling myself. You can’t build your life on the ashes of others.”

“So, you’re really selling out here and moving to Tennessee? You loved that land you purchased next to Mom’s.”

“I did, but the new owner gave me a decent price for it.”

I laugh because I bought it. It wasn’t because I wanted it. I bought it because it was next to Mom’s.

“It’s here for you if you ever want to come back.”

“Jake—”

“I mean it. I don’t want the property. We’re fixing up our place, and it’s where Miss Hazel is the happiest. That property was yours. As far as I’m concerned you come back, it will be yours again.”

“You’re being good about all of this.”

“I appreciate how you handled things with Lennon. I can’t say it erases all of the past between us, but I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same thing in your shoes. Katie...” I sigh. “She’s one hell of a woman.”

“That she is,” my brother admits. I may see the pain that flashes over his face, but I ignore it. He must find his own way. I know that pain because I felt it every time I came home and saw Jeff with Katie and Lennon clinging to them.

“Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?”

I look up to see Reed walking toward us and smile.

“Sorry, we’re too pedestrian for the great Ryker Lane,” Jeff says, and Reed flips him off.

“Kiss my ass, dude. I can’t believe you’re leaving us for Tennessee.”

“It’s a nice place. I mean, you still have a house there, right?” Jeff responds.

“We had it sold but the deal fell through. You want to stay there? You’re welcome to it. Callie and I are happy here.”

“Nah. I’m working on a ranch in Dandridge. I’m good. Thanks for the offer, though.”

“You know it. I have a confession,” Reed announces, grabbing our attention.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“The girls sent me over here because they were afraid you two might break out in a fight.”

“You’re like a guard dog?” Jeff laughs.

“Kind of. So, are you about to kill each other yet?”

I look over at my brother and find him staring at me. Slowly both of us smile and for the first time in forever, the tension between us isn’t swallowing up the air in the room.

“We’re cool,” I murmur, taking a drink from my beer. Jeff laughs. “Yeah, we’re cool.”

Reed joins in and some of the anger that I’ve held inside slides away. I look across the yard to find Katie staring at me. I wink at her and love the way the color rises in her face. The smile she gives me warms me all the way through, though. Lennon comes running over and wraps his arms around my legs. I pick him up and he starts talking to Jeff while holding onto me.

This is it. This is what I’ve been missing since leaving Macon years ago.

I’m home.

Jake

“You had a good time tonight,” Katie murmurs as I walk into the room after tucking Lennon in bed for the night. She’s slipping on my T-shirt and as the shirt falls, I get a look at the red lace material of her panties. My fingers itch to take them off—take it all off. We sleep in clothes because of Lennon, but I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I miss the way we used to sleep together skin against skin.

I walk straight to her and pull her body back against mine. Her juicy ass nestles against my cock, making me groan as I slide my hands under her shirt to cup her breasts.

“Now that’s a hello,” she whispers. “Is Lennon, okay?”

“He was sound asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow almost. I barely made it to page three of his book,” I respond, kissing her shoulder.

“I saw the way he loved on you all night.”

“He did, didn’t he?” I respond as she turns in my arms.

Katie’s still a little stiff and has some limitation with motion in her right hip and leg. Still, she’s getting better every day. The doctors are optimistic that she will only have a slight limp once she heals completely. Things are starting to feel almost normal. Although, the doctors haven’t given her the okay to have sex. That means we haven’t gone past hands and mouths with one another. Thank God it’s not just about me these days, but I still bring her to climax slowly and deliberately, letting it unfold slowly so she just concentrates on

the pleasure. Still, I want more and if I'm reading her correctly, she does, too.

"Yeah, he really did. I told you he loves you," she replies, bringing my mind back to our conversation.

I nod. If there's one small dark spot, it's that Lennon has never said that to me since finding out the truth. I long for those words from him. I won't rush it though. I just have to hope that he says them to me one day.

"What about his mother? Does she love me?"

"More every single day," she breathes, and I capture her lips in a gentle kiss, my eyes closing from the pleasure of having Katie freely loving me again.

"Ditto, baby," I respond as we break apart—making her laugh.

