



The *Romeo*
Arrangement

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICOLE SNOW

THE ROMEO ARRANGEMENT

A SMALL TOWN ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

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ABOUT THE BOOK

He never bothered with hello.

The shrieking hot stranger had me dizzy the instant he said we're engaged.

Then he chased off the bully on our heels and dragged me back to his place for the night.

Pure insanity, right?

Wrong.

You don't let pride do the talking when you're homeless, on the run, and hauling around your sick father in a truck so old it must've been on Noah's Ark.

You definitely don't complain when Ridge Barnet takes charge.

(In)famous heartthrob. Stinking rich. Fed up owner of one angry rooster. Eyes set to permanent storm.

Of course, it doesn't end there.

My unexpected Romeo doubles down on this ridiculous "fake fiancée" rescue scheme.

One blazing kiss shatters worlds.

I'm swept up in a small-town fairy tale, wishing I hadn't lost my faith in wishes years ago.

He's saving my life. Hero and done. Nothing more.

Prince Charmings don't really marry pumpkin farmers from Wisconsin.

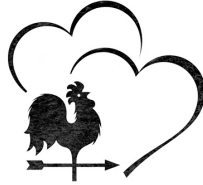
Give me strength.

Tell me his gaze doesn't scream obsession.

Save me from his oh-so-believable growls.

Help me believe our little arrangement never, ever ends in
"I do."

NO PLACE TO CRASH (GRACE)



“Careful, Gracie. This snow’s getting to be too much,” Dad growls, his eyes flicking across the road.

“Just a little longer. There has to be something up ahead.” I bite my lip, hoping to every star above that I’m right.

And it’s hard to hope when the stars are walled off behind the dense, angry clouds intent on burying us for the last hundred miles.

Oh, I’ve got all the fire under my ass a girl could ever need, but I’ll tell you one thing—I’d *kill* for a touch of real fire right now.

I feel a mad affection for every human being who ever shivered, scowled up at the sky, and said *winter, bite me*.

If only winter was the end of my worries.

The loud, ragged cough coming from my father in the passenger seat has me more nervous than the heavy snow drifting across the highway in blustery white sheets. It’s been snowing for hours.

This old truck, which had seen better days long before we left Wisconsin, has already been working overtime to pull the horse trailer up and down the rolling hills.

I’m keeping the speed low so I can try to avoid any mishaps. They’re all too likely with the sort of luck we’ve had on our journey thus far. We must’ve lost a good hour back in Minnesota, straining to change a flat.

Every time I glance at the old Ford's dashboard, I'm expecting to see red.

A check engine light. Low oil pressure. Battery, alternator, brakes, another broken thingamajig.

Nothing would surprise me.

Still, despite being rusted up and dented, no thanks to my teenage driving skills years ago, the truck soldiers on. It's almost like family, an old workhorse with the air of an immortal.

Only, the signs of aging are as impossible to ignore as its scabs of rust.

I know it's a cheap metaphor for my father, who hacks up another coughing fit next to me.

Ask me how much I care about metaphors right now.

The once robust Nelson Sellers, who used to practically juggle hay bales, has shrunken the past few months. It's not just his weight and musculature.

He slouches, even when sitting, something he always used to get after me for as a kid.

Dad's demeanor has changed, his energy flatlining as his body limps along. His once coppery-brown hair is dull silver, and that fiery shine in his blue eyes that made him Dad is just...gone.

All depressing signs of the crushing weight we've shared lately.

But deep down, he's still a Sellers. He won't stop, and neither will I.

As long as this old Ford trudges on, so will we, all the way to Montana.

Same with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—aka Rosie and Stern—the two horses riding in the trailer behind us in my rearview mirror. I'm not sure who loves them more, Dad or me.

They were his pride and joy once, and my best friends growing up. Practically the only friends I'd had when we'd left the city for the small farm north of Milwaukee to raise pumpkins.

Yes, *pumpkins*.

Feels like an eternity ago now. I'd finished high school while living on the farm, moved out, went to college for interior design, and dreamed of covering pretty places in prettier ideas.

Sadly, pretty anything hasn't been in the cards for a long time.

I watched too many dreams get demolished on that farm. And then one day, when there was nothing left but smoldering ruins, we threw together our things and hit the road while we still could.

Someday, I'll have my freaking slice of pretty.

Even if it feels like someday might as well be in the next century with this dark, deserted road and white dunes that could swallow a person whole crowding every mile.

"Gracie," Dad says, breathing heavy. "It's getting damn near impassable. You're gonna have an accident. Pull over."

"I can't just stop here, Dad. There's nowhere to park." Not without potentially trapping the truck in an icy grave, and us with it. Believe me, I would if I could. Even in my boots, my toes are frozen nubs because the heater can't keep up with the cold air invading the cab. "I can't make out a shoulder, let alone how deep the ditches are."

It's the truth, but I don't need to say it.

Dad's eyes aren't that bad.

He can see the snow-covered road and the huge flakes swirling around in the beams of our headlights before splattering against the windshield and being swept away by frantic wipers.

"We'll pull over as soon as I find a hint of civilization," I tell him, scratching my cheek.

“There has to be a town somewhere. I checked the map a hundred miles back; I know I saw something,” he grumbles.

“Only *you* still read off of a paper atlas. Every phone has GPS that works most of the time, even when the service sucks.” I give him a teasing smile, but it fades just as fast when I see the look on his face.

I can tell how he’s trying to hold in another cough. It’s there behind the slight sideways quirk of his lips.

My heart hurts for him, and worry sours my stomach.

Congestive heart failure.

Probable.

That’s what the emergency room doc said last week. We didn’t get a chance to stick around for the follow-up with the cardiologist. Honestly, his ticker running out is the whole reason we’re in God Forsaken Nowhere, North Dakota.

As soon as we got the bad news, I said we had to go.

Leave.

Before it’s too late for him to find a little peace.

I’m still praying it isn’t. Nobody deserves to spend their last days on earth being hunted.

“Can’t believe how long this is taking,” he says, reaching up to wipe at his side of the windshield. “There has to be a pit stop up ahead, a gas station...*something*.”

“You’d think so,” I say, hoping to lighten the mood. “But I’m pretty sure there are more oil drills than people out in these parts.”

“Yeah, yeah. I heard all about the oil boom out here a few years back. Hell of an industry to be in,” he answers dryly, but with a hint of a smile. “Oil crews gotta eat, though. That means a town somewhere in this mess.”

“It’s coming,” I say. “And then we’ll stop for an overdue breather.”

“Not too long,” he reminds me, tapping a finger against his seat belt. “Just enough to take a leak and give Noelle a call. You said she left a few messages?”

“Right. I just haven’t had time to—”

Those words stop short in my mouth when I notice an odd purple flashing light in the swirling wintry darkness beyond the headlights.

My eyes narrow to a squint.

It’s almost like the purple light winks right back at me the harder I stare, holding the truck in what I hope is still our lane.

Weird.

I haven’t seen a patch of clear pavement or another vehicle for miles, and I’m almost wondering if I’m seeing things. Hallucinating out of desperation.

Nope.

Purple lights. Still there. Still pulsing.

I’m hoping it’s a business, not just some kind of derelict radio tower or utility site. My hands are cramped from white-knuckling the steering wheel for what’s felt like hours.

The tension in my shoulders and neck makes my muscles burn. It hurts to turn my head enough to glance at Dad again.

“You see that?” he asks. “That purple light?”

“Sure do. Glad it’s not just me.”

Coming closer now, I see the flashing light belongs to a sign. A tall one hoisted high in the sky. Between the snow and the distance, I can’t see anything below the sign, yet.

An old motel, maybe, but it could be something else, too.

“It looks like...a cat?” I whisper, trying to make sense of the round face outlined in bright royal purple with what looks like two pointy ears. “Definitely a cat. Meow.”

Now I can see the whiskers, the cartoonish grin, one eye winking as the sign flicks back and forth.

“Thank God. Hope it’s not just a snowmobile dealer,” Dad mutters.

I get the reference to a big brand in winter gear, but I’m pretty sure their logo doesn’t look anything like this. That winking face is actually kinda ridiculous, and by far the happiest thing I’ve seen all night.

“I think we’re in luck,” I say, smiling.

We’re close enough to read the name stenciled in curly lit letters under the cat’s face.

The Purple Bobcat, it reads. *Good eats. Beer. Fun.*

“Looks like a dive,” Dad says as the building comes into view. “Whatever, it’ll do.”

I nod, holding my breath for signs of vehicles in the lot. I don’t want to get my hopes up unless it’s still open.

The bar itself is a one-story wooden building painted bright purple. The owner must be a huge Prince fan or just hellbent on grabbing attention out here in the sticks.

Coming closer, the windows are lit up bright with beer signs. Looks like a few trucks parked in front of the building.

I exhale that breath I’ve been holding.

It may not be much, but right now a parking lot and a few walls feel like a luxury resort.

“It’s still open. Hope you’re hungry,” I say, easing my foot off the gas.

I refrain from tapping the brakes. It’s hard to determine just how much ice is packed under the snow.

The last thing I need is to send the trailer fishtailing across the lot and smack right into some good old boy’s favorite pickup.

Two little blue reflectors sticking out above the snow tell me where the driveway is. I slowly steer the truck between the reflectors and pull up along what I’m assuming is the edge of the parking area where there’s room to park without boxing in

other vehicles. Plenty of room to make an easy turn when it's time to leave, too.

"Don't forget your hat," I remind Dad as I shut off the truck and stow the keys in my purse. "Go on ahead of me; it's freezing out here. I'll check on Rosie and Stern, then meet you inside."

Dad grumbles under his breath.

Something about being perfectly capable of looking after himself, but he puts on his wool-brimmed hat to humor me. I smile as he pulls the side flaps down over his ears, giving me a firm look that says *happy?* before opening his door.

I dig around on my lap and find my green-and-gold stocking cap, and then tug on my thick, fur-lined, made-in-Duluth Chopper mittens. The wind coming in through Dad's passenger door is so bitter it rips my breath away.

When I open my door, the cold makes me shiver from head to toe.

"Winter, bite me," I say, mostly to myself because I don't think Jack Frost is listening. And if he is, well, the sweeping chill he flings in my face is worse than a middle finger.

Tucking my chin into the collar of my coat, I pull the fur-lined hood tighter around my face to help block the wind. I hate every single big fat snowflake stinging my cheeks and catching on my eyelashes as I waddle past the truck in my boots to the trailer.

Thankfully, it only takes a few minutes to check on the horses. They must be freezing, but they aren't showing any signs of distress from the ride or bad weather. I feed them a couple carrots they wolf down like starving beasts before my own stomach growls.

If my lucky streak continues tonight, maybe this place will have something that isn't oozing grease. A girl can hope. It'd be nice to keep my blood sugar levels in the happy range where I'm not hankering to chew my own arm off.

By the time I enter the bar, I'm ready to call the weather a winner.

I'm chilled to the bone. The dense snow packed on my boots makes my feet feel like they're twenty pounds heavier. It's a workout as I go stomping through the door.

The Purple Bobcat isn't nearly so colorful inside.

Too bad.

It's smaller than it looked on the outside, dark and dingy, but fairly clean. No ripped-up seats or rickety tables or cracked tile floors. No ugly crowd of guys missing teeth or gals with their boobs hanging out of their shirts over pool tables, either.

The wood-paneled walls are covered with metal signs advertising retro beers and off-color jokes. Dad's found a table where he's parked himself to look over a menu.

One of the only occupied tables tonight, it seems.

If this place has regulars, or newcomers, or even long-haul truckers looking for a nightcap and a side of bawdy conversation, the storm has kept them all away.

Who could blame them in this blizzard?

There's an older man and woman in a booth near the frosty windows, picking at what looks like plates of gyros and fries. The table Dad chose is in the center of the room, surrounded by other empty ones.

At the bar, I count four guys on stools. A couple big blue-collar guys in stained coveralls—oil workers, maybe—plus two tall figures at the far end with several seats between them and the other men.

The maybe-oil-workers are quiet, focused on their tall beers, but the two on the opposite end are talking loudly.

Well, one of them is.

He's tall. Built. Ginormous. Loud.

A tiger of a man stuffed in a red-and-black flannel shirt. I'm a little embarrassed when he whips around with a smile meant for the bartender.

Maybe he sensed the weirdo staring, and with said weirdo being me, looking like Jack Frost just kicked my butt up and

down the playground, I...

I can't hold it against him for wondering who the miserable, crazy lady is who just dragged herself in from the cold like a wet cat.

Am I still staring?

Maybe.

Because maybe I'm suddenly feeling a whole lot warmer taking in the handsome face perched on his wide shoulders, a jaw so defined it was cut by a mad sculptor, over six feet of defiant muscle that looks like it's ready to burst right out of that flannel corral barely holding it.

Maybe he's sporting *just the right* sandy-dark stubble to sear a woman's skin, like this otherworldly, beautiful freak who just leaped out of a fashion ad.

Oh my God.

Um, and maybe he's staring right back. Turning the most obscene blue-eyed lightning I've ever been struck with on my bewildered face.

It's a look that bites.

A gaze that's too intense, too assessing, too ready to reach down inside me and dredge up feelings I have zero time for and even less energy to give.

It's a fight to tear my eyes away. I stomp my boots on the rubber mat out front again, taking my sweet time, saying a quick prayer that the next time I look up, the tiger will have moved on to other things.

Oh, thank hell. I let out that breath I'd been holding in.

He's not facing me anymore, and he's back to telling his boisterous, animated story that's got the bartender laughing away. Seems they're two giant, steely-eyed peas in a pod. The bartender is also a wall of a man with a thicker beard and a rougher look in his eye.

The other guy seated next to Tiger, on the other hand...

He's just out of place.

Lean, older, and his button-down shirt and tie look far too posh for a bar called the Purple Bobcat. Whatever they're saying, he's just nodding along, looking bored out of his mind.

I flip my hood down while giving my boots one more good shake, then pull off my hat and mittens. I walk to the center of the room and sit down next to Dad.

"The horses are fine," I tell him, remembering how to speak.

"Figured they'd be. And what about you?" He covers his mouth as he coughs.

"Still kicking," I whisper, reaching to slide his menu across to me. "Anything good here?"

He can't answer while he's busy fighting his own lungs.

God. We've been on the road for over twelve hours, but with this weather, we still have a good four or five more to go to Miles City.

That concerns me a lot. Dad's beaten, worn out, drained.

It's hard to keep my eyes glued to the menu for the sake of being polite. But he hates it when I fuss over his health, even if I have every reason to.

With a soft sigh, I set my hat and mittens on the table while he takes a long drink of water.

"Listen...I think we need to call it a night. I'll check to see if there are any motels nearby," I say, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

"No, Grace. The horses can't stay in that trailer overnight. They'll freeze their rears off." He inhales sharply. "I...I ordered us both some coffee, and he's making a fresh pot so we'll have plenty more to go. We'll wait for the snow to let up and then press on. We can handle a few more hours. Noelle's place isn't far."

He's so wrong I bite my tongue.

Jesus, I'm not sure if I can even *handle* a few more hours, but if he's this determined...

I nod, but now there's a new reason to be concerned when I look at my phone.

Three missed calls and a flurry of texts. They're all from Noelle, and they say the same thing.

Grace, call me ASAP.

She's my cousin, my mom's side. I haven't seen her since Mom's funeral, but when I'd called in a nervous fit last week, she'd invited us to come to Montana and stay with her until our trouble gets sorted.

Our choices are pretty limited when we're low on money, and Noelle is the only family we know with a farm and plenty of space for us to bring along Rosie and Stern.

Too bad Miles City is hundreds of miles from Wisconsin. I swear, we'd be there by now if it wasn't for that stupid flat and this intensifying storm we hit past Bismarck.

She and her husband have a hobby farm a lot like ours, only instead of pumpkins, they sell eggs, homemade cheeses, and other goods. She's always wanted us to see it, and a small part of me was looking forward to being part of something like that again.

That pit in my gut deepens, scrolling through the missed calls.

She's been texting for hours.

With the snow demanding every bit of my focus, I hadn't taken a hand off the steering wheel to do anything except hit the blinker switch to pull in here.

Crap. Whatever it is, I don't think she's just checking up on our progress.

The coffee arrives, steaming and black. I reach for a sugar packet and tear it right open, hoping nobody notices how my hands shake.

I thank the bartender before telling Dad, "Be right back. I need to use the ladies' room."

Tucking my phone in my pocket, I spot the restroom sign above a hallway near the end of the bar. Purple, what else?

Of course, I carefully avoid another awkward stare-down with Tiger Sex Eyes. He must be quite the comedian—the bartender and the oil guys are still roaring at whatever he’s saying.

Probably some crude joke that’d be too fitting for a place like this.

The hallway is short. I shove open the women’s door and enter the small, two-stalled room, pull out my phone, and hit Noelle’s contact.

She answers after one ring. “Grace? Oh my God, finally.”

“Yep, it’s me.” Turning around, I lean my backside against the top of the sink. “What’s wrong?”

She goes deathly quiet. “Well, um...have you guys left Milwaukee yet?”

“We left early this morning just like we planned. Had to change a tire on the truck halfway through Minnesota, then this snowstorm we ran into...we had to pull over. But we’re coming tonight, just a few more hours and—”

“Oh,” she whispers.

Another heavy silence.

That one, innocent word kills me.

Don’t do this, Noelle, I think to myself, trying not to fall over with my heart frozen.

“I...I really hoped I’d catch you while you were still at home.”

My nerves are a jumbled mess, a little more frayed with every word she speaks. Noelle doesn’t sound like her usual bubbly self, and I’m scared of what’s coming.

“What’s up?” I force the question through clenched teeth. “Noelle...what happened?”

“Well, uh...God, I hate to say this, but...something’s come up. You and Uncle Nelson aren’t going to be able to stay with us after all.”

No.

My heart hits my stomach and shatters like a snow globe on cement.

“I’m so sorry, Grace,” Noelle says, sniffing like she’s on the verge of tears. “I hope you have somewhere else.”

Sure.

If we had *somewhere else*, I’d have never called her and wept with gratitude when she said we could come. It’s not like we were asking to move in.

We only needed a month or so, a few weeks, just enough time to check on Dad’s health and figure out our next move.

“What changed, Noelle?” I ask. Then, because she’s known to sugarcoat things, I add, “Tell me the truth.”

Her sad, heavy sigh echoes in the phone.