She made me sit through an old chick flick the other night where the guy never told his woman he loved her. He just kept saying ditto. The male lead dies in it and is a ghost the whole damn movie. It was depressing as fuck. Katie cried and then looked over at me during the glowing part where he leaves to go to heaven and told me this was the best movie ever. Lennon and I looked at each other and told her girls are weird.

She instantly laughs—like I meant for her to. "Jerk," she giggles.

"Are you worn out?" I ask. It's been a long day for her. Along with Jeff's goodbye dinner tonight, she has also been in the shop most of the day. Katie started back two weeks ago and works four days a week. I'm worried she's doing too much too soon.

"I'm perfect. I'm just tired, but that's to be expected. How about you? Are you okay knowing your brother is moving to Tennessee?"

"Yeah. He feels it's something he needs to do, and I understand it. I hate that Jeff sold out, but his land will be here if he wants to come home."

"Do you think he will?"

“I don’t know. Coming home was the smartest thing I ever did,” I murmur, going in for another kiss. It’s just a quick one but seeing her smile afterwards while she licks her lips is phenomenal. “I love you, Sunshine. You and I must get it right this time because I don’t think I could live without you. There’s no more room for errors.”

“We won’t mess up. Things are different this time, Jake.”

“Different?”

“Yeah, we talk now. We aren’t running from one another.”

“This is true,” I agree quietly.

“Plus, we both want to give Lennon a solid foundation.”

“You sound so positive.”

“Full disclosure,” she hedges.

“Always, baby.”

“I can admit that I’m nervous about what will happen when you go back on the circuit.”

She bites nervously on her lip. I stroke it with the pad of my thumb. “Katie, that’s the last thing you need to worry about.”

“Jake, I’ve seen the women that chase belt buckles and my man is the cream of the crop.”

“I like that,” I grin.

“Huh?”

“I like hearing you call me your man.”

“Well,” she whispers, “You are.”

“Damn straight,” I fake growl, making her smile deepen.

“It’s not you cheating I’m worried about.”

“Then what on earth is going on in that beautiful brain of yours?”

“There’s a big chance you may realize how much you miss being on the road traveling and living life under the rodeo lights.”

I shake my head, laughing. “Sunshine, don’t you realize nothing could beat being in bed with you and making love to you every night?”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

“You have?”

“At my checkup yesterday, the doctor gave me the all-clear to resume all extracurricular activities in the bedroom.”

“Extracurricular activities?” I laugh.

“That sounded better than I can now jump your bones,” she mutters with a shrug.

“Does that mean my woman wants to make love to her man?”

“Oh yeah,” she groans, pressing her lips against mine.

Jake

I gather the hem of my shirt in my hands and pull it up, revealing her body and leaving her standing in front of me in nothing but a pair of flimsy red lace panties.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I croon, gently turning her back around so I’m standing behind her.

I pull her hair to the side, exposing her neck, and breathe her in. I run the ridge of my nose along the delicate flesh of her neck until my lips press against her ear. I suck the lobe into my mouth, nipping at the flesh as her ass presses against me.

She lets out a ragged breath that seems to wrap around my cock.

“You belong to me, Katie. You always have,” I whisper.

My hand moves down her side. My fingers graze against her skin, teasing her slowly, and stopping only when I can hold her hips. I press my fingers into her curvy flesh, rubbing her ass against my aching cock—torturing us both.

She trembles against me, moaning as her hunger builds. I’m so hard that it’s painful. My pulse is racing, thundering in my ears as I try to rein in my hunger.

“And you belong to me.” Her words shudder through her body and release on a moan as I kiss her neck.

“Always, Sunshine.”

I shift my focus to her back, nibbling and tracing her spine with my tongue and lips all the way down, until I’m kneeling behind her. I slide my fingers under the waistband of her

panties, pulling them down her body. Once they're out of the way, I run my tongue over the fleshy globe of her ass.

“God, I’ve missed you, Katie.” I suck on the cheek, taking it into my mouth—needing to mark the skin. Eventually, I release it with a wet, popping noise before returning to bite and nibble the same spot.