“I didn’t hear the message. James did. It was on the voicemail at the gift shop. It mentioned you and Uncle Nelson...something about not making everyone in the family sing the ‘Old Milwaukee Blues.’ It was menacing and it came from an untraceable number. James wouldn’t let me or the kids hear it. I’m...I’m so sorry, Grace. I hate this, but we have children. We can’t get involved in—”

“I get it,” I snap, rubbing at the awful pain in my temple. “No, you can’t risk it. You...you did the right thing.”

The words feel so numb, I have to keep repeating it over and over in my head.

But there’s a deeper question nagging me.

How did they know?

Dad hasn’t talked to anyone, and I sure as hell haven’t.

We’ve given that maniac everything. *More* than everything, but it’ll never be enough.

Not for Clay Grendal. He's a flipping two-bit gangster, but in his mind, he's Al Capone and El Chapo spliced together.

"Gracie, I'm scared for you and Uncle Nelson," Noelle whimpers, her voice so low. "You need to call the police, the FBI, somebody. Get help!" she hisses. "Go to the law before it's too late."

My stomach churns, pushing angry bile up my throat. My head is pounding; I still haven't had anything to eat, and now with this bomb I've had dropped on my head?

Appetite, gone.

The police can't do anything for us. No one can. The time to risk something like that was years ago, not while my father might be down to his last precious days on earth.

Dad doesn't need even more stress, his hourglass running out under the gun. Literally and figuratively with constant interrogations. Maybe they'd even lock him up.

Years ago, while working at the railroad yards in Milwaukee, my father took on a side gig helping *transport* goods that weren't quite legal.

Actually, it was as illegal as it gets. Both the transporting and the goods.

"I just...I thought Uncle Nelson was done with all that mob stuff," Noelle says quietly. "I thought he got out when he bought your farm years ago? When you moved out of the city?"

My teeth pinch together so hard it hurts.

He had gotten out, or so we thought.

For a little while, life was good, until my mom got sick and the medical bills started coming fast and furious. Dad reached out to his old associates for a loan.

At the time, Grendal said it wasn't a loan, but a gift, for Dad's past services. Then the bad luck started, and Dad found out fast what kind of strings came with accepting that gift—vandalism, a fire in the barn, and a string of other events that truly had nothing to do with random chance.

It left us destitute, barely scraping by on miscellaneous pumpkin sales plus Dad's railroad pension. Clay doled out more money, and this time he expected repayment—*with interest*.

We gave him everything we had, even offered the farm, but it wasn't enough. He insisted on his pound of flesh. I think even if we'd won the lottery, it still wouldn't have been enough.

He knew what he wanted out of this all along, and it has nothing to do with money.

"Grace? Are you still there?" Noelle asks. "I'm sorry. I know it isn't your fault. I didn't mean to bring back bad memories."

My stomach revolts. The bitter taste of bile burns my throat, coats my tongue, and I swallow hard not to gag.

"Still here," I tell her. Still hopelessly cursed. "Dad's out, just like I've told you for years. Don't worry, you aren't in any danger." I'm certain of that. Clay Grendal only wants one thing.

I know because I had to face the devil himself, and I'll never, ever do it again.

"Where are you? Are you safe?" Noelle asks.

"North Dakota now. Don't know the town, but we're not that far from the Montana line." I turn around, pacing the small area between the vanity and the stalls, desperate to get my head screwed back on.

"Oh, Grace. I'm sorry. I truly, truly am."

"I know you are, Noelle. I understand. Family and little ones first."

There's a long pause, then I hear her take a strained breath.

"What're you going to do?"

Boom. The million-dollar question I don't think I could pry a dollar from.

I don't have a clue.

Here we are, almost flat broke, stuck in the middle of flipping nowhere, while Mother Nature has major PMS.

“Don’t worry,” I say again. “We’ll figure it out. I’ll call you in a couple of days to check in.”

“Oh, please do. I hate this again, Grace. If it was just me —”

“I know, Noelle. But James is right. Listen to your husband. You have to think about your family.” Which is exactly what I have to do, too. “I’ll call you soon.”

“Okay. I really am sorry. Do you want us to contact anyone if...if you don’t check in?”

I rub at my eye, amazed at how hard it is to answer such a simple, but loaded question.

But if I’m not in any position to call my cousin two days from now, her running to the police won’t help anything.

It’ll just put her family in the crosshairs they’re trying to avoid.

“No, don’t bother. I know you mean well. Bye, Noelle.” I click off, drop the phone on the counter, and hang my head over the sink.

What the hell am I going to do now?

Pushing myself back up, I pick up my phone, enter a stall and use the facilities, with my heart sinking lower and lower. There’s nowhere else for us. *Nowhere.*

Exiting the stall, I wash my hands. As I reach for the paper towels, I see a candle sitting on top of the metal towel holder. Not quite up to normal safety standards but it’s what’s lying next to the candle that truly catches my eye.

A match. A spent one with its end charred black.

It makes me think of Mom, and despite the hopelessness inside me, a grin tugs at my lips.

If you’ve got a light, you’ve still got a wish.

She must've said that line a thousand times. I don't know if she stole it from a movie, a song, a book, a story her grandmother told her, or what.

Sometimes it haunts me, but right now, I know my wish like I know this sickly adrenaline hangover coursing through my veins.

I wish this wasn't my life.

I wish I could wake up in a cold sweat, toss back a glass of water, and get out of bed.

I wish I could start the day living a boring normal Wisconsin life. Not this lethal nightmare.

But it's not a horrific dream.

It's as real as can be, and this is a world where wishes rarely come true.

This is a life where I traded my faith in wishing to keep my sanity.

I stare at the blackened match for a few more seconds and shrug. We're not totally beaten yet.

My credit cards aren't quite maxed out, and I have enough to put us up in some cheap motel for a little while. So onward we go.

Walking out of the bathroom, I also wish I'd drunk my coffee before calling Noelle. It's sure to be cold now.

Lukewarm coffee has nothing on my insides when I reach the end of the hall and spot the man who's just walked through the door.

He's tall. Bald. A human brick in neutral colors. A mosaic of shapes runs up one side of his face, more like a sinister mask than a tattoo.

I've never seen him before, but my instincts tell me he's more bad news—what else?—even before his eyes lock on Dad and he's heading for our table.

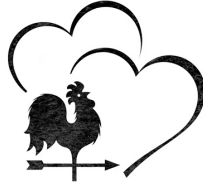
It. Can't. Be.

I shoot around the end of the bar, and in my hurry to get to my father, I bump into the tall glum man dressed in business attire who's on his feet and making his way toward the bathrooms.

“Sorry!” I say and continue rushing toward the table.

Baldy has already arrived, though, and I can hear him snarling behind a nasty smirk.

“Never thought I'd find your ass in this storm. You finally ready to talk sense, old man, or what?”

NO DULL MOMENT (RIDGE)

“**M**an, if I know one thing about you—and I’ve learned all I need to know about Ridge Barnet for this lifetime—you’re full of shit. This place is perfect.” Grady gives me the evil eye, picking up another glass from the washer behind the bar to towel dry.

I smile, throwing an arm around Tobin’s shoulders. He’s sitting on the stool next to me.

His eyes flick to my hand like he’s ready to tear it off. How he’s spent his life by my side, a glorified babysitter trying to save me from myself, I’ll never know.

Poor bastard.

He’s in his fifties now. He must’ve loved the few years I was in the military with Uncle Sam playing chaperone instead.

Probably the only time he’s relaxed in his entire life. If only it’d convinced him I can look after my own sorry ass, but I keep him around because I know what a struggle it is for valets his age to find new work.

My ma hired him originally, then made him my personal valet when I got older. Mainly because at fifteen, a kid’s old enough to avoid lighting the house on fire, but too stupid to avoid speeding tickets and hangovers from contraband booze—hopefully not at the same time.

“I’m right, aren’t I, Tobin? Back me up,” I say, pulling him into the conversation with Grady, who’s hell-bent on insisting we do a film here in town.

He's too proud of fixing this place up. Ever since he took over the Purple Bobcat from Wylie last fall, I think the bar's right up there with his kids in the pride and joy department.

"Tobin," I grunt, nudging him again.

"Do we really need to have this debate? Perhaps it's time we go," Tobin answers, tugging down the cuffs of his white dress shirt and flicking my arm away. "It's still snowing, Ridge. The driveway will be drifted over by now, and if it's not plowed out by morning—"

"I'm not ready to go home to an empty house, where I'm sure we'll be snowed in for days. We have four-wheel drive for a reason," I tell him, taking another pull off my beer. "Lighten up and tell Grady here that Westerns aren't selling like they used to. You know I'm talking from experience."

That's the excuse the producer of my last film used to explain why the movie was a dud.

Hardly true.

The script sucked, the creative team bungled the plot, and the conflict was all too predictable. They turned my glorious redeemed outlaw flick into a piss-poor shoot 'em up with a flimsy romance so bad I think any Harlequin author would jump at the chance to slap them upside the head.

Nothing like the stuff real Western fans want.

They like action. Mystery. Good guys and bad guys and heroines who sass off and give a dude a fight before they torch the sheets.

If you're going to spend two hours glued to a chair, watching a screen, you expect something *gripping*, dammit.

"I tell you, Ridge," Grady rumbles again, refilling Tobin's water. "The market's due for a comeback anytime. You hear the latest news from one state over? They had a showdown worthy of John Wayne, a ghost town, even a frigging rock from—"

"Dude. This isn't Heart's Edge," I cut in, holding up a finger. "This is Dallas, North Dakota. You want this place to

be movie famous—or even Heart’s Edge-documentary famous—you need a good reason to put it on the map.”

Grady drags a hand through his thick beard, his eyebrows pulling together. “We’ve had to eat our drama pie. Hell, that tale with North Earhart Oil, how old man Reed’s granddaughter inherited everything, and how Bella and her bodyguard saved Dallas from those Jupiter Oil fucks...now *that’s* a story. Great movie material right there. She wound up marrying her bodyguard. Tell me that ain’t romance.”

I snort, trying not to laugh as I glug down another sip of beer.

“I mean, Edison might be Hollywood stuff. He’s a lot more lovable than Bojack.”

“Shit, man, the only thing Edison the horse *can’t* do is speak,” Grady says, grinning as the oil guys laugh at our conversation.

Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard the whole wild story before.

I know Drake and Bella Larkin personally. They’re my neighbors.

As close to real neighbors as they can be, with each of us owning more acreage than the eye can see. They’re good people, and I like them. I’ve caught their boy Edison on my property more than a few times and brought him home after he Houdinis his way out every lock known to man.

Exactly why I’d never blow their privacy by pitching anything about their lives to the industry.

Based on a true story sucks for a lot of folks when it’s their story.

Drake and Bella are too smart for that crap and too busy, practically employing half this town in the oil fields.

“Ridge,” Tobin says in his slightly smarmy, always stern tone. “It’s going on eight o’clock.”

“Oh, is that my bedtime?” I ask, letting out a chuckle, then looking at Grady. “You see what I put up with? I’ll trade you for the kids.”

He rolls his eyes, topping off my beer.

Truth be told, I'm not nearly as drunk as I'm letting on. I just like pulling old Tobin's tail every once in a while, waiting for the day I might be able to get him plastered enough to stop fussing over damn near every detail of everything.

That's the good part about being an actor—well, *former* actor.

I can still turn the charm on and off on demand. The other thing about being an actor, you have to learn to believe in lies, in fiction, in the utterly ridiculous.

Maybe I've been doing that most of my life, even before making my first movie.

One thing that's true is that the winter this year doesn't want to end. It's late March, and we're still getting enough powder to make it look like the second coming of Christmas.

When I moved to Nothing, North Dakota, I'd wanted out of the limelight. A low profile and a chance to remake my life away from California and any gossipy asshole ready to flash a camera in my face.

It was easy to get that here.

I just wish it didn't come with a metric fuck-ton of winter.

Tobin and I have been cooped up at the ranch for months going stir-crazy. Even the biggest, sleekest places you spend a pretty penny having tailored to your specifications start to feel like prisons when there's only one person to talk to.

After hearing another storm was due tonight, I'd insisted we go to town, stock up on supplies, and visit other human beings while we can.

Ideally, human beings who don't spend their Friday nights with an ironing board and Russian lit novels bigger than my head.

Hell, it could be two weeks before we even get mail again.

Not that I receive a lot that escapes being fed to the fireplace, but the whole rain, snow, sleet, or hail brag isn't

true. Not when it comes to postal deliveries in rural North Dakota.

A junk letter offering a chance to win a million bucks in a sweepstakes isn't worth a mailman sliding off the road and turning up frozen solid in the spring thaw.

I'm only *slightly* exaggerating. Without a plow, those drifts outside could swallow a person whole until summer.

"Need I remind you, we have groceries," Tobin says, lifting his eyebrows.

I laugh, loving that predictable and endearing face he makes when he's really had enough of me for one night but can't bring himself to tell me off. My eyes wander the bar.

Banter, beer, and good company aside, I can't shake the sense that something's off with the vibe here tonight.

Not with me, but with someone close by. It's not Grady or the oil guys, or even that married couple in the corner enjoying a quiet dinner.

Call it a sixth sense. An instinct I should thank the Army for helping me develop. It saved us more than a few times when enemy combatants decided to make our lives a little more interesting than the monotony of patrol.

Turning, I see the other couple, the girl and the older guy.

She'd caught my eye like a fly in a trap when she walked in, red-faced and bundled up and drumming her boots off. I know I've been cooped up in a Dallas winter too long when a country girl who's a hot mess just looks...hot.

Fuck me.

I know how it sounds.

Desperate, outlandish, probably a little borked in the head. My buddy, Grady, might be the first to tell anyone I'm *all* of those things, and I might tell him where he can shove it.

The woman was magnetic.

Two pale-blue eyes set in a shapely face, framed by a wavy mane of golden blonde hair she tugged free from her hat.

The cute kind of oval face that makes any red-blooded dude want to stare a little longer.

Long legs made for sin, supple frame, a little extra cushion in all the right places.

I've seen enough scrawny supermodels for this lifetime back in L.A.

She wore a puffy white coat, tight blue jeans, and insulated rubber boots that came up to her knees. Black ones. They were so coated with snow when she'd walked in she had to damn near dance on the mat to pry it off.

Seems too snow-packed to have just walked across the parking lot. She hadn't come inside until later, several minutes after the old man.

I couldn't even get a clear view at her goods, which tells me right now I'm more buzzed than I should be.

Like hell I'm admitting anything to Tobin, though.

I also can't decipher the weird look she gave me.

It had its own gravity. This desperate fencing stare that had me pushing my toes into the ground, ready to jump up and approach her if she'd let it linger a few seconds longer.

She didn't.

Doesn't mean I stopped keeping an eye on her between doling out plenty of crap to go around for Tobin and Grady.

Magnetic Girl isn't alone anymore. There's a third person at their table, a punk with a face tattoo who joined the old man and young woman.

I don't like it. Can't shake the sense that this visitor who walked in from the cold earlier isn't quite welcome.

I don't recognize them, though. For all I know, they might be locals, or just travelers unlucky enough to be passing through on a stormy night.

I've only lived here since late last summer, and due to being snowed in at the ranch, I don't know that many Dallas folk.

Surveying the scene, I replay what I remember. They'd ordered coffee after walking inside, but she'd gone to the restroom before drinking hers, nearly knocking over Tobin in her rush back. The old man sat alone for a while, fighting back a cough between sips of water. Then came the prick who's hunched over, glaring across their table at them.

"Hey, Grady." I curl a finger, instructing him to lean over the bar and come closer. "You know those guys?"

I nod toward the trio.

"Nah, never seen them before. Why?" Grady shrugs his big shoulders. "Guess I should see if they need more coffee. The old guy said he wanted to fill up a thermos for the road. Can't imagine they plan to go far in this mess."

I spin my stool all the way around so I can get a better look at them.

Yeah, there's something seriously off here, no question.

The bald guy seems to be doing most of the talking, running his mouth like he's the center of attention. The girl keeps shaking her head. The old guy looks thoroughly pissed, like he'd enjoy nothing better than ringing Baldy's neck, but between his coughing and age, he doesn't have it in him.

I don't like this shit. I hate bullies, thugs, or scum-of-the-earth types throwing their weight around.

Whatever else I don't know about their situation, I know Baldy over there is all three.

"Ridge," Tobin says with a warning tone, gently jostling my shoulder with his elbow.

He must see the hawkish look in my eye.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything," I tell him, already planting my feet firmly on the floor.

Then the bald fuck grabs the woman's wrist.

Change of plans.

"Oh, hell no," I mutter through clenched teeth.

Grady gives me a concerned look, but it's already too late.

I'm up, barreling toward them before my brain has a chance to catch up with my stride.

There's a reason I can't stand to see some towering ogre jerk a lady around like she's his toy poodle. And right now, that reason comes back to me in hot, angry red flashes screaming *do something!*

I know it's none of my business.

I know it's ill-advised.

I know Tobin's about to have a cow—probably a whole damn herd—but he knows we're throwing down when anybody this dumb punches my magic button.

In seconds, I'm standing next to their table, planting a hand firmly on the goon's shoulder.

“Let her go,” I snarl.

“Huh? This ain't your rodeo, cowboy,” the goon says, glaring at the woman. “How 'bout you mind your own damn ___”

How about no?

I grab his wrist so hard, bone shifts under my fingers. It's the same hand he's using to hold on to hers. I dig my fingertips deep into his flesh, bruising muscle and nerves, applying a cruel, relentless pressure until he's forced to release her.

Still controlling his muscles with my grip, I lift his hand. “You've got no clue where your business ends and mine begins. Want to find out?”

His face becomes a frozen snarl, deep lines twisting that mess of ink up his cheek. It's like watching a chessboard being twisted in half.

He pulls back his other hand, fixing to take a swing at me.

Bad move.

Growling, I dig my fingers into his neck with the hand still on his shoulder, deep into his nerves.

For some reason, most people think violent nerve pinches are fables. But if you know the right technique...

It's hard to suppress a satisfied grin.

His head twitches uncontrollably. He tries to sputter out a word, but it dies in his mouth.

Seconds later, his whole upper body is a jerking, confused mess.

"This is what I call a sleeper hold," I whisper. "I've made it my specialty. You have about ten seconds to decide if you want to spend the next two hours on the floor or listen to what I have to say."

The prick's dark eyes blink, stunned and confused.

"Your funeral," I growl, beginning to count off precious seconds. "Five...four...three..."

"A-all right! You fuck," he gasps out.

I relax my hold ever so slightly, enough to keep him awake but still under my control.

Finally, I turn to the girl, who looks like she's staring down a Mack truck flying dead at her.