“Jake,” she gasps, her body quaking beneath my touch.

I help her to turn so she can face me. For a second, I just look at her. She takes my damn breath. Her blonde hair down and shining around her face like a crown of glory. Her blue eyes sparkling with love.

Love for me.

“I want more tonight, Jake. I need you inside me.”

“I need to taste you first.”

We’re standing by the bed. I help her to sit down, carefully pulling her legs apart, baring her completely to me. Her beautiful eyes watch as I slide my tongue against the lips of her pussy. I groan as her flavor explodes in my mouth. I thrust my tongue in deep. She whimpers and the sound is so full of pleasure my balls are aching. I spread the lips of her pussy wider and slide my tongue against her clit, lapping at it and then gently sucking before using my fingers against the slick, swollen button. I massage it, making broken, slow strokes, priming her for my cock.

Her hands slap against the bed as they curl into the cover.

“Oh God,” she cries, her body quaking. “Jake, it’s been so long...”

I push my tongue back inside her, fucking her with it while keeping pace with my thumb on her clit. I eat at her like a dying man tasting paradise. I push a couple of fingers from my other hand inside her and use those too. Instantly, I can feel her body quaking, the muscles of her pussy fluttering, trying to clamp down. I start grinding my thumb against her clit. My moves are rougher, more demanding this time. That’s all it takes.

Katie comes apart, yelling out my name. I keep licking, soothing her, and letting her ride out her orgasm. I give her pussy one last kiss before looking up at her, licking her sweet cream from my lips.

Standing up, I begin taking off my clothes. Katie's full lips spread into a smile.

“Now this is my kind of show, Cowboy.”

A small laugh escapes as my lips stretch in nothing more than pure, fucking joy. There has been a hollowness in my heart since the minute I left Macon and Katie behind. Every single day I have with her now washes away that pain and slowly fills up that emptiness.

“Glad I could please you, Sunshine.”

I finish stripping, making short work of it. Tonight, I finally have my woman back. I don't have it in me to go slow. I take my cock in my hand, watching her lick her lips while I stroke myself. My cock is swollen, throbbing to be inside of her. The head is dark with hunger and covered in precum. Jesus, I'll be lucky not to go off like a skyrocket the minute I get inside of her.

Katie slowly moves back on the bed.

“Stop torturing me, Jake.”

“But it's so fun, baby,” I croon as I put a knee on the mattress and position my cock so that it slides between the lips of her pussy and presses against her entrance. Jesus, her sweet cunt is already trying to suck me inside. It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to ravage her. I know I need to go slow. Katie needs me to be gentle, but that sure as fuck is not going to be easy.

Between the scent of her arousal, the taste of her in my mouth, and the way her pussy is already trying to milk my cock, I'm having trouble holding onto control.

I have to keep my head.

“Jake, I need you,” she pleads, sounding as desperate as I feel.

“I need you too, baby,” I groan.

I push into her, carefully. She’s so fucking tight, I almost lose it.

“Oh,” she breathes, as her body relaxes, making room for my cock, sucking me into heaven.

Her tight walls are stretched and pulsating around me. I put my hands on her hips and set a rhythm that’s slow but even. I want to thrust in so deeply she can taste me, but I know we will need to work up to that. Still, this with Katie is the best I’ve ever experienced.

The fucking best.

“I’ve got you, Sunshine. Let yourself go for me,” I order, my voice a rumbling sound as I continue to slide in and out of her pussy. With each stroke, I go deeper and deeper, knowing that I’m letting her body remember the shape and feel of my cock. I was her first man and I’m going to be her last.

Katie belongs to me.

I’ve already moved so that I’m completely over her body, looking directly at her, and I kiss her deeply. “I fucking love you, Katie. I’ve always loved you,” I groan against her lips.

Our tongues wage war with one another as I swallow down her hum of pleasure, her fingernails biting into my back. I can feel my orgasm building. Heat spreads down my spine and my cock is so hard, my balls tight. I want this to last forever, but the end is coming.

I pull back to look down at the woman who has always owned my heart.

“Jake,” she gasps, reaching up to touch the side of my face. “I’ve been so lonely without you. Don’t leave me again. I don’t think I could survive.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Katie. I promise you. I’m going nowhere without you. Never again. It’s you and me forever, baby.”

She moans out the word forever as her second orgasm crashes through her. Her body tenses, her pussy clamps down

on my cock, and she takes me with her. I fill her with streams of my cum.

I bite into her shoulder as I come, making her cry out as her sweet pussy spasms around my cock. She takes every drop I have to give her, and I kiss her shoulder when it's over. I pull back to look at her and those beautiful blue eyes slowly open.

“Better than I remember,” she murmurs.

“You're not getting away from me again, Katie Smith.”

Her hand slides against my neck and along the side of my face. “I'm not going anywhere. I've tasted life without you, Jake. I thought I was fine. Now, I realize I wasn't living. I've just been existing. I need you like air, honey.”

I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, tasting it. I do it again and again before deepening the kiss. “I love you,” I finally say when we break apart. I go to move off her, not wanting to hurt her body. I tried to go easy, but I know she's going to be sore.

“No, don't leave me. It's been so long, Jake. I just want to fall asleep with you inside me.”

I smile, kissing her forehead. Then, I shift us, hold her closely as I roll us over, fixing it so that she's on top of me and my cock is still buried deep inside her warm body. As her breathing evens out, a feeling of contentment overwhelms me.

This is exactly where I belong.

Exactly.

Jake

I didn't expect this.

I've spent the last week back on the circuit, away from the house and away from my family.

And I hated every minute of it. *Every freaking minute.*

I talked to Katie and Lennon every night, but I ached to be home. If I hadn't already known that I was going to leave the circuit after this year, this week would have made that decision for me. I'm done. I can't be away from them like this. I was as miserable as Lennon and Katie sounded over the phone.

Today is my first day back and Katie is still at work. I got here early enough to make sure the next-door neighbor knew Miss Hazel was okay. It's almost time for Lennon to get off the bus so I'm brushing down the horses while waiting. My babies seem as happy to be home in the barn as I am to be here. I turn toward the road as the bus stops at the end of our driveway. I put my grooming brush down and jog across the pasture to meet Lennon. It's early today. I get there just as Lennon comes running out, wrapping his arms around my legs. I lift him up and he hugs me tight.

"Daddy! You're home!"

Daddy. If the joy in his voice didn't get me, having my son call me daddy again would send me over the edge.

"I sure am. I missed you, buddy."

"I missed you, too," he says, squeezing me tighter. "Do you get to stay?" he asks.

“Yeah, for a little while. I was thinking we could pick Mommy up and take her to dinner this evening. What do you think?”

“Can we take Nanny Barb and Grandma Hazel?”

“Sure, buddy. Anything you want.”

“Yay!”

I stand, smiling, while I grab the backpack that Lennon must have dropped when he ran to hug me. Then I reach down and instantly my son puts his hand in mine. I can feel tears sting my eyes and I swallow down my emotions.

We walk back to the house hand in hand. I feel like a damn king. Some of the scars from my past slowly fall away.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, son?”

“I sure am glad you’re home.”

“Me too, Lennon. Me too,” I answer.

“Dad?” he says again.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

I swallow, my throat tight with emotion. “I love you, Lennon. I love you, too.”

Coming home was the smartest thing I’ve ever done in my life.

Epilogue

JAKE

“Do you want me to ask if anyone has objections to the wedding? It’s not required.”

Katie and I grin with the judge’s question. Nothing is going to stop our marriage. I won’t allow it to. I was always meant to marry this woman. *We* were always meant to be a family. It may have taken us way too long to get to this point but now that we have, I’m never going to take it for granted.

“No one objects,” Mom says, making us all laugh.

We’re at City Hall. It wasn’t the fancy wedding that Katie deserved, but it is what she asked for. After the fiasco of a wedding that she had planned with Jeff, I just want her as my wife legally. She doesn’t know this, but I would have agreed to anything to get my ring on her finger.