"You know this guy?" I ask.

She shakes her head slowly, too dazed to speak.

"His name's Jackknife," the old man says cautiously. "Jackknife Pete."

I can't help it, a chuckle bellows out of me. They might as well call him *Two Inch Dick*.

"Jackknife Pete, huh?" I mutter, letting his hand fall limply to his side.

Jackknife?

In one fluid jerk, I reach down, flipping up his right pant leg. I find exactly what I'd expected.

A concealed blade. A long one in a leather sheath attached to his boot. Some people are so predictable, they make every bad movie archetype recycled a thousand times look original.

I rip the knife out and toss it behind me, where I know Tobin will retrieve it.

“Do you want him here?” I ask the woman.

“No. Not really,” she answers.

“Who the hell *are* you?” Jackknife Pete asks, wiping the corner of his mouth. I guess he’s reached the rabid drool stage of anger. “Why are you butting in where you don’t belong? You stupid?”

Hardly, but it looks like I let my hold slip too much. *Shame.*

I intensify the pressure on his neck again, drilling my thumb in deep, one flick away from blocking half the blood flow to his brain.

Between the Army and years of acting, I’ve played many roles. Right now, though, I’m thinking this woman and the old man need a little chaotic good.

“I’m the dude you’ll answer to if you ever touch her again,” I bite off.

“W-what? You don’t even know—”

The next sound out of his mouth is more like a wild hog stuck in the mud. My thumb stabs into his neck, deeper, until he’s twitching again, unable to speak.

“You have no fucking idea who I am, or who I know, Dickless Pete. So let’s not pretend you do.” This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time. I can feel the adrenaline rush kicking in. “For all you know, I could be her husband. Imagine how much I’d love to kick your ass straight into a snowdrift then.”

“S-she’s not—”

“Married?” I give him another quick pinch, watching his eyes roll back with delight. “Not yet. We haven’t set a date.”

There’s a loud, grinding sound behind me. I don’t even need to turn around to see.

It's Tobin, clearing his throat—utterly mortified at the load of bull I'm improvising by the second.

Whatever, fine. I guess my valet doesn't deserve a heart attack tonight, so I ease off Pete's shoulder the tiniest bit, heeding Tobin's warning.

The scumbag gasps for air, shuddering as real feeling comes back into his upper body, chasing away the numbing dance of a thousand needles.

I know what he's experiencing. It's like being stabbed with a flurry of white-hot pins by a mad scientist trained in evil acupuncture.

“This is getting old. I'm ready to call it a night. Time for you to leave,” I say, giving Pete a helpful shove away from the table.

Too much. He topples right over and almost falls on his face, but his knees catch him in this stricken, crouching position.

Wiggling, shrugging, it takes him two tiresome attempts before he gets to his feet.

Not in any mood to wait longer, I grab his arm and drag him to the door.

“You idiot, you'll be sorry!” Dickless Pete grumbles, seething.

“I already *am* sorry to ruin my evening with a face as ugly as yours,” I tell him as I throw the door open.

“You don't get it. Those deadbeat assholes owe us, and now they're trying to skip. We had an agreement!” he hisses.

I don't even lift an eyebrow.

Whatever this agreement is—if it exists—can't be legal. Even the most aggressive debt collectors are bound by consumer protections. And I'm pretty sure there isn't a loophole that involves stalking your borrowers into a goddamned bar and getting grabby with a lady in public.

“Then go ahead and look me up. I’ll tell you where you can shove your agreement, little man.”

I push him, flinging his bulky body through the door so hard he struggles to catch his footing.

And fails.

I watch the bully go spinning and plant facedown in the snow, waving his arms helplessly to get up. When he finally peels himself out of it, he hightails it to a black SUV he’d left running. I also notice an old Ford with a horse trailer hitched to it not that far away, plus a few older beat-up trucks belonging to the oil guys.

The one with the trailer must be the old man and woman’s vehicle. I shut the door, and as I turn around, I tell Tobin. “Keep an eye on him. Tell Grady, too.”

Tobin nods, moving to the window near the door and looking out over the frost line on the glass.

A second later, I see there’s no need to clue Grady in. My friend was watching the whole time from behind the bar, his jaw set, ready for a fight.

He lifts his chin, as if he’s just waiting for me to say the word.

I flash him a thumbs-up. No need to involve the minuscule Dallas police force if everything’s under control. Not on a night like this when they should be helping people broken down on the road before they turn into popsicles.

I walk back to the table. “Where you folks headed?”

“Montana,” the old man says. “Miles City.”

The woman stares into her coffee cup. Can’t tell if it’s the run-in with Pete that’s left her shaken or something else.

No way in hell can I let them go to Montana like this. It’d take hours just to hit the state line in this storm, let alone chugging on to Miles City. That’s not even weighing the fact that Pete would be hot on their tail, first chance he gets.

Between the storm, their old truck, and that sorry sack of thug, they wouldn't make it ten miles up the road before something horrific happened.

"There's a motel in Dallas," I say. "About five miles west of here. You can follow me there, if you'd like."

The old man opens his mouth to speak, to protest, but starts coughing instead.

Shit.

"Thanks," the woman says quietly, laying a hand on the old man's shoulder. "We could actually use something like that. The storm's worse than we thought."

"Is he your father?" I ask, nodding their way.

Sadness fills her eyes as she nods back slowly.

She's still looking at her old man, not me. This deep, sudden sadness wells up and douses my heart. Something about the unconditional love that never fails between a parent and their kid, despite it all, maybe.

"Want to tell me why that charming gent I escorted out of here is so interested in following you?" I ask.

Her eyes widen. She shakes her head. "Listen. I really appreciate what you did, stepping in, but—"

"Ridge."

The harsh urgency in Tobin's whisper has me turning around and moving back to where he's standing by the bar.

My lip curls. I glance out the window and see a shadow stalking around in the snow. Undoubtedly the goon near the horse trailer.

Apparently, the jackass hasn't had enough yet.

"Give me that knife," I tell Tobin.

"You're drunk, Ridge. Handing you a combat knife while you're intoxicated hardly seems like it'd help de-escalate the situation."

“De-escalate,” I grunt. “Is that what we’re here to do? I’m not the asshole hunting those folks.”

“You shouldn’t be involved,” Tobin says, his eyes pleading behind his owlish spectacles, the loyal wingman—or babysitter—until the end. “If we can guide them to the motel in town, however, I’ll do the driving.”

I toss him a look that says it’s already too late not to get involved in this, and hold out my hand. “Tobin. Knife now.”

With a guttural sigh, he passes me the dagger.

“For the love of God, don’t do anything rash. We don’t have the kind of legal support here we did in California.”

“I know,” I say quietly, then turn and stalk toward the front, giving Grady a look along the way that says *I’ve got this*.

I also know there’s nothing in the world that’s going to stop me from running off the twit with the devil ink who doesn’t know when to quit.

Pushing open the door, I find him waiting, just a few feet outside.

“Yo! You really are dumb as a rock, aren’t you?” I’ve stopped next to his SUV, waiting for him to look at me.

When I finally catch his eyes, I sink the knife down in the front tire on the driver’s side.

“Hey!” he shouts, charging toward me.

The fact that his ride’s still running means there’s a good chance it’s unlocked.

Yep. I open the truck’s door and hit the lock button, then slam the door shut, making sure to ram the knife in the back tire before he arrives. A satisfying rush of air hisses out.

“What the fuck!” he roars, diving for me across the last few paces.

It’s hilarious how easy it is to smack him in the throat with my forearm and catch him behind the ankles with one good kick.

As he goes down, I pull the knife out of the tire, then dash around the vehicle and blow two more tires on the other side.

He's up and coming at me again, shouting a blue streak.

Twisting so his blow hits my shoulder, I get a good hold of his neck, digging in my fingers.

He fights it by tightening his muscles.

No dice.

I'm already bored with this, so I dig my fingertips in deep and then pivot the tip of the knife against the other side of his neck. He freezes up a second later, realizing his predicament.

"Now, slow poke, be a friend and show me where the tracking device is on that vehicle." My eyes flick to the horse trailer belonging to the folks inside.

He starts to blabber, no doubt winding up his lies. But between the nerve torture and pushing the tip of the knife harder against his skin, he goes quiet.

"Let's go." Snarling, I shove him at the old Ford and the horse trailer.

He tries to resist, but my adrenaline makes me a little crazy, giving me a high like I haven't had in a long time.

It isn't even a question.

I win.

A few hurried minutes later, I count no less than *three* tracking devices in the snow by my feet. He's shivering from digging through the caked snow to remove them from the vehicle. Poor bastard should've remembered gloves.

"Hurry up already, and that better be all of them," I tell him. "If I find one more you missed, you're dead."

He sputters but has just enough sense to bite his tongue.

I get it, really.

Dickless hates losing. Most people do. Particularly when they're used to throwing their weight around against targets who can't fight back.

I think his face is redder from hot anger than it is from the blistering cold.

“You...you wouldn’t dare,” he chokes out.

“Try me, my man. I don’t make threats I can’t carry out,” I say, pushing my face close to those ugly-ass tattoos. Whoever did him up also did a hack job.

He curses, flinching away and climbing up the side of the horse trailer. It’s like watching a bloated chimpanzee trying to struggle up a brick wall. Finally, he pushes himself up high enough and pulls off a fourth tracking device from the roof of the trailer.

As it falls into the snow near my feet, I ask, “Where’s your phone?”

Again, he plays mum, tongue caught in the total humiliation he deserves.

“I want it,” I say. “Either hand it over, or I take it the hard way again.”

His eyes narrow and I laugh.

If I weren’t retired, I’d reconsider the casting invites that come in sometimes for suspense flicks. This shit is fun.

I spin around, giving him a side kick that I’d mastered as a teenager and still practice in my basement gym. A huge bout of satisfaction hits as it strikes the side of his head.

Damn, I’ve needed this.

Not the whole hurting someone, but the tension release.

Turns out, this whole off-the-grid retirement thing has been boring as hell. Working out just isn’t the same, not as satisfying.

Also, I think this counts as community service. No one gets a name like Jackknife without being a royal asshole and hurting people. Can’t say I mind avenging a few of his victims, whoever they are.

I dig two cell phones out of his pockets, and knowing they probably have plenty of tracking too, I shove them in my back

pocket, along with his knife. I'll destroy it all later.

Right now, I need to get that woman and her dad out of here.

This goon can't go anywhere with his keys locked up and four flats, but that's also a problem. He's stuck here. They can't be.

I pick up the four trackers as I walk back to the door of the bar, leaving Dickless raging in the snow.

Once inside, I tell Tobin, "Start our truck. The old man's riding with you. I'll ride with the girl and give her directions."

"Ridge—"

"Start our truck." I'll let him lay into me with his overly polite *concerns* after we're home.

For now, I cross the room and drop the four black trackers on the table. "Found these on your truck and trailer."

"Son of a bitch," the old man says, his eyes bugging out as he coughs again.

"Hope you two don't mind a change of plans. Our friend outside will be stuck here for a while, and I don't think the Crow Motel's safe with him hanging around town. You're coming home with me," I say. "I have a barn for your horses and a guesthouse."

The woman looks at her father, who's still coughing, then at me with such worry and trepidation in her big blue eyes that my heart actually aches for her.

That hasn't happened in forever, but if anyone deserves some compassion, it's her tonight. I'd say she's had a tough row to hoe lately.

I brush the snow off my shoulders and arms while she pats her dad on his back. They'll need a minute to think it over, so I head for the bar.

"Grady, you should close up a little early tonight. The snow's coming down mighty thick out there now. Call Sheriff

Wallace, tell him there's a moron outside with four flats and he locked his keys in his car."

"You're sure that's his *only* problem?" he rumbles in a low tone, leaning in, his eyes dark.

"Yeah. I helped set him straight with everything else."

Satisfied, Grady nods and walks over to the oilmen, politely closing out their tabs.

Tobin lingers by the window, glaring into the night, the key fob to our truck dangling in his hand.

I round the table to the old man and stoop down next to him.

"My name's Ridge. What's yours?"

"Nelson," he says with a gasp. "Nelson Sellers."

"You look like a smart man, Nelson. A good man, but you also look like you need some rest and a warm bed for the night." I lay a hand on his shoulder. "I give you my word, you and your daughter are safe with me."

He studies me, evaluating whether or not I'm one more piece of bad luck.

I don't know him from Adam. To him, I could be a serial killer, a brazen drunk, or just plain fucked in the head. Maybe I'll admit to the last one since I charged into their business, just as long as their dealings with Pete are done for now.

I glance at the trackers I'd laid on the table. "A hell of a lot safer than you would be out on the road. Trust me," I say.

He looks at the trackers, his daughter, and then up at me, and nods slowly.

"I believe you're right," he says, the only sane response even if he doesn't like it.

"I know I am." I jerk my head at Tobin. "That's my friend over there, Tobin. He'll give you a ride to my ranch. It's about ten miles from here. I'll drive your truck and help your daughter get your horses settled in while Tobin gets you set up in the guesthouse, all right?"

Nelson looks at his daughter again.

She gives him a slight smile, shrugs, and nods.

I hadn't even realized I'd been holding my breath until her meager smile turns my way.

"Great. Grab your coats and I'll be right back." I scoop up the GPS trackers and walk over to the bar.

"Got a hammer back there?" I ask Grady.

He frowns, folding his powerful arms, and waves toward a door behind the bar. "In the back. Don't leave a mess for me, Ridge."

I round the bar.

"No big. I just need to borrow it. I'll pick up every piece."

I enter the little service room next to the kitchen, find the hammer hanging on a wall, and find a clear spot on his metal workbench. Nothing of Pete's is military grade, and it's easy to bust apart. The phones snap, crackle, and pop with a few good swings after I've removed their batteries.

The asshole outside probably has them connected to his SUV and God only knows what else, but hopefully this helps slow down his mischief. Just for good measure, I give his precious blade a good whack. It tears off its handle and goes skittering across the surface.

Before leaving, I toss the shattered remnants of the trackers, phones, and the knife in the trash, then grab my coat off the back of the bar stool.

"What should I do about the prick outside?" Grady asks. "Don't like the thought of him hanging around after I close up."

"Leave him. You called the sheriff, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but they said it'll be a couple hours before they can get out here for a lockout. And all the towing places are closed or filled to capacity in this shit."

That bums me out.

I was hoping they'd come haul him in and commandeer his vehicle, too. I'm sure the devious bastard has a record.

“My guess is he's stolen more than one car in his time. If the cops are dragging that much, he'll be out of your hair soon enough. He'll figure out a way to get the doors unlocked and hit the road with his flats. Especially once he hears the law's coming.”

“Works for me. One less problem to deal with.” Grady shrugs, but gives me a small grin. “Thanks for a fun night, Ridge.”

I chuckle and walk toward the table.

Whatever else happened, at least it was interesting. My stomach hiccups as my gaze locks on the woman's.

Damn.

Now I have to face the equally unpredictable consequences of my fun night. Everything old Tobin will give me a talking to about.

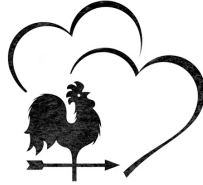
Mom always said sometimes I got too deep in my roles back when I was every producer's golden boy.

Sometimes, I let my heart do the thinking instead of my head.

Go ahead and guess how that ends.

Not fucking well.

NO FIGHT LEFT (GRACE)



I still can't figure out if Dad and I are being rescued or kidnapped—or which would be worse.

There's something else I can't shake, too.

This guy in his red-and-black plaid shirt, who calls himself Ridge, looks oddly familiar.

It's one of those freaky I-swear-I've-seen-someone-who-looks-just-like-you spidey sense moments.

But in my state of mind right now, I might just be comparing him to Paul Bunyan because he's got the flannel lumbersexual thing down in spades.

Rather than a blue ox, this guy has Tobin, his straight-out-of-corporate-looking sidekick. Tobin seems younger than Dad by a good ten years or so, maybe early fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair, oval glasses, and frown lines that have only deepened since the entire scene at the table started.

I can't figure that out, but honestly, it's the least of my worries.

Ridge, with crystal-clear blue eyes and dark brown hair, has a perma-grin plastered on his face that's barely faded since he'd first stormed up to our table and laid down the law.

I still can't believe he frog-marched Clay Grendal's goon out into the snow like a bag of trash.

I still can't believe he stepped in, offering to help a couple total strangers.

I *definitely* still can't believe he implied we're dating—a heartbeat from being flipping engaged.

The size of my disbelief could have its own zip code.

Granted, the Purple Bobcat was almost deserted, but if it's anything like most small towns, word travels fast.

Who knows how he plans to live *that* rumor down.

Even now, the whole event feels like a blur. I still have no idea how Ridge forced Jackknife Pete off me with nothing more than one hand.

I've never seen anything like that Vulcan death-grip he used, either.

Up until tonight, I'd only heard of Jackknife Pete, but had never met him.

Those GPS trackers Ridge mentioned, the ones he must've destroyed in the back room—I'm assuming that was the hammering I'd heard—must be how Pete found us. He'd probably been following us all day.

It's a small miracle he caught us here, where there was someone to help, and not back in Minnesota when we had to change that flat.

I've made peace with the fact we're not going to Noelle's.

She truly doesn't need this kind of trouble.

"Let's go," Ridge says to me as he shrugs on the brown leather coat he'd lifted off the bar stool.

Dad and I fall into step beside him, heading for the door.

Again, I wonder if this is actually a good idea, accepting an invite to stay with this strange man, but we don't have another option.

Dad needs rest. Ditto for Rosie and Stern. So do *I*.

"Let me have the keys to your truck," Ridge says as Tobin opens the door.

I hand them over. There's no use arguing. It's still snowing, heavy white slop that's only piled up higher and

deeper ever since we entered the bar.

There's a black SUV parked by the door with four flat tires and Pete inside, glaring at us.

A harsh chill sweeps up my back that has nothing to do with the cold.

Ridge slaps the hood of the SUV, hard, pointing two fingers at his eyes and then at Pete.

He's wearing that grin for our benefit, but his eyes are ferocious. There's no mistaking their message.

Don't you dare.

God. My heart crawls up my throat just watching how he's toying with the thug.

I truly don't know if this guy's drunk, high, or just plain crazy.

Don't know if I want to know, either, because he's our only ticket to a little sanity tonight—as insane as that is to think.

Ridge opens the passenger door of a big silver truck with dual back tires. He holds it open for Dad to climb in. I can smell new leather, new car scent as I stand nearby, watching my father use the running board to ease up and then buckle his seat belt.