“Very well,” the judge laughs. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the presence of God, family, and friends to witness a joyous occasion. It is the union of Jake and Katie in holy matrimony. May I ask, who gives this bride to be married to this man?”

“I do!” Lennon pipes up, his words dripping with pride. We all laugh, but I reach down and ruffle Lennon’s hair. I’m sure parents say it all the time, but I truly do have the most beautiful and smartest son ever born. “Jake is my daddy.”

“I see,” the judge responds, smiling at my boy.

“And this is my mommy. If you hurry and marry them then we can be a family—official like.”

“Is that right?”

“Yep.”

“Then, I guess I better hurry it up,” the judge says, trying to act like he’s being very serious.

“I sure would appreciate it, sir.”

“You must really be excited to have your parents married.”

“Well, I am. I really want all my friends at school to know that my daddy is home now and that he’s never leaving.”

We all look at Lennon as he says that.

I kneel and rub my hands up and down Lennon’s arms. “Hey, you know I’m not going anywhere, don’t you, buddy? Nothing could ever take me away from you and your mommy. I promise.”

“I know, Dad.”

“Then, why are you wanting to rush everything up?” I ask, worried.

“Well, Nanny Barb and Grandma Hazel promised to take me out for ice cream after. So, if we could hurry up, I’d really appreciate it.”

Everyone starts laughing and I shake my head. “You heard the boy, Judge,” I murmur.

“That I did,” he agrees.

I rise back up and hold Katie’s hands as we pledge our lives to one another. It was a long, broken road to get us to this point. Every step of the way was worth it, however, because it led me straight to Katie. I wouldn’t change a thing, because every detour we took prepared us to be the partners that we each needed.

Forever.

Epilogue

KATIE

“Get back in bed, Mrs. Ryan.”

I grin down at Jake. “That’s right, I’m a married woman now,” she laughs, sliding back under the covers.

He instantly pulls my body back against his, wrapping his arms around me. “You’re *my* woman,” he corrects me.

“I’ve always been your woman, Jake. Now, I’m just your wife, too.”

“God, I love you, Sunshine,” he groans.

“I love you,” I respond snuggling down into his arms with a yawn. It’s our wedding night and my husband has worn me out. I had to take some medicine because of my hip, but I can tell that I’m getting stronger. “Lennon said to remind you we’re having pancakes tomorrow at Nanny Barb’s.”

“I’m sorry, baby. This is not a very exciting honeymoon.”

“I beg to differ. Tonight was perfect.”

“I wanted to take you away somewhere.”

“We can, eventually. Right now, I think it’s important we include our son in everything.”

“I do, too.”

“Besides, your mom isn’t doing so well.”

“Still no word from my brother?”

“Not a word. It’s been a month now. Jeff’s phone has been disconnected and he never gave us the address of the ranch he

was working at in Tennessee.”

“Shit,” he hisses. “I don’t know what to do.”

“She’s planning on flying up there next week to fill out a missing person’s report. It might be good if you go with her.”

“I will. Maybe we can track him down. I don’t understand it. He seemed better when he left here.”

“I know. I’m not sure what’s going on. This isn’t like Jeff at all. Even when he was ghosting me, he still checked in with Barb.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Jake says, and I give him a smile.

“I know we will sweetheart.”

“I think what we both need right now is to get back to our honeymoon,” he suggests with a glint in his eye.

“Okay, but I think it’s only fair to warn you that you’ve worn me out and you may have to do all the work this time.”

“I can deal with that,” he laughs.

Damn, I’ve a very lucky woman...

Sneak Peek

OF DON'T CRY

Prologue

I rub the back of my neck, blinking to focus. My gaze moves from the road to take in the clock on the dash. *One in the morning*. I stayed in Texas way too long. I didn't want to leave bad feelings anywhere. Mom didn't want me to leave at all, but I knew in my heart it was what I needed. Besides, I began working at a ranch in Tennessee when I left the first time. Truthfully, I was starting to really like it. The work was easy, and the beauty of the mountains soothed me in ways I wouldn't have thought possible. I've always loved Texas. Still, at times it felt like I was living in the shadows of everyone around me. That's a feeling that wears you down. I can't continue to see Katie and Lennon every day and know they will never be mine. I've always known that their hearts belonged to my brother—I helped to fuck that up. I should have been truthful with Jake from the beginning. I let my need for Katie to finally see me—to *love me*—cloud my actions. I slowly turned into someone I didn't recognize. I became a man desperate for a woman's love. It made me lose sight of everything around me.

No, it's much better that I start over. I need to let Jake and Katie live their lives. I don't want Lennon to be conflicted either. It hurts like hell, but I know in my heart that this is the way things are supposed to be.

As for me?

I don't know what in the fuck I'm going to do. There's a huge part of me that has given up on life. I spent too much

time trying to make a family with a woman who was never meant to be mine. It hit me before the wedding that I couldn't continue like I was. I needed to make changes.

So, I told Jake the truth. I knew that's all it would take. My brother is an asshole, but I knew he would want his son. I'm not sure he deserves Lennon, but I slowly became a man who didn't deserve that boy either. Right now, it doesn't feel like I deserve anything. I feel tainted. Somehow, I warped love in my head so much that I felt it was okay to betray my brother and lie to the one woman I swore I would always put first.

What the fuck does that make me?

It's raining tonight and that fits my mood, but it sure as hell makes seeing difficult as fuck—especially when you're bone tired. I blink because the rays of my headlights flicker off of something in the road. At first, I think it's a dog or something. I slow down and turn the wipers up another notch. The sound of the worn rubber squeaking against the windshield fills the cab.

“What the fuck?” I hiss as I finally realize it's a woman standing beside the road. I slow down and come to a stop. The beam of my headlights shine on her. She steps back, staring at me but not walking toward my vehicle. The rain has her hair plastered on her head. She's wearing shorts and a flimsy white T-shirt that swallows her small frame. It's cool outside and she's not wearing a jacket and has flip flops on her feet. I throw the truck into park, open my door, and move outside.

I stand across from her on the yellow line in the deserted, paved road and she's on the shoulder, the white line under her sandal. I swallow as—even despite the rain—I can see that she's in bad shape. There's blood coming from her nose. Her cheek is cut and it's hard to make out, but the right side of her entire face appears swollen. Actually, it's her eye that is almost swollen together. There are scratches and bruises dotting her small arms and even on her legs. I don't know if she's been in a wreck or what's going on, but this girl definitely needs help.

“Are you okay?” I ask, making my voice loud enough to be heard over the rain and my truck.

Neither one of us need to be out in this cold rain, that concern is secondary to finding out what is going on with this girl. I need to take her to the hospital, but she's wrapped her arms around her body,. Her head is down like she's afraid to look me in the eyes. She's shaking and I get the feeling it's more from fear than the cold. I'm picking up a bad feeling off this little slip of a girl. It's easy to tell this is just a bad situation.

She shakes her head, but I can't tell if she's saying no to me or just trying to shake some of the rain from her face so that she can watch me closer.

"Were you in an accident? Do I need to call the police?" I ask, trying to make her more comfortable by seeing I'm only here to help her.

"N-n-no," she stutters. "I just n-n-need to get away."

That churning in the pit of my stomach intensifies. Back home in Macon, there was this girl I went to school with—Lisa. We were the same age. She was sweet and funny. Hell, if it hadn't been for Katie, I would have asked her out. She fell into the wrong crowd—most notably Tim Barnes. Tim would use Lisa as his personal punching bag. The whole county knew it and most of us reported the son of a bitch, but Lisa would never press charges and no matter how hard any of us tried, Lisa just kept going back. We knew it was only a matter of time before the bastard killed her. It turned out, he didn't. No, Lisa took her own life and the sadness in that never left me.

This girl has the same expression that Lisa used to wear. I could be wrong, but I don't think I am at all.

"Can I take you into town? You don't even have to talk to me. I'll just give you a drive into town—or even into the next. Whatever you want."