“We'll see you at the house,” Ridge says as he shuts the door. Then he tells Tobin, “Find him something to help with that cough, and some soup. I know we've got something in the pantry.”

“Certainly,” Tobin says as he climbs in the driver's seat, sounding more like an employee of some sort obeying his boss rather than a friend.

Weird.

While we're walking toward my rusted old two-tone tan Ford, he asks, “Sellers' Pumpkins, huh? How's business?”

Oh.

Right.

Though the paint is faded on the wooden rack on the box of the truck, it's still legible. Amazing Jackknife needed a tracking device at all.

There's nothing like trying to disappear with your name plastered across the side of your getaway vehicle.

Maybe we just hoped we had time before they'd notice we'd blown town.

Maybe we hoped Clay and his merry band of monsters would chase after something more lucrative than our farm and the thing he's been after all along. The sick, gut-wrenching thing I still can't bring myself to admit.

Wrong.

The phone call to Noelle proved it even before the goon showed up.

"That was our farm, our old business back in Wisconsin," I say. "We raised pumpkins."

Under normal circumstances, it would've been a good gig, even if it was seasonal. Not one that would've made us rich, but it had provided a living, and my parents enjoyed it.

Ridge gives me a firm, quiet look.

I can't tell if he's amused or laughing at my lame pumpkin-growing past.

"We had a huge pick-your-own field." I nod at the horse trailer. "Rosie and Stern pulled a big hay wagon around, giving customers rides. It was kind of a big deal in the fall. Gift shop, corn maze, hot cider and treats, bonfires at night... everything except the zombie costumes."

"Sounds fun."

I pull open the passenger door.

"It was for a while." No lie. I don't even want to think about how much I'm missing it right now.

Grabbing the snow brush off the floor, I shut the door and start wiping the snow off the windshield.

He walks around to the driver's side and starts the truck, then circles around and grabs hold of the brush. "Let me take care of it."

"But—"

"Darlin', you deaf? Go check your horses before you freeze to death out here."

Okayyy. So, apparently, he's got that large-and-in-charge bluntness down pat.

I take off to check on Rosie and Stern.

They're a matching team of American standardbreds.

Both brown with white blazes on their foreheads, white socks, and black tails and manes, they're hard to tell apart, except to Dad and me.

Rosie, sweetness incarnate, loves her attention. Stern prefers to just be fed and left alone, besides a good brushing and a carrot every so often. He practically falls asleep during grooming.

They both give me a friendly snort.

"I'll let you out soon, guys," I tell them. "I promise."

"Rosie and Stern? Which one's which?"

I whirl around, surprised he remembers their names. "Um, this is Rosie on this side, and Stern's over there."

"Hope they like roosters. Loud-ass roosters with lungs like bagpipes."

"Come again?"

"Eh, you'll see." He nods and gestures at the truck. "Let's go. My buzz has worn off no thanks to cueball and his fun, so I'll drive, if you're cool. It isn't far."

I look him over, sizing him up, and then nod.

Once we're in the truck, I have to ask, "So you have chickens?"

"No." He puts the machine in drive. "I have *a* chicken. Cornelius Pecker. I was gonna call him Peckerhead, but Tobin

insisted on something more elegant,” he says, pulling the truck forward, making a wide turn, and then driving onto the highway. “Sometimes I just call him Corny-Pecker. That’s enough innuendo, right?”

I hide my smile, unsure whether to laugh or cry for the poor rooster.

“Fair warning: he’s had the barn all to himself, so he might be grumpy when we get there.” He grins and winks at me. “Guess I should be warning Rosie and Stern instead.”

I shake my head, somewhat dumbfounded. “Why do you only have one rooster again?”

“Because he was the only chicken left at the feedstore. Someone dropped him off with a whole bunch. Didn’t want him. The rest sold out. They were going to make him into a casserole, so I brought him home. Let me tell you, he was all sorts of pissed when I opened the back of my truck and set him loose. He’s calmed down some since then...about four months ago. I’ll get him some friends later this spring. Eventually.”

I shake my head.

I’m not sure if hauling home an angry rooster makes him nice, or again, a total nutjob. Which makes me think of our current dilemma.

“Why are you doing this? Helping us, I mean?”

“The truth?” he side-eyes me.

“Please.”

“Because I’ve literally been snowed in ever since I found out what winters are like in North Dakota. I’m bored out of my fucking skull and desperate for company. Not the good Samaritan stump speech you were looking for, I’m guessing, but...”

For the first time in a long while, a smile automatically appears on my face.

I don’t have to work hard to fake it, to pretend like I’ve had to do with Dad for months.

It actually doesn't fade off, either, so I call him out. "Nice, but try again."

Ridge snorts. "What, you don't believe me?"

"Nope. Nobody gets in a bar fight with an armed creep and brings two strangers to their house because they're just bored." I bite my tongue, wondering if I should be worried at his real motive.

Whatever it might be.

The sound of his laugh fills the cab. It's a deep, booming, infectious chuckle that sets me oddly at ease and makes it even harder to keep that dumb smile of mine suppressed.

"Shit, lady. You've never been to Dallas, North Dakota before have you?"

"No, but I've lived in Wisconsin my entire life." I shake my head. "It's not *that* different. Lots of space between towns, farms, nosy townsfolk. I wasn't born yesterday."

"You got a name to go with that mouth?" he asks, words that might sound rude coming from anyone else. But with the light tone, surprisingly, I don't mind.

"Grace. Grace Sellers."

"Well, Grace Sellers, what I said is the whole truth and nothing but. You're welcome to believe me or think I'm about to chain you up in my pumpkin farm out back. Honestly, I've never lived in a place this barren in my life. I was raised a city boy all my life until coming out here."

Huh. I don't get the big city vibe from him, but maybe that explains Tobin. He must've come from Bismarck, Minneapolis, maybe Chicago.

"Why'd you move out here if you hate it so much?"

"Early retirement," he tells me.

"Retirement?" I give him a puzzled look. "How old are you? You look way too young."

"Thirty-three. You?"

I rake him up and down slowly with another slow, suspicious look.

It just keeps getting weirder.

How can some farm boy *retire* in his early thirties?

“Twenty-five,” I say quietly.

“Sweet age for a lot of things,” he muses, smirking to himself.

Ugh. I feel like I’d have an easier time with ancient Greek than deciphering this dude.

“While we’re playing twenty questions, how about you tell me what you’re doing in the middle of North Dakota, pulling Rosie and Stern through a blizzard, with a charmer like Dickless Pete on your heels?”

I try not to burst out giggling at his nickname for Pete.

“That’s...kinda a long story.”

“We’ve got the time. In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re barely moving five miles an hour in this mess.”

I nod slowly. Maybe so. But my stomach practically eats itself at the thought of confessing our whole dilemma to a total stranger.

“Well, I would, but...it’s not my story to tell.”

“Your father’s?”

“Right.” I hold in a breath, not really wanting to direct him at Dad either, especially in his weary state.

Ridge’s gaze remains fixed on the road, staring through the billowing snow that’s coming down at a faster clip now than it was before.

“Fair enough. You’re lucky he’s still around,” he says. “My old man died when I was eight. Not that I’d seen him a whole lot before then—busy man, big company, maybe you know how it is—then my mother died a few years back.”

“So did mine.” I bite my lip.

I hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

What can I say? There's just something about riding through a dark, wintry night with a handsome stranger who just saved your bacon that brings out awkward confessions.

All the more reason why I need to remember to keep my mouth shut.

"I'm sorry," he grinds out. "Never an easy thing losing family."

I swallow the anxious boulder in my throat. "I'm sorry, too. Heartbreak hurts us all."

He turns off the highway, wheeling the old truck onto a narrow road.

"Hold on. This could get a little rough even though we're moving like a snail," he says. "This road likes to drift over."

I can faintly make out a set of glowing red taillights a short distance ahead. I'm grateful the dual tires of that huge truck with Dad and Tobin inside are breaking a neat path for us. Well, *neatish*.

The old Ford wouldn't manage in this without the dually in front of us. "Who else lives at your ranch?"

"Just three of us, darlin'. Me, Tobin, and old Corny himself."

"Cornelius," I say, mainly so that I won't laugh out loud.

"You'll see which name fits when you meet him," he tells me.

Shaking aside another laugh, I ask, "How can you call it a ranch if you only have a single rooster?"

"I can and I do. It's a work in progress." He chuckles, again with that deep, rich masculine vibration. "I always planned on buying more critters, or livestock, or whatever the fuck...maybe hire on a few ranch hands to help with the upkeep. Tobin and I are learning as we go. We're still pretty close to ground zero."

"Why'd you buy a ranch, then, if it's such a hassle?"

“I *want* the hassle, lady.” He shrugs, flicking his eyes briefly over to me. “Something to do. When I decided to move out to the sticks, I knew I’d need to keep the mind and body busy. Even with a place like mine, the winters out here are maddening enough. Think I’d wind up such a dull boy I’d be hallucinating ghosts by now if I didn’t have spring to look forward to soon. Allegedly.”

I smile at the obvious nod to *The Shining*.

It’s hardly out of place considering the creepy introduction we’ve had with Dickless—okay, I’m stealing his crude nickname, sue me—while everybody on this side of North Dakota has their status set to *snowed in*.

The odd tone in his voice says there’s something more to his move, too.

I wonder what, but I’m not in any headspace to fire off questions that might risk upsetting the guy who’s promised us a place to crash for the night.

Then we pull up to the ranch and my jaw hits my lap.

I can’t even breathe.

Ginormous would be a sad lie for this place. It’s more like...

...someone imported a team of architects to build a palace in Nowhere, North Dakota, which somehow still has all the outer charm of a real ranch.

Frosted with snow, it’s like I’m looking at a scene from a Christmas card come to life.

Everything glows cozy orange, lit up with huge yard lights perched on top of several poles like small moons. The house itself is an immense wooden structure with a sprawling front porch. Seems like it’s borrowed inspiration from the rustic lodges you can find on postcards.

Behind it, the red barn is two stories tall, with a green metal roof and a big rooster-shaped weathervane twirling slowly around a square cupola. My eyes flit across several other buildings, storage sheds I think, plus a smaller cabin

tucked back behind the house near a row of pine trees glazed white.

That cabin turns out to be the guesthouse Tobin escorts Dad to as soon as they park near it.

Then it's our turn, stopping next to the barn. Ridge gives me a wicked look as he shuts off the engine.

"Shit. Right. The house. I guess I should've warned you, but...I keep a low profile."

I don't even know what to say. Or what he's even hinting at.

Sure, a little notice that he's apparently a gazillionaire would've been nice. But now that it's obvious, and it breeds questions like rabbits, I don't know if I could even dream of scolding him.

Much less poking at his secrets after he said *low profile*.

"We're fine," I say weakly, pushing my door open. "Let me help you with Rosie and Stern."



CORNELIUS PECKER ISN'T NEARLY the shrieking grump he let on.

Ridge insists the red-crowned beast is just subdued tonight thanks to the storm, but I can't see the fuss.

The big white leghorn rooster seems happy enough to have company, scratching at his pile of hay and peering around curiously. Rosie and Stern are certainly pleased to be inside the heated barn.

Of course, the barn interior is just as magnificent as its exterior.

I've only seen pictures, but I can't help comparing it to the one the Budweiser Clydesdales live in. It's almost too neat, all polished wood and soft orange light, hangers for miscellaneous equipment, and silver water hookups positioned neatly throughout.

Once we get the horses settled, Ridge helps me carry our luggage into the cabin. No surprise, he carries several overstuffed travel bags like they're nothing.

Then, as he says goodnight, he mentions pulling the Ford into one of the sheds to keep it out of the snow if I need to grab anything else from it.

I thank him, shut the door, and huff out a breath.

Relief floods my brain, though I'm not sure it should.

The cabin is really a mid-sized house and only looks modest next to the mansion. It has a couple bedrooms with full baths, a kitchen, living room, and loft area. All very stylish modern country, decorated with log furniture and lots of red-and-black plaid—pillows, curtains, and tablecloths.

Like something straight out of a log and hearth magazine.

Dad slouches on a sofa in front of the gas fireplace that's crackling away, blowing a comfortable heat into the room.

"You know who Ridge reminds me of?" he says, hands out in front of him to catch the warmth.

I blink, grateful his words snap me out of the trance I've been in ever since we showed up here.

There's an armchair near one corner of the sofa, and a rocking chair on the other.

"No, who?" Walking over, I lean against the side of the armchair.

"That actor who used to show up in all the big films when you were a kid—Barnet. I think he did a couple really bad Westerns a while back."

"Dane Barnet?" I ask, though I'm sure that's who he means.

Oof.

It hits me like a snowball to the face.

There's little denying Ridge looks a lot like him, and Dad knows his Westerns. He's always loved them, but that can't

possibly be it...right?

It's too implausible, even if our mysterious benefactor for tonight is clearly loaded to the gills.

"Hmmm, I don't know, Dad. Just a weird coincidence, I bet. We've had plenty of those tonight," I say with a meager smile.

I don't have the heart to tell him Dane Barnet wouldn't be caught dead living on a ranch in small-town North Dakota. What kind of celeb molded straight from Hollywood royalty would?

"I'm telling you, it's him!" Dad takes another loud sip off the hot tea Tobin prepared before he headed back to the big house with Ridge. I can smell the spices.

He'd already eaten a bowl of chicken soup that Tobin also made him. There's an insulated carafe holding more of the tea on the coffee table, plus a bottle of cough syrup and a bottle of pain relievers.

"Everybody has a twin," I say, stepping in front of the chair. I sit, not wanting to tell him, yet knowing I have to deliver the bad news. "So, Noelle called, Dad."

He gives me a sharp look and for a second we lock eyes.

"Aw, hell." He hangs his head, rubbing a hand over the side of his face near one ear. "We can't go there, can we?"

My stomach sinks all over again.

I hate how he has this weird sixth sense for bad news sometimes.

"Not anymore. She told me somebody called and left a nasty message on their voicemail at the gift shop. They...they have their kids. It's frustrating as hell but it wouldn't be right."

His chest rattles as he sighs. It seems like the warmth the fire breathed back into his skin goes out of him, leaving this small, pale, fragile man next to me.

"I'm sorry, Gracie. You're right. And as much as I hate to do it, we'll have to deal with that bastard again. I'll sell the

horses, the truck, empty out what's left in the accounts...if Clay could be convinced to take my pension—”

“No way! You're not giving more to that horrid man,” I snap, the anguish bleeding out of me. It won't fix this. Rosie and Stern are old, and every penny we have won't cut it.

“Grace...”

“It won't be enough, Dad,” I say, softening my tone. “If there's anything we should know by now, it's that. Nothing's *ever* enough for him.”

“I'll give it up and go to the police, then. The FBI. Tell them everything. If I come clean, maybe there's a chance they'll—” He breaks into a fresh new coughing fit.

Seriously.

I can't take this.

So I lean in next to him, gingerly rubbing his back until it eases.

“Dad, no. We know it can't end well. We've been through this a hundred times.”

If anything, I'm understating how many times we've discussed a confession. We've literally played out every scenario, every what-if, every apparent escape *thousands* of times over the last couple years.

We both know involving the law means Clay gets to him eventually.

If not before he's in jail, then certainly after he's imprisoned. It's inevitable. A crime boss with contacts as deep and aggressive as thistle roots won't take anyone who wants to squeal on him lying down.

And whatever sentence they'd dole out to Dad would be for *life*.

It doesn't matter how many years it's been since he quit the game, he'll serve time for the years he served them. No lawyer on earth could sweet-talk a judge out of imposing some kind of punishment.

And in Dad's state, any punishment means he'll never breathe the air as a free man again.

"We'll figure something else out," I whisper, glancing at the fire. "We got lucky tonight, even with Noelle falling through. I'm not squandering this chance."

"Like what, Gracie?" He takes a long pull off the tea and sets down his cup. "We can't stay here. Can't dare drag anyone else into our troubles." He coughs a couple of times into his shirt sleeve. "I really thought the farm would be payment enough, but hell, I was wrong. Wrong again."

I stand, taking hold of his arm.

"No sense in worrying about it, now. You need to get some rest."

It's a miracle he doesn't fight me. I've seen him like this too often in the rare idle moments we have, where he'll just stay up all night brooding and stressing out.

Once he's settled in one of the bedrooms, I walk into the kitchen and ladle myself a bowl of soup from the sealed pot still on the stove and bring it to the table.

I can't help remembering the first time I saw Clay Grendal.

I was fifteen when he carried a black duffel bag full of money into the kitchen of our apartment in the Milwaukee burbs and hand-delivered it to Dad. I'd stood next to my mother, who'd frowned disapprovingly as my father opened that bag.

I hadn't understood what was going on, who the guy with the dark hair wearing a black leather jacket and smelling like he'd been doused in cigarette smoke even was.

"It's all there, old man. My gift to you and your people for a job well done," he'd said, this deceptive warmth shining in his dark eyes. *"It's high time you enjoyed the good life. Is this the missus?"*

Dad watched nervously as he plodded across the room, grabbed Mom's hand, and laid a kiss on the back. Mom just looked like she was about to throw up.

“Charmed,” Clay grunted, flicking a feral tongue over his lips before looking at Dad again. *“You’ll always have a place with the boys, if you ever need it again. Let me know if country livin’ gets boring, Nelson.”*

Then came the moment I wish I could forget.

He turned, stared, and winked at me, those bear-like brown eyes so dark, so hard to decipher.

No, I didn’t know what was going on, but Mom’s sick, strained expression told me all I needed. It also warned me to keep my mouth shut.

So I did, keeping one hand on my hip, softly pinching the skin under my jeans until it bruised.

The same spot aches now, remembering that day.

We’d moved to the farm the same week. Though the place was worn down and needed a lot of money and time to fix it up, it was ours.

We built Sellers’ Pumpkin Patch into a profitable business. Things were good, very good, until my last year at college, when Mom was diagnosed with cancer. Her health insurance soon maxed out and Dad wound up making a call to Clay Grendal for help.

Dad would do anything for her, and he swore to drive her to the Mayo Clinic one state over for the best treatment available, even if it cost a fortune.

I’d been there again when Clay showed up, this time at the farm, sporting another fat bag bursting with cash. He’d acted sincere, concerned for my mom.

Dad was relieved, and the money made her final days fairly peaceful.

That’s why I’d never said a word about how Clay looked at me, this lecherous gleam in his eye.

How he ran a hand down my arm when my parents were out of the room.

Every last bit of me cringed, knowing what this wolf wanted.