She doesn't answer me. She just stands still, staring at me, trying to keep her gaze focused on my face and mostly still losing that battle. Her body is trembling so much that I can't stand it. I take off my coat. The outside of it is wet, but it's waterproof, so the inside is dry and warm. I take a few steps toward her. I see the panic fill her features as I reach out the

coat with one hand and putting the other up in a stop motion. I'm trying to be careful. I hope she can tell from my actions that I mean no harm. She stares at my hand before taking the coat and putting it on.

"I promise you that it may not feel like it, but you're safe," I try to assure her. She walks to the truck and gets inside. For some reason, that makes me breathe easier and I get back in the driver's side. I reach behind me and grab an old towel I keep back there. It's not the cleanest ever was but it will work. I offer it to her without saying anything else and she tentatively takes it. The light in the cab is faint at best, but I can tell the wounds and bruises on her body are worse than I thought. The girl is so small that the thought of anyone raising a hand to her fills me with rage. Once she wipes her face, she hands it back. I smile and dry off quickly before putting it down. I want to throw it back out of the way, but I don't want to make any sudden actions and scare her more.

"My name is Jeff."

"Rylee Taylor."

"Hi, Rylee. Where would you like me to take you?"

"Uh..."

"I can drive you to a hotel somewhere close, or even Memphis?" I offer, mentioning the nearest city. I'm traveling backroads because I just prefer them late at night.

"I don't know..."

"I'm actually going to Dandridge, so I can take you anywhere you want."

"Cordova will be okay..." she murmurs nervously.

"Sounds good. Where's your clothes and things? Did your car breakdown somewhere around here?"

"No. I left kind of quickly. I uh...forgot my suitcases at the house. I did pack them, but things got..."

"Complicated," I supply, not wanting to bombard her with questions.

“Give me the address and I will go get them,” I tell her, my throat feeling tight. Whoever this bastard is that hurt her he needs the shit kicked out of him.

“N-n-no. I can’t go back there. Besides it’s not that important. You can always get new clothes, right?”

“Rylee, I’d venture to say you don’t have a dollar in your pocket to even pay for the hotel—let alone clothes. That gives us two choices.”

“W-w-what choices?”

“You either let me give you money to pay for hotel and food, as well as clothes, or we go get your stuff. You choose, honey.”

“Randy is probably passed out by now. I can p-p-probably get my stuff before he wakes up. That’s what caused the fight to break out. He came back early and caught me packing. My bag is still in the floor by the b-b-bed.”

“Rylee, I know you don’t have a reason to believe me, but I’ll protect you. I promise. All you have to do is give me the address.”

She grudgingly gives me directions and we spend the short drive there in silence, but I can tell Rylee gets more and more tense the closer we get. As I pull into the graveled driveway of an old, weathered, gray single-wide trailer, I’m afraid she’s going to jump out.

“It’s okay, Rylee.”

She looks at me, but the hopelessness in her eyes nearly guts me. I find myself hoping this guy is awake so I can beat the shit out of him.

“This is a bad idea. Maybe I can—”

“It’s fine. You wait in the truck. I won’t be but a minute. Lock the doors, okay?”

“But—”

“It’s going to be fine. I just want you to feel safe.”

I reach under the front seat of my truck and pull out my pistol. I have a concealed weapons license. Although technically it's not recognized in every state. I don't really give a damn. I'm trained and safe with my gun. I wouldn't even get it out now, but it seems circumstances call for it.

"Jeff, maybe we should just go. I don't want you to—"

"Wait in the truck, Rylee."

I get out and wait for her to lock the doors. When she does, I give her a reassuring smile and secure my pistol in the back of my belt and jeans. I walk up the front and bang on the door.

A man who looks to be in his forties opens the door. His salt and pepper hair is shaggy and in need of a wash. His white T-shirt is stained with filth and blood—*probably Rylee's blood*. He's got a beer belly and he's double the size of Rylee—if not more. How such a sweet girl got involved with a bastard old enough to be her father that gets his rocks off hitting her is beyond me. I'm just going to make sure he never does it again.

"What the fuck do you want?" he growls, his words slurred.

"I'm here to get Rylee's things," I tell him, shoving an elbow into his gut. I go inside, not really wanting the girl to see more violence. I'm pretty sure she's seen and had enough to do her a lifetime.