I still haven't said a word about it, or the other things that happened.

The 'bad luck' started after Mom died.

Little things at first. Petty vandalism—someone driving through the pumpkin fields and then the corn maze right before Halloween, our peak season.

The next year, it was worse.

The barn and gift shop caught on fire. Since it was ruled arson, insurance wouldn't pay.

They wouldn't cover the cost of all the items that were stolen, either. By fall, we couldn't even buy a new insurance policy. Not that it mattered, there wasn't much *left* to insure, and Dad was in no state to rebuild anything himself.

I knew it was Clay. Dad insisted it wasn't, it couldn't be, he'd never...

Oh, but he *would*.

And he did.

Dad's eyes were opened when the demon visited us one night, asking for his payment, flashing this violent sneer as he mentioned our run of *hard times*.

Ugh.

So much for my appetite.

Tobin's chicken soup tastes divine, but I can't bring myself to eat another bite.

I dump out the remnants in the bowl and go to bed, hoping I'll be able to sleep and come up with a plan in the morning.

Dad's right about one thing—we can't drag anyone else into our problems. Even if we're broke, desperate, and for now, effectively homeless.

I also know Dad needs a doctor. His cough keeps getting worse, and he's getting smaller and greyer by the day.

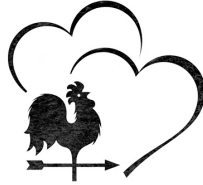
It's times like this, back when I was little, that Mom would bring me a candle and a soft, angelic smile. She'd stroke my head and speak her catchphrase.

"If you've got a light, you've still got a wish."

But what do you do when the only light you've got is borrowed from a generous stranger and you stopped believing in wishes years ago?

What do you do when there's no fight left in a battle that was always lost?

NO EASY WAY OUT (RIDGE)



Tobin finishes filling a steaming cup of coffee on the table just as I walk into the kitchen.

A little white bottle of pain relievers sits next to it, waiting for me.

“I don’t need those,” I say with a snort. “Didn’t get *that* plastered last night.”

“Oh? Not even for your morning after headache?” He folds his arms, a smirk barely hidden on his face.

I’m still amazed he hadn’t seen through my acting last night.

I pick up the coffee and take an angry slurp, eyeballing him the entire time. He huffs out a breath and shakes his head.

Honestly, I shouldn’t be amazed.

It’s what he expected, I’m sure, considering the date.

Why I was itching to get the hell out of here yesterday, go into town to stock up before the storm hit full force, and stop off at the Purple Bobcat.

Yesterday was the three-year anniversary of Mom’s death, and I’d wanted to forget.

Still do.

“What, dude? You’re looking at me like I went on a wild bender and crashed the truck into a snowbank. I could still drive, Tobin, I wasn’t stone drunk.”

“Then how, pray tell, did we wind up with guests? Guests who came with plenty of trouble, I might add. You *do* remember last night, right?” He cocks his head, giving me the old accusatory principal look.

Well, at least there’s one part of Mom still living on.

Hell, I haven’t forgotten anything.

In fact, a pair of soft baby-blue eyes kept me up far past my bed time last night, and I rolled out of bed with them still glued to my mind.

Grace Sellers. Pumpkin farmer. Sugar sweet smile. Sweeter ass.

Not so sweet backstory.

Here’s what I’d really like to know: who chases a frigging *pumpkin farmer* across three states for a shakedown over a debt?

And why?

Those are the things that have me seeing double this morning.

“What was I supposed to do? Leave them?” I snap. “Just let ’em get marched off to fuck knows where with that bulldog latched on? With the storm, you know Sheriff Wallace and his boys would’ve been too busy to do anything timely. I swear, this town needs more cops for the amount of trouble around here.”

“And *you* would be wise not to volunteer to take on their excess trouble, Ridge,” Tobin says firmly, laying strips of bacon into a pan on the stove.

“Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.”

He gives me a dirty look and curls his lip. But with the usual Tobin O’Hare self-control, he keeps his genteel lips glued shut before anything rude flies out.

Perish the fucking thought.

Still grumbling to myself, I carry my coffee to the window and look out across the expanse of white snow glistening

around the guesthouse. She'd been scared out of her wits last night by that Jackknife idiot, but other than her eyes, she hadn't shown the shock I'd expected.

I've lived through trauma many times.

I know the way a person reacts when they've been mugged, or they pick up the phone and hear someone close has died out of the blue, or fate decides to drive an unlucky bullet into their spine on a hot Afghan day.

It's different for every person and every situation, sure.

For her, it just wasn't there.

Grace didn't react with any of the monotone looks or shaking or panic crying I'd expected.

Almost like she's *used* to run-ins with scoundrels like bald-fuck.

That bothers me, thinking that a girl like her could get used to being scared.

"A little company won't be the end of the world. Might even do us both a solid," I tell Tobin, still gazing out the window. "We've been snowed in here since November. Couldn't even make it over to the Larkins' place for Christmas."

"The roads will be clear enough to the airport in Dickinson in a few days. We could take a trip, if it's socializing you're after. The Florida Keys. Lanai. Bali."

"No."

He looks up from making breakfast, that mask he wears revealing nothing.

"Miss Silk left a message. Perhaps if you'd agree to meet with her in person—"

"I don't care," I growl.

My agent, Bebe Silk, cares more about the money I'd make her if I ever returned to the silver screen than anything that has to do with my well-being.

Let her find another golden boy for Hollywood's spider trap.

Tobin sighs. "You're going to have to go out in public again eventually, Ridge. You can't keep yourself exiled indefinitely, and I know Dallas isn't big enough to satisfy your needs forever."

"Needs satisfied. We went out yesterday. We had a grand old time with Grady and our new friends." I stare out the window, wondering if I just saw someone walk past a window in the guesthouse.

Probably not. Unless I have eagle eyes.

"I believe you know what I'm suggesting. Time out, culture and conversation, away from somewhere other than an establishment with *Bobcat* in the name," Tobin says dryly. "It's not too late to meet someone who appeals to you romantically, either. You're still a young man."

I whip around from the window as a solid bout of anger rises.

"You done?"

"Forgive me," he says softly, then turns his eyes back to the sizzling bacon and eggs.

I know exactly what he's trying to do, and it pisses me off. My nonexistent love life is none of his goddamn business.

But I know he means well. I know he cares. I know he's the only person on the planet who might even love me, like family, for being Ridge Barnet instead of Dane.

"I didn't mean to snap. Sorry. But I like the Purple Bobcat, Tobin. I don't like fucking dating—especially not anyone who'd laugh in my face at the idea of settling down in this town. We'll still take trips when I'm good and ready. I give you plenty of vacation time; you must have like six months stockpiled since you've never taken a day off in ten years. You're welcome to go wherever you'd like if this place is driving you stir-crazy. I'll be fine here alone for a few weeks. I do whatever the hell I want."

“That was perfectly evident last night,” Tobin mutters. “What if that man decides to press charges?”

I step over to the counter and refill my coffee cup.

“That dickhead, you mean? He’s not going to the cops. For Christ’s sake, his name was *Jackknife*. You don’t get a name like that by being Mr. Rogers.”

“All the more reason for you not to get mixed up with him,” Tobin says with his head stuck in the fridge.

I’ve had it with his lecture.

It’s in his nature, always looking out for me and my interests, often against my own judgment.

Sometimes it helps. Usually it’s nothing but mad annoying.

I don’t have a single regret about what I did last night, though, and won’t let him make me think I should.

“That’s not enough bacon,” I say, nodding toward the pan.

He closes the fridge and straightens to his full height. “How hungry are you?”

“We have guests. Make more.” I set my cup on the counter. “Please.”

He doesn’t respond, just like I’m expecting.

Still, I also know there’ll be plenty of food for Grace and her father when I come back downstairs after my shower. He doesn’t need to be told twice.

Tobin may not always like my decisions, but he’s loyal to a fault.

That’s exactly how it happens after I clean up and head downstairs.

The table is set, full of food, and Grace and Nelson are sitting there with Tobin at the table within half an hour of when I’d left the kitchen.

Nelson doesn’t look any better this morning than he did last night.

In fact, he looks a shade paler if it isn't just the light. There's hardly any color to his skin. He resembles someone wearing the first layer of the special effects zombie makeup I used to see when I starred in a horror flick.

A frown pulls at my lips. This guy should see a doctor.

"We, um, really appreciate your hospitality, Ridge," Grace says as the food gets passed around the table. "Last night and this morning."

I'm glad because hospitality is the last thing on my mind.

Now that I can see her in the clear light of day? I wonder how a bona fide angel made it to this table.

My eyes keep drifting over to her heart-shaped lips as she brings a tall glass of orange juice up to her mouth. The dark blue of her shirt is reflected in her eyes, just a shade lighter, and her cheeks flush soft pink.

A stormy contrast that puts lava in my blood.

Fuck.

She may look like heaven, but my thoughts are in a lower, darker, dirtier place.

I rip my gaze off her, finally, not wanting to be the guy who adds to her woes by leering like a sex-starved dog.

"It's no problem," I say. "We like having company, especially this time of year."

How? How the hell can she be a hundred times prettier this morning than last night?

"Were you out in the barn already?" I ask her, after everyone has had a good chance to sample their breakfast.

Nodding, she swallows before saying, "I was. I fed the horses, bright and early like they're used to. Oh, and Cornelius. I took care of him, too."

"He didn't peck your eyes out?"

"Nope, sure didn't." She grins. "He crowed a few times. You weren't kidding about the set of lungs on that guy."

I nod, fighting back a smile. That sounds a lot more like the literal cock I know.

“That’s what he does, never misses a chance to announce his presence to the world. I think maybe they haven’t heard him down in Sydney yet.”

She flashes me a smile fit to kill at my idiot joke.

Mayday.

“We’ll be heading out shortly,” Nelson says, taking another bite of scrambled eggs and chewing loudly.

That’s about all he’s eaten, a few bites of eggs, and his breathing sounds labored again.

“Not today,” I reply, setting my fork and knife down. “It takes forty-eight hours or more for the plows to make it out here sometimes. Your truck will never make it to the highway through these drifts. Even without a horse trailer.”

I’d had a hell of a time keeping it moving through the pathway the dually opened ahead of us last night.

The snow quit falling sometime early this morning, but those drifts must be four to six feet high in all the usual tight overflow spots along the driveway. I could see them from the windows upstairs.

“Don’t you have a plow?” Grace asks, setting down her fork. “Or even a tractor with a bucket? I could help you clear this place out.”

Tobin smiles like he’s just switched on one of his damn operas.

“No, unfortunately,” I say, shooting a glare at him. “They warned me, but hearing it and living through your first winter here is something else. Especially when my friend here thought a plow would be *excessive*.”

Tobin winks at me from across the table.

Leave it to a man who’s spent his entire life in balmy SoCal to underestimate General Winter. Tobin practically

laughed at me when I suggested buying a plow back in October.

He wasn't onboard with this whole ranch idea from the beginning, and he'd suggested we wait until after winter to decide on more equipment, just in case we decided not to stick it out here.

"I hire a guy to plow right now, but he has other places on his route and his first duty's to the city of Dallas. He won't be here until tomorrow, probably. We never need to go anywhere fast."

I flash Tobin a look again, grateful I'd ignored him on one thing last year. At least I'd bought the four-wheel drive dually so we could still push through for emergencies.

"Well, then, we'll pay you if we're well and truly stuck here," Nelson says. "For lodging and—"

"Forget it," I tell him. "I don't need your money. The good company's payment enough."

Cash is the last thing I need. Between my royalties and a sizable inheritance from Dad's old company, now absorbed into a major airline, I'll have a hard time spending a fraction of a billion dollars before I die, even if I live to be two hundred years old.

"How 'bout flowers? Could you use a few of those?" Nelson asks, lifting his brows.

"Dad!" Grace shoots her father a scowl.

I hear her foot scuff the floor, no doubt from giving him a kick under the table. I fight back the urge to smile.

"Flowers, huh? Enlighten me," I say.

"That's what she does." Nelson coughs into his sleeve. "The girl's a natural, puts 'em together in the prettiest arrangements you've ever laid eyes on. Does them up nice and fresh, too. Better than the ones you've got sitting on that little stand where we walked in. No offense."

The amusement in Tobin's eyes dies. He sits up straighter in his chair, reaching for the food in the center of the table.

“Would anyone care for more bacon?” he asks, holding up the platter still heaped with crisp, fried strips.

It’s no secret what he’s doing.

The flowers Nelson mentioned are the yellow silk roses under my mother’s portrait in the entryway. I’d had it installed right before the house was move-in ready.

Mom loved yellow roses till the end.

Our house was full of them growing up. Somehow, her dressing rooms at the studios and most of the hotels she’d ever stayed in had at least one or two bunches of them hanging around, too.

Wherever that woman went, she left a trail of beautiful, delicate gold in her wake. Like she couldn’t resist making this world just a little bit brighter.

If only it repaid her in kind.

When she died, we made sure her casket was draped in a cloud of airy yellow bouquets.

Tobin knows a touchy subject that might set me off like a stick of dynamite when he hears it.

At least, that’s how it’s been before.

Strangely enough, today, I don’t feel the usual anger surging hot in my veins.

I hadn’t last night, either, when I’d told Grace my parents were dead.

I didn’t even realize it until now.

Who the hell knows what that means.

“You’re a florist?” I ask her. “I thought you raised pumpkins.”

She nods shyly. “Dad did most of the pumpkin farming. I helped when I lived at home, but then I went to college.” She glances at her father. “I’m an interior designer. Floral design is just part of it, the main thing that caught my interest.”

I look at Tobin. “We could use some decorating around here, don’t you think? The boys who finished this place left it so neat and tidy it’s almost like a mausoleum. Never got around yet to putting our own spin on it.”

He lays his napkin on the table, undoubtedly holding in a sigh.

“Perhaps,” he says, careful not to look at me.

He’s not impressed with how I’m handling this, extending an invitation to keep Grace and her old man around.

I get it. His tone is placating. Hell, he’s the closest thing to a father I’ve ever had since my real dad shuffled off his mortal coil, but he’s not family.

He’s an employee. Always has been. I tend to forget that far more often than he does.

Ignoring Tobin, I look at Grace.

Whether he likes it or not, they can’t leave until that snow gets cleared, and I’m not lying about wanting company.

“Anything catch your eye with this place? Give me your suggestions.” I fold my hands, keeping my eyes trained on her.

She looks at her father, wide-eyed, as if to say, *see what you did?*

I smile at that.

So does Nelson, who gives me a lopsided half-grin.

“Well...I’d need to take a look around and ask you both some questions. What styles you like, favorite colors, what areas are mostly used for what, discover your color palette, all the usual stuff,” she says cautiously.

“Easy,” I say. “I like blue, love being comfortable, and we mainly cook and eat in this area. Right now, I’m feeling anything that isn’t plain white, considering what’s outside.”

I lift a hand, waving toward the window.

She rolls her eyes and tries not to smile, but ends up grinning anyway.

Goddamn, I like how she grins.

I have a feeling she doesn't do it often.

"In all honesty," I say slowly. "This place is pretty much exactly how it was when I bought it. It came furnished right down to our specifications, plus some creative input from the firm that handled everything. We haven't done a whole lot except move our stuff in."

"Even that picture of the actress?" Nelson asks.

Shit.

Tobin doesn't offer more bacon this time. He just freezes, staring at me like an animal with its leg trapped.

I can read his mind. He's wondering if I'm ready for this.

And ready for the other hundred questions that are sure to follow.

I can't say I am, but it's not like I have much choice in the matter.

Maybe it's time. If I can't handle an old guy sniffing around in the privacy of my own home, how will I ever handle it when everybody in Dallas finds out who I am?

So far, very few people know my true identity, but that won't last in a town this small, where gossip is practically a sport.

"It's my picture," I tell them. "I've had it for years."

"I saw a lot of her movies," Nelson says. "Did you know Judy Barnet? Work with her or something?"

I can feel Tobin's gaze; his concern glows almost hot, sincere and growing.

I nod at Nelson. "I knew her well. She was my mother."

"Your mother?" Nelson seems surprised, caught off guard, and breaks into another thirty-second cough he smothers with a slurp of coffee.

"Damn, you *are* him, aren't you? The Barnet kid. I never made the connection between her and..." He frowns. "So

what's your real name? Dane or Ridge?"

"Dane's my middle name," I tell him. "Mom insisted on Dane when I started acting, so I'd still have a sliver of personal identity outside the glaring camera lens."

So much for that.

"I've seen your Westerns." A big grin spreads over Nelson's face, deepening his wrinkles. "Can't say I really cared for that last one, though. The gun battle at the end didn't come with any surprises."

"Nothing I haven't heard from the critics," I say, appreciating his honesty. "My acting career is behind me these days."

I look at Grace. "Tell me more about your thoughts on the house, what type of changes you'd make."

"It's already very lovely. Nicely decorated. Contemporary. New," she says, avoiding my gaze.

I grin. "As in?"

"As in...nothing, I guess." She flicks her hair back nervously, a soft gold wave catching the light. "I just mean it's a really good starting point. You'd have to mess up big time to make this place ugly."

"What's the first thing you'd change? Nothing's ever perfect." I help her along since she's trying to be polite.

"Hmmm...I'd add more color, I think. It's just a little drab from what I've seen, though obviously I haven't been through your whole house yet," she says instantly, then clamps her lips tight as her cheeks turn red.

"Color?"

She nods. "Not a ton, but there's a lot of grey in the house. This floor, anyway. It doesn't really, well...connect with the exterior. This place must be beautiful without the snow. I can only imagine it greened up and sunny outside. I think I'd try to connect the outside with what's in here, so the transition isn't such a shock."

I like the sound of that.

She has a point. The kitchen cupboards are contemporary slate grey. So are the walls, and the tile floor matches.

“Now tell me you can do it without changing up the paint?” I’m not into using a paint brush or roller, or living through the process. Been there. Done that.

Just because I’m rich doesn’t mean I’m above getting my hands dirty sometimes.

The little shrug she gives off is cute, but it’s the way her eyes light up that interests me.

“Little things can go a long way,” she says. “Vases of natural flowers, for instance. They’ll bring the outside world in. A picture or two, whether it’s a nicely framed black and white landscape or something painted, a little rustic. A tablecloth like the one in the guesthouse. Bowls of fruit or pinecones. Pillows. Rugs. Candles. The good news is, you’re almost a blank slate. Any decorator would be thrilled to roll up their sleeves and work with that.”

I can almost visualize her ideas as she’s looking around the room.

Yeah, I think I’ve made up my mind.

“Listen, I’m going to let you knock yourself out, lady. Tobin can order whatever you need, but it won’t arrive overnight, of course. That’s not an option here. I mean, I know this is sudden, but if you’re willing to spare the time and energy, I’m game.” Then, because I’m starting to feel claustrophobic, I set my napkin down. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a few chores to do.”

I don’t have any real chores. I just need to escape. Get away before the memories hit. They’re bound to, even if they only smack me over the head on a delay.

All the shit I don’t like thinking about, remembering, regretting.

What Grace described is what I call a woman’s touch.

I'm not sure I should have that around me at all, even if it's only temporary.

Maybe Tobin's right, and I hate like hell to admit it.

I also need to think about the Sellers and that thug last night.

What sort of shit I might've invited in by charging to her rescue and hauling them home, then floating the idea of them staying here.

It's not in my nature to second-guess, but I don't make *all* of my decisions on the fly.

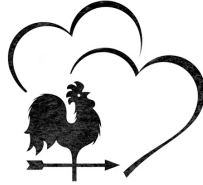
Seclusion, privacy, and a fresh start were all good reasons why I chose Dallas for a new beginning. Yet, right now, they're the very things driving me crazy.

That shouldn't mean I throw open the door to a sick man and a woman who's far too pretty to be around me for long. Not to mention the fact that they're both being chased by a wolf with some reason to show his fangs—maybe more than one.

I throw on my coat and head outside, grabbing the shovel off the front porch.

A little heavy lifting never hurt a man.

I start working my way through the deep snow around the house, hoping the physical release of energy helps me think clearer, and maybe find a way out of this shitshow.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME (GRACE)

I don't know what it is about Ridge, but now there's no denying the obvious.

There's far more to this guy than he's letting on.

A rich and famous actor? Here? In the middle of flipping nowhere?

It's like he's gone into hiding. I can't say exactly why I believe that, but I do.

I guess we've got something in common, though, even if we're a universe apart in other ways.

But Ridge isn't hiding in the same way Dad and I need to disappear. And I doubt Ridge would've been gullible—or desperate—enough to take Clay at his word.

Dad was convinced the farm would settle his debt for good, and I'd wanted to believe him.

Out of sheer desperation, I'd made myself believe there was a chance. Even though I know firsthand just how far Clay Grendal goes to get what he wants.

I just wanted to believe this nightmare could end. Peacefully. Forever.

Stupid me.

Refusing to dig in my heels and tell Dad it was a dumb idea only made things worse, no question.

Now I wonder if I'm being dangerously naive again. Making things worse by agreeing to decorate Ridge's castle.

Sweet baby Jesus, I'm not even close to qualified for this.

He's a famous actor. I'm a nobody decorator with a dusty degree.

Sure, I went to school for it, but I don't have the experience, the talent, the eye for a gig like this. I feel like a kid who was just asked to touch up Michelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel.

And I think Tobin agrees, even if he's too polite to say it.

I still can't figure him out.

He's like the love child of Jeeves and Marie Kondo with his emotionless mask and a seek-and-destroy routine for anything the least bit out of place.

He hasn't come out and said, *lady, you suck*—like rudeness is even in his DNA—but it's in his eyes, on his face, in his stance.

It's written boldly in the cold way he'd answered my questions while showing me around the house, which took the better part of an hour to cover what felt like fifteen, maybe twenty thousand square feet of ultra luxe country living.

Obviously, he's cooperating because Ridge is his boss, and nothing more.

I get the reluctance and his loyalty.

I also get why Dad offered my services, despite almost short-circuiting the second he did.

Pushing the air out of my lungs, I sigh until my shoulders sag, looking down at the clipboard in my hand. Yes, I'm aware we have these things called smartphones and tablets now, but my brain works better when I plot my ideas in good old-fashioned pen and ink.

I have a few thoughts that could brighten this house, but at the same time...

Is it *really* the house that needs brightening?

It's the mood, the vibe, the energy in this place.

There's something dark and heavy inside Ridge Barnet, and I think that's what truly worries Tobin and keeps him iced over. I'm not sure how I know it, but I do.

After answering my questions on the layout, Tobin left me to wander the place on my own, and I have, all three floors of white walls and grey floors and rooms laid out for every purpose under the sun—except they're all eerily empty.

As beautiful as it appears from the outside, the house is void of any true soul inside. It's an empty vessel begging for life.

That alone should have me excited about this job, particularly since the budget is basically unlimited in this case. In theory, it's an easy fix and won't cost much in time or money, but it just makes me wonder more and more about its illustrious owner.

I wonder about the chores he'd mentioned too.

Doesn't Tobin do most of that?

What does he even have outside?

One chicken, a rooster, who I already fed, doesn't really merit *chore* territory.

If I want to figure out how to glam up this house right, I think it starts with unraveling its owner.

So I head back downstairs, pausing for a moment while putting on my coat to stare at the picture of Ridge's mother. The whole scene is like this sad miniature shrine, even if it commands a deep respect.

Judy Barnet was a beautiful woman.

And the longer I stare at her sunshine smile painted red, wild blue eyes, and dark wavy hair pressed perfectly into place, the more I see the connection, the resemblance with her son.

It's the eyes, mainly. Their color and shape. They're keen, bright, and alive in the portrait.

Judging by Ridge, I bet hers had the same flash of mischief and good humor sometimes.

I'm not sure why, but it makes me smile.

Growing up with someone so famous couldn't have been easy. Judy starred in so many classic pictures throughout the seventies and eighties, traveled the whole world.

She must've been gone a lot when Ridge was little.

If his father died when he'd been eight, who took care of him while she was away?

A thousand other questions nip at my brain as I zip up my coat and pull my hat and gloves on. I walk to the cabin and check in on Dad, quietly, because as soon as I open the front door, I see him sleeping on the couch by the fireplace.

Thank God.

He'd coughed half the night, and I'm glad he's resting now.

I set my clipboard on the table near the door and pull it shut again. I'll let him sleep as long as he wants and use the time to check on Rosie and Stern.

They could use some affection. Until recently, I never thought that old yarn about animals soaking in bad juju was true.

But even before we left Wisconsin, they were restless as hell.

Awake at odd hours, eating sluggishly, letting out loud snorts of disapproval whenever I'd get them settled for the night and start heading back to the house.

If there's any animal that has a nose for trouble, it's probably a horse. I'm sure Dad and I reeked of it.

And I'm sure they're more confused than ever since we landed here.

Though the barn is gorgeous, they're probably wondering what we're doing in a place so nice it still smells more like a new car than a farm with stables seasoned by years of use.

I'm not expecting to see anyone in the barn, so I'm startled when I open the door and see a tall, dark silhouette brushing Stern.

Ridge.

I should've known this is where he'd gone after clearing a pathway through the snow to the door. Then again, paths were also shoveled to all of the outbuildings, including the guest cabin.

"Now you've gone and done it. You'll be his best friend for life," I say, closing the door behind me. "Stern loves being brushed."

"Yeah, I figured," Ridge says quietly, a smile curling his lips.

I frown slightly.

He turns and his smile breaks into a grin. "I think he's almost asleep."

A laugh rumbles in my throat.

"Yeah, probably," I whisper, stepping closer. "He's been known to do that. Just drifts off with a nice shiny coat."

"The stall should hold him up if he falls over," Ridge says, still whispering and running the brush over Stern's back. "I just hope he tilts away from me."

Something about his easy smile and the way he's keeping his voice low for the sleepy horse makes my heart tingle.

So he's a weirdo, maybe, but he's a *nice* weirdo.

I don't think I'm fawning over the former A-lister the entire world knows. Of course he's good-looking, but it's his attitude, his kindheartedness, that's turning my crank just now.

"He won't fall." I pat Rosie's rump on my way to where there are several shiny new curry combs and brushes filling a shelf.

"I know," he says. "Even when they're sleeping like the dead, they never totally let go. These guys don't get groggy or hungover like people do."

“You know your way around horses, don’t you?” I say, selecting a soft bristle brush for Rosie.

“No choice.” His voice sounds slightly off, and his eyes stay glued to the horse, bringing the brush away from Stern so he can pat the beast’s neck.

“Did you have horses growing up?” I ask.

“I starred in several Westerns. Big damn commercial flops full of bad writing, but I had fun with the cast, including the ones on four legs. And before that...yeah, I grew up riding a bit.”

I nod, totally blanking on his recent, more subdued acting history. He just doesn’t seem like a famous actor right now, out here in the barn. He’s more like a normal guy tending his ranch.

An average guy with amazing looks who loves to butt in on situations he shouldn’t.

Technically, nothing about that screams average.

The fact that he’s a famous somebody just makes it weirder. A rich and famous actor, Hollywood royalty, who rescued us from only God knows what if Jackknife Pete had his way.

“These guys are getting up there in age, aren’t they?” he asks as I start brushing Rosie.

“A little bit,” I answer. “But don’t tell them that. I think they’d both hate to be put out to pasture totally, even if we save them from the heavier work these days.”

“That why you’re taking them to Montana?”

“No.” I tilt my head, studying him, unsure where he’s going with this sudden round of questioning.

“Still won’t spill your secrets, huh?”

He barely throws his gaze over, and we lock eyes.

For a second, I lose myself in that weary, knowing smirk of his.

“I...I told you, it’s not my place.” Changing the subject before it gets heated, I ask, “Last night you said you planned on buying livestock. Does that mean horses, too?”

“Probably. I had the place stocked with everything I’d need. Told the boys who furnished this place to set me up for a little of everything. Don’t know if I can handle hogs, though... have you *smelled* some of the pig farms around here?”

“Um, yeah. Animals of all kinds are kinda little poop factories. What goes in comes out a lot...like, a lot *a lot*.”

Ridge grins and then breaks into a chuckle.

Oh, my.

I might just keep the dumb, sarcastic statements coming if I could listen to that laugh all day.

He rests an elbow on Stern’s back and looks at me over the stall walls. “Are these two for sale? Is that why you’re asking what kind of furry crap-machines I’m so eager to buy?”

My smile fades. I hold in a sigh.

“These two aren’t worth much, I’m afraid. They can’t do heavy labor like horses in their prime.”

“So they’re priceless, you mean. Gotcha.”

I frown, unsure I follow him.

He rakes a vivid blue side-eye over me and shrugs. “You can’t put a dollar sign on pets or family, and I’d say these two are both. They’re in good shape for their age. Shows they’ve been well taken care of, and they like plenty of attention.”

I nod. “That’s true, they’re basically pets now. It wasn’t like that when we first got them. They came with the farm my father bought outside of Milwaukee. They’d been neglected by the previous owner. They were both so thin you could see their ribs.”

“Fuck.” Ridge bites back a hot, angry look. “I hate that shit. People who don’t look after their animals properly ought to get the same treatment. Call me old fashioned.”

My heart skips a beat. Ridiculous or not, there's something extra sexy about the way he tenses up and scowls when he goes all Captain America.

It's one of the mysteries of the universe.

Why do some guys look so hot when they're pissed?

"Exactly. Rosie came around rather quickly, but Stern, well...besides being brushed, he doesn't like tons of attention. He just—"

A noise like a bellowing trumpet makes me jump out of my skin.

"Told ya," Ridge says. "Set of lungs on that boy could wake the damn dead."

Shaking off the adrenaline rush, I laugh as I look up. Cornelius flaps his wings overhead, perched on an open crossbeam, looking down at us with his beady black eyes.

"He doesn't have an internal clock. He just belts out a wake-up call whether it's eight a.m. or noon or two in the morning." Ridge gazes up at Cornelius with an icy scowl as the rooster struts along the beam. "He doesn't much care where he shits, either. So watch out."

"Oh? So you've taken a direct hit?" I lift a hand, trying to push the giggle back into my mouth.

"A few too many," Ridge grunts. "I swear he just does it for amusement, too, the cheeky bastard. That's the worst part. Just my luck that I wound up with one disturbed, nasty-ass bird."

"How'd he even get up there? Seems awfully high." I glance around the barn and don't see a direct route the rooster might've taken to get on the beam. I know they can't just get that high straight off the ground.

"Who knows," Ridge says, stepping gracefully out of Cornelius' range. "He's had the run of the barn for months now, and he's been in every nook and cranny. He's probably got a secret passage or something."

My curiosity keeps growing by the minute.

“So, you retired and wanted a little peace and quiet,” I wave the brush. “Why North Dakota?”

He pats Stern on the rump one more time before stepping out of the stall, dusting himself off.

“Got a good deal on the land. With the kind of agents who deal in high-end real estate back in L.A., it’s not a question of *if* you’ll land what you want, but when.” He pauses to set the brush he’d used back on the shelf. “Dallas is a nice little town. It already had its fair share of drama over the local oil company and the chick who inherited it a couple years back, so I knew moving here wouldn’t raise many eyebrows.”

I put away the brush I’d used on Rosie. “Raise eyebrows?”

“Being famous will do that. People will mob you for selfies or go through a gauntlet just for a handshake and a smile,” he tells me. “Mom raised me to appreciate the fans, and I do, but I’m no saint. It gets old real fast having to chart out your whole day’s routine just to make sure you’re not drowning in legions of screaming people or assholes with their cameras when all you want is a beer and a burger.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, dumb question.”

Again, I’d forgotten just how famous he is.

“No need to apologize.” He shrugs and steps away, heading for a large stack of hay bales where he plucks out a long straw and sticks it in the corner of his mouth to chew on.

Holy hell.

Forget Pissed Off Ridge.

I think Cowboy Straw-In-His-Mouth Ridge might be my new favorite.

Which, I guess makes me no better than the admirers who can make his life miserable in the space of a heartbeat.

“Frankly, I’m not sorry. Not for retiring or moving out here.” Glancing around and still chewing on the straw, he waves me closer, gestures to have me sit on a smaller square bale next to him.

“Well, looks like you’re set up for the long haul. How’d you even find a lot with this much land?” I ask, careful not to let myself gawk at him too long—especially when a sunbeam falls across his face, turning him into an image straight out of a Western flick.

“The people I bought this place from only owned it a little over a year. A new field manager over at the North Earhart oil fields who’d bitten off more than he could chew with an acreage this size. Nothing else my crew had to do except tear down the old structures and get to work building. I told them to give me everything plus the kitchen sink. Tobin warned me not to go crazy. Surprise—I didn’t listen.”

I bite back a grin.

Guess that explains why there’s plenty of hay for Rosie and Stern, and why the house seems so sterile.

No one’s ever made it a home.

People think that’s a cliché, but in design and home décor, it’s the endgame.

There’s a huge difference between a house and a home. Ridge needs to make his place truly *his*.

Standing, I lean against an empty stall, scanning the barn again. There are ten nice wide ones, plus two larger stalls that I assume are for birthing and a good-sized indoor exercise area for the bitterest winter days.

“Have you made any headway on the master plan for this place?”

“I’m thinking classic cattle ranch.” He sits down on a bale, chewing that straw between his teeth. “I have the acreage for a real operation, but I’d also love to keep a herd small and organic. There’s a hell of a market for that right now. Grass-fed beef is the gold standard.”

His legs shift apart, bowing out at the knees, turning him into the perfect picture of the rugged North Dakota rancher.

Oh. My. God.

Whatever else he needs help with, the Western McHottie vibe comes naturally.

He's got the clothes down pat, the sculpted body of a god, and eyes that could make blue nights seethe with jealousy.

"True," I admit, hating how flushed the rosy heat in my cheeks must be making me.

"I'll rustle up more chickens, too. Maybe a few to help teach Corny some manners. The brat could use them." He looks at me then and grins. "Hell, maybe someday I'll even carve out a whole field of pumpkins. Always liked Halloween."

I burst out laughing at the absurdity of a big, messy pumpkin patch next to his fields. He'll probably run the sort of place that looks immaculate and shows up in magazines and travel shows, tidy crops and a lawn so green it sears the vision.

"They're more work than you think," I point out, lifting a finger. "And if you don't have people lined up to grab them, the compost job alone—"

"Darlin', when I go, I go all-in. Never thought about a field full of jack-o-lanterns before you showed up, but I bet it was fun. Having people coming out, picking them, taking hayrides and having bonfires. This would be a good place for that. People would have to drive a while to get here if I ever get more than Dallas townies, so I'd better have things for them to do." He shrugs. "Besides gawk at my famous, easily annoyed ass, I mean."

"Good luck. Say goodbye to your low profile if you ever did any of that," I warn him, raising a brow.

His firm, easygoing smile disappears.

I shake my head, sensing he's disappointed over reality setting in.

"It's probably not the end of the world," I say. "You didn't exactly keep a low profile last night, either. Stepping in the way you did."

“That was different,” he rumbles, his voice low like thunder. “I had to.”

“Why?”

“It isn’t obvious? Because I can’t fucking stand pricks like —” He pinches his lips together, glancing around before finishing, “Guys who pick on women.”

“He didn’t do it for the fun of it. Not that it matters, I guess,” I say glumly. Feeling I owe him some explanation, I look up, meeting those piercing blue eyes. “He was hired to follow us.”

“Yeah, I figured that much. Why? What the hell does your dad owe these jackoffs?”

I shake my head, wishing I hadn’t brought it up.

“I know, I know it’s your father’s story, yada yada yada... still, it involves you. So it’s also yours, Grace.”

Ouch.

I can’t really argue with that.

I huff out a breath. “Dad just got mixed up with the wrong crowd years ago for reasons I won’t go into. It was stupid, and he realized his mistake and left that world while he still could. Trouble is, no matter how hard he tries, it won’t leave him.”

“And someone in that *crowd* wants you,” Ridge says slowly, tightening his jaw on the straw. It crunches between his teeth.

My stomach clenches at how easily he figures it out.

Right on cue, my pulse doubles, bad memories coming in a hot, sickly flash of images.

“He wants everything.” My throat burns as I admit it.

“Sounds like he’s already taken most of what you had.” He holds my eyes while his right hand forms a fist, knuckles pressing deep into his thigh. “What else is left?”

This man isn’t all savior.

He’s too smart. Too intuitive. Too much trouble.

There's no sense in lying, so I nod. *Barely.*

"You're safe here. I give you my word. Anyone trying to get to you has to go through me." He thumps his chest with the same fist, a rebel glint in those lightning-blue eyes.

From anyone else, it'd be almost comical how exaggerated it seems, this man talking like we're part of an action script.

But the severe dark tone in his voice leaves no doubt how serious he is. Or what lengths he'd go to live up to his word.

Crap. I can't let him do this.

I shake my head. He's stepped in a viper's nest and he doesn't even know it.