"You bastard," the guy breathes, catching his breath while stumbling around to see me. "Who the fuck do you think you are, coming in my house and attacking me? Where is that little whore at?"

I don't know Rylee, but the fact a man could beat her and spew such filth when talking about her breaks what thin leash I had on my temper to begin with. I plant my fist into the side of his face. He goes down with a thud, falling back against an end table and sliding across the scarred up brown linoleum.

"How does it feel to be the one who gets beat on for a change, asshole? What kind of piss-poor, fucking excuse for a human being spends his time beating up a girl who can't hope

to defend herself against you?” I snap, kicking the bastard as he tries to crab walk backwards to the table.

“I’m going to kill you,” he hisses.

“You’re not going to do shit. I’m going to get Rylee’s things and then I’m leaving. You will never look for her again. In fact, you won’t do anything with her. If I find out you laid one finger on her, I’ll come back here and end your miserable life,” I tell him, and I’m not bluffing. If anyone needs to stop wasting air, it’s this sack of shit.

“The bitch deserves everything I give her. What did she do? Did the whore spread her legs for you to get you to come and try and get rid of me? I hope she was a good fucking lay man, because when I’m done you will be six feet underground.”

I should have been paying attention. I let myself get carried away with anger and listening to his ugly words. I didn’t see him reach into the basket at the bottom of the end table and pull out a gun. He’s drunk so he doesn’t get it aimed right away. I reach back and get mine, slipping the safety off as I draw it out of my belt. My heart is thundering. This isn’t how I meant for things to go down. The steel of the gun feels heavy in my hands. Blood is roaring in my ears like a raging river.

“You don’t want to do this, man. Don’t make a bad mistake end in a worse one. Give me Rylee’s things and I’m out of here.”

“You can go fuck yourself!” he yells, cocking the gun.

I don’t think. I just react. I shoot him right between the eyes. The man’s head goes back instantly as blood splatters out.

“No!” the girl cries out, standing at the door.

“Is there a phone in here?” I ask, glancing at her briefly before looking back at the man I just killed.

“Y-y-yes. Why? Why did you do that? Oh God...”

“Call the law. Get them out here,” I tell her, sitting down in a chair. I put the gun on the arm and notice a pack of smokes and lighter. I take one out and light it, realizing my hands are completely still and calm—despite everything that just happened.

“No. You need to leave. They’ll arrest you if you don’t. I can say I didn’t see who did it and they’ll never even know you were here. You can get away. You need to leave,” she basically pleads.

I look at her and shake my head no.

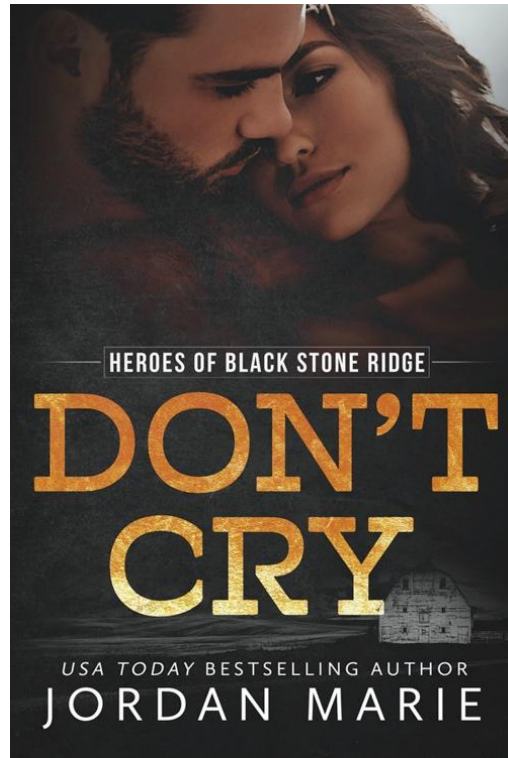
“Call the law, Rylee,” I order her, taking a drag off the cigarette, enjoying the rush of nicotine. “Your nightmare is over.”

I don’t tell her mine has just begun.

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