His celebrity status won't stop a freak like Clay.

In fact, it might put *worse* ideas in that maniac's head.

"Ridge..." I can't find the words.

"It's too late, woman," he says, reading my mind. "I'm part of your story now too. In case you forgot, I told that jacked-up shit at the bar we're a thing. I'm sure he reported back to the powers that be, told them we just haven't set the date yet for our wedding."

He winks at me like it's nothing.

Oh, crud.

I'd almost forgotten he said something so totally outrageous and incriminating last night. With everything that went down, I hoped maybe I'd just dreamed that part.

"We're moving on as soon as the roads get plowed."

"Bull." He plucks the straw out of his mouth and tosses it aside. "I was thinking about that and some other issues right when you walked in the barn. Give me some credit."

Pushing up the sleeve of his coat and shirt, he shows me an American flag tattoo with some sort of symbols beneath it. I freeze, staring, trying to decipher it.

"I'm a little better than some pampered schlub born with a silver spoon in his mouth," he growls. "Besides being an actor,

I was in the Army for four years. An elite force where I formed a lot of friendships still at my disposal few others know about. Not even Tobin.”

The Army part surprises me, but his statement about Tobin is a total shocker.

Is anything about this guy what it seems?

I’m officially worried my head might just spin off.

“Tobin seems loyal, very dedicated to you,” I whisper.

“He’s a good man. My mother made him my valet, aka, babysitter, when I was still a kid. He’d die for me, no doubt about it.” He sighs. “Which I’d never let him do, but he’ll still follow every order I give him to the letter of the law, including when it comes to you.”

“I’m not your responsibility, Ridge. I didn’t ask for any of this.” I’m breathing so hard it hurts, so riled up it’s a miracle I can speak.

“No, you’re not, but you *are* my concern. What would I be if I watched you hit the road in that rickety old truck with no way out of this? You expect me to live with that shit on my shoulders, Grace?”

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

He’s incredibly good at inserting himself into other people’s stories, apparently, and making it feel like a complete atrocity if he doesn’t get a chance to rewrite them.

I’m not the kind of girl who just folds and listens to strange men. Trouble is, I can’t debunk anything he just said.

“Thought you’d get me. Hopefully Dickless Pete heeds my warning, but if he doesn’t...” He shrugs, rolling those mountainous shoulders. “Let’s just say he’ll wish he had.”

My insides churn, hot and frantic.

Desperate to avert another disaster.

“Ridge, you don’t get it. You don’t know—”

“No, I don’t know your whole story, and when you’re ready to tell me, I’m here to listen. Even if you don’t open up, I’ll still be here. The few people clued in about who I am know better than to leak my whereabouts to the media. As far as Hollywood knows, I’m on indefinite hiatus. I fucked off out of California and gave the press the idea I’d fled to Maui, where I still own a place. Besides, having you around, having people think we might be a couple won’t hurt anything. In fact, it might just keep the gossip hounds more confused and throw them off longer.”

I shake my head.

Seriously.

He can’t be suggesting what it sounds like.

I’m so not pretending we’re a couple. It’s absolutely ludicrous, and I seriously doubt real fake engagements end nearly as well as they always do in those fun, guilty-pleasure romance books I devour every so often.

Ridge stiffens, looking at me as I lift my head and force myself to meet his gaze.

No, nope, and hell no.

My heart leaps at the way he smiles and nods.

So this is what it’s like when a barn mouse looks up and sees a hawk.

I swallow the rock in my throat but still can’t talk.

Still can’t tell him there’s no way I’m going along with this scheme to ‘pretend’ we’re engaged.

After years under Clay’s thumb, I know what hot messes look like, and I’m not interested in turning my life into a bigger freaking dumpster fire.

Not even for a bossy, lethally handsome hero I never asked for who apparently has a few screws loose in his drop-dead-gorgeous head.

“You know...I think I’m going to walk these two around a little bit. Give them some exercise.” I bolt and start heading

for the stalls.

“Right behind you,” he says, three mundane words that shouldn’t make steam shoot out of anyone’s ears.

Oh, but right now?

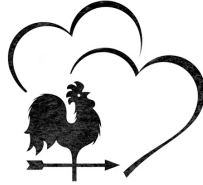
I don’t want his help.

I don’t want him risking his famous butt for me.

Not with Rosie and Stern or mobsters who’ve made our lives a living hell.

I’m about to boil over.

NO CHANGE OF PLANS (RIDGE)



“Well?” I stare down Tobin with my arms folded, wondering how big a heap of shit I’m in for.

“She wandered the entire house taking notes,” Tobin says, following me into the kitchen.

“Good. Hopefully she’s found plenty to change in every room.” I open a cupboard door and take out a glass. Although my mind is still back in the barn, stuck on how we’d walked the horses around the inside arena and talked, I tell him again. “This place could use some sprucing up.”

“I offered to—”

“So you’re a certified decorator now?” I ask, interrupting him. “Interesting. Mom never mentioned that talent.”

His lips smooth into a thin, frustrated line.

“I didn’t think so.” I fill the cup with coffee. “Guess who is?”

“I’m very aware. What baffles me is why you’re so intent on keeping them here,” Tobin says, barely keeping his voice level. “This isn’t like you, Ridge. You’ve never been overly friendly with strangers—particularly the last few years. You came here for the quiet, the anonymity, the reclusiveness... having people living in the guest cabin now is the exact opposite of that.”

I shrug, partly because I’m not totally sure myself why I decided to dive into this insanity, but I damn sure want Grace and her father kept safe.

“It’s been over six months living with the best Dallas has to offer. Maybe I’ve decided it was boring. I’m ready for some excitement.”

Tobin straightens those oval wire-framed glasses of his, then clasps his hands neatly in front of him. “There’s a difference between excitement and danger. I trust you know the distinction.”

I suck in a breath of air.

“You think I don’t?” I snarl.

Of course I do. I’d thought that very thing while shoveling. Thought about it a lot.

“No,” Tobin replies, stone-faced as ever. “I’m just worried about the type of excitement you’ve gotten yourself mixed up in the past few days. Perhaps you should reconsider your career trajectory.”

A blaze of anger whips through me.

Dammit, I know what he’s suggesting, and it ain’t happening.

“Forget it. I’m not going back to Tinseltown. I’ve told you a hundred times I’m *done* with that fuckery. After Mom, after that *pig*...” I bite my jaw together so hard it almost snaps.

We both know who I mean.

And we have a silent agreement never to say his name again.

The career I had is over and done. Just like the Army. A bullet in the leg cut my service time short on a botched raid against a Taliban compound. So did the guilt I had over Mom spiraling downward.

I’d accepted that easily enough. I returned to acting as an adult rather than a child, giving it a second go, but when I found out what happened to my mother...

Yeah. Tobin would need a whole division of elite troops to drag me back to that shit.

“Forgive me,” he says, his expression lightening. “I certainly didn’t mean to dredge up old ghosts.”

“You know what happened, and you know why,” I say, needlessly reminding him that he’d been the one to point out what was going on.

Tobin’s little tip got me in a brawl that could only end one way. He tried to stop me, tried to be the voice of reason, but he would’ve had better luck talking sense to a hurricane.

Not that it matters.

None of that shit matters a damn anymore.

I’m done, done, and also *done*.

Tobin clears his throat, shifting his weight. “As far as Miss Sellers...she’s asked for a budget and access to a supplier to place orders for the materials we’ve agreed on.”

“Give her my Centurion card and that extra laptop. Let her go wild,” I growl.

“Very well, and how much have you decided for...”

He’s silenced by the look I give him. She could max out several credit cards and it wouldn’t faze my bank account. He knows it.

I also know Grace won’t burn a dollar more than she really needs to get things done.

“You heard me, Tobin. I said, *wild*.”

He nods. “Do you have any requests for lunchtime?”

“No. Whatever you want to cook today will be fine.” I set my coffee cup in the sink. “For all of us, I’m sure.”

He’ll come around, sooner or later, and understand that I *have* to help Grace and her father.

It just takes him time to make peace with new situations that seem threatening.

For once, this one actually *is*, but I know it’s nothing we can’t handle.

I head downstairs to the gym and change into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt to finish the workout I'd skipped this morning. The couple hours I spent shoveling snow were a good release of energy, and plenty of exercise, but I still need something else.

I've never liked sitting around and twiddling my thumbs.

Having horses like Rosie and Stern already makes being buried under a mountain of snow feel tolerable. Something that'll keep me busy.

Maybe I'll look up some horse auctions online this afternoon. See what's out there.

Believe it or not, I wasn't just bullshitting her about the pumpkin farming idea.

If this chick and her old man made a living off it, then surely I can manage.

Plus, something feels mighty rewarding about watching a big old mess of pumpkins come alive on their vines all season, only to hand them out to local kids itching to carve them up into pretty ghouls and superhero heads.

One thing that doesn't bore me one bit about Dallas is how it still appreciates the little things.

Folks here don't need a new candy-colored Tesla or an extended stay in the Maldives to be happy. They relish the simple pleasures, the joy of the seasons, the laughter and fun of families living a small-town autumn to its fullest.

I can't even say I miss that shit.

I've never *had* it.

Maybe I'm still wrestling with the extreme quiet that comes from living in a place like this, but I know, deep down, there's something here for me.

And I'm willing to work like hell to find it.



AFTER A GOOD HOUR of breaking sweat, I take a shower in the downstairs bathroom.

I'm surprised to see Grace examining the exercise room when I step out. After drying my hair with the towel, I drape it around my shoulders and button my jeans before stepping up behind her.

"Boo," I whisper, holding in a chuckle as she jumps.

"Oh! You...I didn't mean to interrupt if you were getting cleaned up." Her cheeks glow cherry red, the same way they did back in the barn.

I wonder if she likes what she sees.

"Just showered, that's all. I'll find my shirt in a minute. What brings you down here?" I ask, smirking at how her eyes flee from my body.

She can't be that big a prude, can she?

"Looking for my muse. Everything we talked about a little while ago." Keeping her eyes averted, she asks, "Do you use all of this equipment?"

Fair question.

There's a lot of it here. Some of it, the bike, treadmill, and weight bench, were here when I arrived, set up by the crew who finished this house. I'd ordered the punching bag and the cross trainer later.

"Old habit. I like to switch things up, and when it's nice, I just go for a run." I drop the towel in the basket on the floor and grab a clean t-shirt off the shelf that Tobin keeps full. "Is this room what you're planning on redecorating first?"

"Do you want it to be?" She finally looks at me now that I'm shirt-clad again, an airy pink still painted on her cheeks.

I shrug. "You're the expert. You tell me how this usually works."

"Hardly. I mean, I've interned, but I've never had a chance to do a real job."

"Yeah? Too busy growing pumpkins or what?" I lift a brow, my temper already rising if it has anything to do with the bastards ruining her life.

“It’s just...my mother was diagnosed with cancer during my last year of college. As soon as I graduated, I went straight home to take care of her and help Dad with the farm. So I’ve never really put my education to good use. Besides creating things to sell at the gift shop, I mean. I did plenty of that, just basic kitschy stuff with horses, apples, pumpkins, and other farm themes.”

“I see,” I say, mainly because I’m not sure what else to tell her.

I know what it’s like to be held back, to have life fling you off course and into something else.

Not for the same reasons as her, no, but the disappointments must be roughly the same.

“If you’ve had a chance to soak it in, I think lunch is almost ready by now. Tobin rarely takes more than a good hour or so to whip something up.”

I wave at the door leading to the hall. She nods her thanks and steps ahead of me, then I follow her out of the room to the stairs.

“You have my permission to knock yourself out redecorating. Let’s get that out of the way right now. Take before and after pictures, order your supplies, do whatever you want to put this job in your portfolio.”

She throws a look back over her shoulder, beaming like the sun.

“Oh, thanks! That’s very kind of you.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing your ideas. Make this place feel less like a fancy hotel.”

“I have my sketch pad. I can show you something soon. It’s all rough drafts right now and fully open to changes,” she says, twirling a finger through her hair.

That little pout makes her bottom lip stick out like a ripe strawberry.

Goddamn, do I resist the urge to sink my teeth in.

“I’ll take a look after lunch,” I promise.

Tobin kept it simple. He’s a skilled chef, and the kind of lunch he’s assembled probably could’ve been put together in his sleep. Doesn’t mean it’s any less tasty.

We tuck into butternut squash soup and sandwiches piled high with ham, salami, several different cheeses, greens, and a sweet citrusy sauce I can’t pronounce. It doesn’t take us long to eat, and then I invite Grace to join me in my office so we can go over the sketches she’s created.

Tobin already knows to bring an extra meal out to the cabin for Nelson, whenever he wakes up.

At first, I’m impressed by her ability to draw.

At second glance, I’m more awed by what she’s suggesting. The additions and notes she’s included in her drawings are minimal, subtle, but if the real thing looks anything like her drawings, this house is going to pop with color.

She’s taken the flower theme and run with it. It’s thoughtful, vibrant, warm, and makes me think it’ll do a lot to chase away next winter’s blues if she can pull it off.

“I like what I’m seeing,” I tell her. “How long will this take?”

“Well...it’s really just a matter of placing a couple of orders online and waiting for it all to arrive. I know a few vendors that have top-shelf products at reasonable prices. And they even ship to the boonies. They’ll get it right to your door and then it’s just a matter of putting things where they belong.”

“If the damn snow melts so we can get deliveries,” I grind out, still flipping through the sketches she’s made of each room.

Her additions are natural. Rustic.

Not all silky flowers in the less trafficked rooms, but decorative vases of twigs and straw, bowls of pinecones, things to bring the outside in, just like she’s suggested.

Keeping fresh flowers alive is a feat for most people. For me, it's simple when Tobin won't let a single ant invade the house, but I appreciate the fact that she kept her plan relatively low-maintenance.

I like it a hell of a lot.

"Supposedly, spring's right around the corner," she reminds me.

I snort. "Tell it to my buddy, Faulk. He warned me winters in these parts linger sometimes until damn near early May. It's about as bad as Alaska."

"It's warmer today. I heard something dripping out there earlier. Seems like the sun is already doing a good job on the snow. Maybe we'll have a thaw after all."

Hmm, she's right. I'd noticed the melt earlier, falling off the roofs and widening the areas I shoveled.

"Which brings us to the next issue," I say. "Mud."

Her oval face scrunches in.

"That's the downfall of spring," she says. Somehow, she still sounds cheerful about frigging *mud*, which makes me want to laugh. "What's that smile for? The earth needs the water. Mother Nature has her way of balancing things out."

"You like nature, don't you?" I ask, fully aware of the smirk I'm wearing. "It's evident in all these drawings."

Her cheeks flush slightly.

"Yes, I do. I prefer to decorate with organic things."

"Bringing the outside in," I say, recalling how she'd said that earlier while we were walking the horses and knocking around ideas.

"That's right. I'm glad you were listening," she says, returning my smile.

I've never really had that.

L.A. is full of manufactured things in all aspects, right down to the manicured palm trees and picture-perfect lawns.

Even the organic trends end in plants on leashes. They don't call Southern California *la la land* for nothing when you find a scene out of a too-perfect dream just by turning your head.

Flipping to another page, I see faint lines where she's erased some sketches. She's across the desk from me, so I spin the book around and push it at her.

"What'd you erase here? In the front entryway?"

She doesn't look at the page, but flicks her eyes away from me. "I, well...I considered adding a few antiques to that area, an old mirror or clock, but I changed my mind. I was afraid it might take away from..."

I see her throat moving as she swallows.

"You can say it. My mother's picture. The memorial." My fingers rap the desk softly.

I see her nod, slowly and carefully.

The painting is huge, rather imposing with the marble half table and a huge vase of yellow roses. It probably does look like some sort of freaky shrine, a mini funeral parlor.

I'd meant to honor her memory, not relive her interment every damn day.

Now I'm wondering if that's necessary.

That little setup isn't making me remember things any differently. It's not preserving happier times, when she'd pull me onto her sets and laugh with the camera crews while they pretended to film me as a boy, chasing other actors around.

Nor is it paying homage to *her* as I hoped it might.

My mother was more than a world-famous actress and a perfect pair of bright-blue eyes preserved in a camera flash and artist's eye. She was the living, beating heart of my life.

I lose myself in the mental tug of war for a minute, idly thumbing at a couple more pages.

Grace remains silent, and oddly, it's not awkward.

Not even when I flip back to the image of the front entryway, pursing my lips.

I stare at it, noting she really isn't changing much there except for a rug and a few antiques. She's not touching the portrait itself, and honestly, I wish she had. Maybe then it'd be easier to decide what the hell to do.

"You know, out there in the building where I parked your truck, there's a large storage area. I've never really explored it much, but they left some old antiques behind. Stuff from the original farm that the previous owners saved and said I could keep."

"Wow, really?" Her long lashes flutter, excitement flickering in her eyes.

I grin at the way they shine. "You're welcome to explore. See if there's something you want to use while sprucing up this place." I close the sketchbook. "Just make it more lively, less sterile."

"Um, I never *said* it was sterile."

"No, but you thought it, and your instincts are right. I just said it for you." I've known it since moving in, but never really thought about making changes so soon.

Hell, maybe *I've* felt sterile since moving out here. Leaving L.A. behind was a definite relief, and I enjoyed the first season here before the snow, but outside that?

I know how it's been.

Barren. Unproductive. Timeless, and not necessarily in a good way.

I thought that's what I wanted. An escape devoid of the constant bustle back home and its stress, but I think I'm moving beyond that now.

I think I'm ready to live again.

Actually, I *know* I'm ready.

"Screw it, I'll come with. Let's get our coats on and go see what's out there," I tell her, pushing away from the desk.

Her face lights up as she jumps to her feet, fully animated.

“Only gonna warn you once,” I say, holding up a finger. “You pelt me with a snowball, there’ll be hell to pay.”



WE SPEND the entire afternoon out there, digging through old cardboard boxes and wooden crates of old junk.

My junk, technically.

Her reaction? It’s like every damn box has a pirate’s forgotten treasure hidden inside.

There’s a large pile of things she’s “sure she can use” that I have to skirt around when I hear Jake Lewis’ snowplow trundling up my long driveway from the road. I can’t even hide my grin as she bolts up after me and follows.

Don’t think I’ll *ever* get tired of seeing that man make short work of the crap blocking access to civilization.

I exit the building and spend a few minutes talking with Jake about the weather and road conditions, which are both improving by the hour, and then walk back inside while he continues clearing away the snow I missed between the buildings.

“It’s getting late,” I tell Grace. “Almost dark now.”

“Jeez, it doesn’t feel like we’ve been out here that long,” she says, her head stuck in yet another box. “I can’t believe all the amazing finds! You’re lucky they left it.”

I can’t believe all the shit out here to clean up one day.

“Hey, one man’s trash—”

“Is another man’s treasure,” she says, looking back with her blonde hair sweeping over her face and laughing. “For this woman, I think it’s a little bit of paradise.”

I pause, throwing back her grin.

Nice to see her worries fade, even for a little while, and I watch Grace Sellers in a relaxed, natural state.

No surprise, she’s prettier than ever.

Even less surprising—I take every opportunity I can to catch an eyeful of that lush ass of hers working every time she’s bent over.

I said I’m no saint, remember?

Her save pile grew during the time I was outside, gabbing with the plow guy.

“You’re going to use *all* of this stuff?” I ask, picking up an old lantern.

She sits back, knees stretched in front of her, and flicks her hair away from her face. “No, that’s just my maybe pile. I’ll know what I want to use once I get everything cleaned up.”

I set the lantern down, keeping my gaze on the pile of miscellaneous junk. Mainly because she’ll notice me eyeballing her sooner if I don’t switch the perv-vision off.

No easy task. Not when she’s a blonde, bright-eyed pixie, an all-American piece of Wisconsin’s finest I shouldn’t be having these thoughts about.

“Looks like a lot of cleaning to me,” I tell her.

“Oh, I’ll whittle the pile down before I start polishing stuff up.” She stands up and brushes her hands on the jeans covering her thighs. “This was just round one, buddy. Round two will put a lot of that back in the boxes.”

Seems like a waste of time to me, but I’m no decorator.

If it wasn’t for Tobin’s input, I’m not sure I’d have thought to ask the furnishing people about fixing a spot for Mom’s memorial.

“Say, do you have any saddle soap? Anything oil-based?” she asks.

I blink. “Uh, no clue. You’ll have to ask Tobin. He’s on top of the cleaning supplies. Why?”

She points at her save pile. “I found some old leather tack I’d like to clean up and some small wooden barrels.”

Shit, does she ever switch off?

I'm impressed her white coat is still white at all after the hours we've spent digging through more dusty crates than I can count.

"Want me to carry them inside for you?" I ask, mock-flexing. "I'm good for one thing."

"We'll leave them here for now, Hercules." She smiles, pointing to two boxes. "Those are the things I'll take back to the cabin and wash tonight."

I pick one up. It's full of old canning jars, earthen crocks, a big wooden spoon, and other odds and ends that look like they belonged to an old-timey kitchen once.

"I'll grab the other." She's already picking up the box. "I've got it."

There's an old washboard sticking out of the top of her box. She has to hold her chin up to see over the top of it. "I'll follow you."

I lead the way to the door, open it, and stand aside as she walks out to the freshly plowed property. I follow and shut the door.

We take the boxes to the guesthouse, and the entire time I'm following, my eyes won't leave her. What can I say?

She's trim, fit, and as cute in the back as she is in the front.

It's not just the fact that I've been cooped up all winter.

It's her, every soft inch of Grace Sellers that makes her a dose of sexy blonde medicine.

That was on my mind the entire time we'd been digging through the boxes. How attractive she is, and how I could use that to my benefit right now.

I'd received several texts from Bebe Silk since Tobin mentioned her, my never ending pain in the ass.

I haven't heard from her since leaving California, which makes me wonder what's changed to send her after me.

A pretend 'girlfriend' would give me the excuse I need for Bebe to buzz off. I know how maddeningly persistent this

woman is, and if I don't give her a reason soon, she'll show up at my door.

Getting rid of her again will be as hard as the first time—she's like a wood tick that sinks in and doesn't let go as long as there's still blood.

“You can just leave that box out here, please,” Grace says, nodding to the floor of the porch next to the cabin door. “I'll carry it in when I'm ready to wash the stuff.”

I set the box down, opening the cabin door for her. “I'm sure Tobin has dinner almost ready. Bring your dad, assuming he's feeling up to it.”

“All right. I'll wash up and then we'll be over,” she says, glancing toward the couch where the old man slouches half asleep.

I close the door without saying another word and walk to the house with an odd weight in my gut.

Almost like I didn't want to leave her.

I'm not a man who brings in strays for good karma, especially strangers, yet that glimmer of sadness, of hopelessness in her soft blue eyes pulls me down like an anchor.

Tobin has supper ready like I knew he would, a steaming pot of beef stew with red wine, garlic, and plenty of rosemary. We've got greens, bread, and homemade mashed potatoes to go with it.

I figured it'd be a stew day after the big storm.

There are times when the man's predictability feels like a godsend.

Grace and Nelson arrive a few minutes after I do, and as we eat, I can't help wondering more about their past. I save the hard questions—especially when the old man looks like he needs every bite he can get—and ask them about life on the farm instead, their favorite places in Milwaukee, all the little things that make Wisconsin worth a trip.

When the meal is over, I head into my office and fire up the computer, where I find a defunct website and social media for Sellers' Pumpkins. I'm still scrolling through old posts when there's a knock on the door.

"Come in," I say, expecting it to be Tobin but wanting it to be Grace.

It's neither.

Nelson sticks his head around the edge of the door. "Got a minute?"

"Sure." I minimize the page on my screen, waving a hand for him to sit down in one of the chairs.

I hope like hell he hadn't seen me peeping at his old business.

He's stooped forward again, as if it hurts to breathe while walking, and gradually makes his way across the room. I resist the urge to jump up and help him.

I almost regret salvaging his pride because he's nearly gasping by the time he plants himself in the empty chair.

"Have you seen a doctor recently?" I can't hide my concern.

"Y-yeah." He nods, covering that damnable cough with his elbow. "Gracie took me to the emergency room one night not long before we left home."

I stare, hating how his entire body trembles.

He takes a wheezy breath. "They gave me some pills, but...damn things sure haven't helped much."

"Maybe it's time for a follow-up," I suggest.

"Can't." His shoulders rise as he struggles to pull in air. Lungs rasping, he sits back in the chair. "It's too expensive, and really...that's what I want to talk to you about, Ridge." Taking another struggling breath, he gestures to me. "I noticed your tattoo over dinner. Your man, Tobin, confirmed you were in the Army. So was I. Quite a few years ago, but I did my time in West Berlin, nose-to-nose with the Reds."

My respect for him increases.

The armed services can be a tough road for anyone, but those who served years ago saw some shit many have forgotten. Nothing like enlisting during the height of the Cold War to make a man's balls drop, staring in the face of very real conflict with another superpower, even the chance of nuclear annihilation.

"Brave times for braver men," I say. "I'm aware things were different back then."

He gives a slight nod. "Not as different as you'd think. But that's not what I wanted to talk about, and as a fellow serviceman, I want to give it to you straight."

"Okay, Nelson. Shoot."

"We've had a change of plans. Gracie won't be able to finish decorating your place, I'm sorry to say." He pauses, coughing a few more times and wiping one eye. "But I'll give you Rosie and Stern for your trouble, leaving a job before she's barely started...I know how disappointing that can be. Consider it payment for letting us stay. We'll be out of your hair tomorrow."

Shit.

Tomorrow? In *his* state?

Obviously, I won't take the offer, but I have to humor him to find out what's really going on.

"Oh?" I ask. "Don't you think sticking around for a few more days until you feel less like death warmed over would be a better idea?"

He gives me a friendly chuckle. "Maybe so, but frankly, we can't."

"Where's the fire?" I fold my hands, looking him square in the eye. "Montana's calling that bad, huh?"

Nelson flinches back, struggling to contain yet another cough.

“Listen, you’re a smart guy. You know we’re nothing but trouble. You saw what went down with Jackknife...we’re plenty grateful but we have to keep movin’, Ridge. Gotta be on our merry way before dragging you in any deeper.”

“What sort of *trouble* are you in, Nelson?” I tilt my head.

I’ll be damned if I won’t find out, whether I pull it out of him tonight or dig it up myself. I have my ways, and friends in the right places.

“The kind that’s got legs and follows,” Nelson says with a shake of his head. “I saw the driveway’s been plowed today, so we’ll head out in the morning. You’ve been real good to us, and I don’t feel right putting you out a minute longer. You’re a busy man, I’m sure.”

“How does Grace feel about the new plan?” I ask.

“She’ll...she’ll listen,” Nelson whispers, breaking off to hack into his arm again.

Goddamn.

So he hasn’t even talked to her yet.

At least that means there’s a good chance he won’t get far.

Grace is hardly a *do-as-I-say* woman, but the old man doesn’t need to hear it because I don’t think he sees his daughter that way either.

He’s flat-out desperate, grasping at straws, lost in fight-or-flight mode.

I think he knows he’s in over his head.

Another thought hits me that raises more alarm. My gut tells me that Tobin, in his subtle, yet always out-for-my-best-interests way, got to Nelson. Maybe he even put the bug in his ear to blow Dallas while the weather’s clear.

If it was anyone but Tobin, I’d be pissed, but I know him.

Hell, I expected something like this after our conversation this morning. The man doesn’t do confrontation, but behind the scenes, he could turn a pack of pirate-ninjas into total pacifists.

Fuck, I'll talk to Tobin later.

For now, I tell Nelson, "You and Grace are welcome to stay here for as long as you need, without any sort of rent. Including your horses."

"Oh, I believe you," Nelson says with a nod. "But we have to leave, and to be honest, not pulling a horse trailer would be easier on the old truck."

There's no denying the logic. Not having their name on the side of their truck would be beneficial, too.

However, despite what Nelson thinks, I believe Grace will make the real decision. Somehow, I don't think she'll be cool leaving with her father so sick.

"If you'd like, Rosie and Stern can stay here. I'll take good care of them and they'll be ready whenever you'd like to pick them up, whenever that may be."

"Dammit, I...thank you. Thank you, Ridge, you're one hell of a guy. I *knew* you'd understand." He stands up, holding out a shaky hand. "We'll be heading out bright and early, so I'll say my goodbyes now, if you don't mind."

I stand and give his hand a firm pump, knowing full well I'll be seeing him in the morning. Then I release him and watch as he walks toward the door.

"When you're ready for help loading, I'm here. Come to me. Tobin shouldn't be doing all the lifting at his age."

He stops at the door, coughs, and with watery eyes, looks at me again. "I wish like hell I could take you up on that. I truly do."

As soon as he closes the door, I pull out my phone. Finding the number I need in the contacts, I punch it and wait for the ring.

It only takes one. I'd be surprised if it was any different.

"Barnet? Hell of a big storm, wasn't it? You okay, man?" The familiar Oklahoma twang over the line makes me grin.

I'm not surprised Quinn Faulkner is just as buried as I've been. He lives on a smaller farm ten or so miles away, his grandpa's old place where he used to spend his summers.

"Yeah, it's me. Should I kick your ass now or later for ever mentioning the words 'Dallas, North Dakota' without telling me about the winters?"

"Aw, shucks. You'd have never moved here to keep me company if I scared you off." His deep laughter echoes in the phone. "Tell me what's really got you pissed. Finally decided you need a real man in one of your movies? I'm ready."

"I'd call Andrews if that was the case, Faulk," I say jokingly.

The three of us were in more than one mission together that went sideways during our years in the service, and Joel Andrews never quit boasting about how good he'd look on the big screen.

Faulkner chuckles again. "Good luck with that, bro. He's in South America, living it up in Panama or something on a budget."

"I heard," I tell him. "Well, maybe Grady deserves his fifteen minutes of fame. Any dude raising two little munchkins alone is more man than I'll ever be."

After a short pause, he says, "Seriously, Ridge, what's going on? I've been thinking about you lately. Haven't met up since we had a beer shortly after New Year's."

"Better question: how are you?"

"You know me, I'm always good every day I'm working for myself. Spying on cheating husbands and dropping trackers on guys with minor warrants beats getting shot at any day."

I laugh. Faulkner has always been full of himself, and since leaving the service, he's made a name for himself as a private eye after serving several years in the FBI.

I haven't needed to use him until now. Enlisting his services for anything seemed far-fetched until recently.

“Listen, I’m calling to ask a favor. Can I trust you with a secret?”

The laughter stops. I hear him take a sharp breath, realizing how serious I am.

“Sure. What’s up?” he asks.

“I need intel on a man. ASAP.”

“You got it. Give me a name and I’ll dig up everything right down to his birth certificate.”

“Nelson Sellers. Lived in Wisconsin. Milwaukee first, and then moved somewhere outside of it. Owned a pumpkin farm.”

“Pumpkins? Shit, do I even *want* to know? Is this some weird movie star thing?”

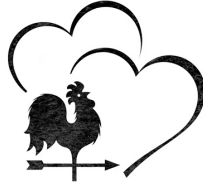
“Faulk, just trust me on this. I’ll explain the rest later.” I’m sure he expected me to be asking about a big-time star or politician, someone far more high profile than a random pumpkin farmer from Bumfuck, Wisconsin.

“Okay, okay. Give me an hour or two and I’ll send something back. I’ve gotcha covered, Barnet.”

The line goes dead.

I click off and stand up, ready to have a few words with Tobin.

NO SURRENDER (GRACE)



“**W**hat’s so interesting? You haven’t even looked up once, Gracie.”

I finally glance up at Dad’s voice, startled that I hadn’t heard him walk in the cabin.

Oof. I’ve been deep in the weeds, scouring every Wikipedia tidbit and gossip rag I can find for info on Ridge Barnet.

I flip my phone down against the plaid cushion of the sofa before Dad sees. He’s no stranger to gossip, but I’m not sure he’d approve of me snooping on our host.

“Oh, just browsing decorating sites and Pinterest boards,” I tell him, flashing a smile that hurts my face.

It’s not a complete lie. That’s what I’d started out doing, but of course curiosity got its hooks in, and I wound up creeping on Ridge instead.

Can you blame me?

It hasn’t even been a full forty-eight hours since my whole world was turned upside down for the second time by this gorgeous Bruce Wayne who decided to play real life Batman.

Dad shakes off his coat and drapes it over the back of an overstuffed chair before he sits down and lets out a sigh...

...and that leads to another cough.

God.

He's still getting worse.

Soon there'll be no choice. I'm going to *have* to convince him to see a doctor. No easy task when he comes armed with a thousand excuses.

The first time, it took me two days of arguing, and even then, the only reason he finally caved is because I said we couldn't leave for Montana until he got checked out.

I wish like hell we'd had time for that follow-up in Milwaukee with the cardiologist. The specialists there are no doubt a lot more common and skilled than whatever's out here in these podunk North Dakota towns.

But Clay and his goons made sure time was a luxury we didn't have.

It just hurts.

Even when you know you made the right decision, fleeing practically overnight, it's no real relief when you're watching your own father fall apart in front of you.

"Everything okay? You seem kinda anxious," I say, forcing myself to look him in the eyes. It's harder than it sounds when I don't want to focus on that bleary redness around his pupils.

"I told Ridge we'll be leaving tomorrow," Dad says once his latest coughing subsides.

Boom. A nice, searing slap across the face.

I mean, it's not like it's a total surprise.

I figured that's why he'd stuck around at the house after supper.

And I also know darn well we won't be leaving tomorrow.

Not with the way he's coughing and rubbing at his eyes.

I'll humor him, though, for now.

I've learned to do that over the years, throw him a carrot to keep his spirits up and let him down easy later.

Hard part is, I've never learned to like it.

“Hmm. I suppose maybe we’ve overstayed our welcome. We’d better keep moving, after all. With the drubbing Ridge gave Jackknife, I bet he’ll be back next time with friends.” I stand up.

“Yeah. That was really something. Damn nice it went our way for once.” Dad gives me a tepid smile and melts back into his chair. Probably relieved that I’m not putting up the fight he expected. “You need my help tying up your odds and ends?”

“I’m good. I’ll go pack up the things I found in his shed today, once I’m finished. It’s the least I can do for our host.” Patting Dad’s shoulder as I walk past, I add, “Hey, they’re clean now. They can use them if they want to.”

“Aw, Grace. I’m sorry about that, getting you roped into things here. Don’t know what I was thinkin’.” Dad looks down, staring at his work-worn hands folded neatly in his lap. “Dummy me. I shouldn’t have said nothing to Ridge about your decorating.”

“It’s fine. This way, we can give back for them taking us in.”

We trade a knowing smile.

Even in his weakened state, my dad’s a proud man to the end. He’s independent to his core and stubborn as a bull when it comes to taking help.

I walk into the kitchen area that opens to the living room.

I’d carried in the other box from the porch after supper, washing everything carefully before I’d picked up my phone to research some ideas and started snooping everything Ridge Barnet instead.

He’s had an interesting life...to put it mildly.

Sure, the tabloids embellish the mundane and create entire scandals every time someone famous burps without covering their mouth.

But behind every piece of clickbait, there’s often a grain of truth, however tiny.

I can’t let myself replay that now, though.

“I think he appreciates you, Gracie,” Dad says, his voice crackling like a fire across the room. “The man’s a hard nut to crack, wouldn’t take my money or the...other stuff I offered to trade him for having us. You’re good at what you do. When this is all over, you can tell everybody you worked on a movie star’s house. Imagine the business that’ll bring in! You’ll be rolling in it,” Dad says, sounding excited for my sake but also very sad.

I’m sad, too, but hold true and don’t push the issue.

That can wait until morning. If it’s anything like yesterday, he’ll stay up longer than he should with that merciless cough and sleep through his alarms.

“We found a lot of antiques today. Even an old harness that’ll be quite handsome once it’s cleaned up with some saddle soap,” I tell him.

“Gracie, I...there’s something I ought to come clean about. I tried to give him Rosie and Stern for letting us stay here.”

I stop mid-stride, my face heating.

“I know, I should’ve talked to you first, but...” Dad pauses. “He wouldn’t take ’em, anyway. Not permanently. So don’t worry about that. He did offer to keep them happy here until we’re in a position to pick them up again. I got to thinkin’, that’s not such a bad idea when we’re gonna be on the road for God knows how long. We’d all be better off with them settled, out of harm’s way, but it’s only right I get your blessing. They’re your horses, too.”

I have to bite my lip to keep from responding.

Yes, I’m miffed that he went behind my back, offering our freaking horses to a perfect stranger.

A stranger who could probably buy the finest steeds ever bred with a rounding error in his bank account.

Jesus. For a second, I wonder if whatever’s wrong with him is affecting his brain, too.

But it doesn’t take brain damage to explain Dad’s behavior. Fear and desperation are motivation enough.

Honestly, he isn't wrong, letting them stay here *temporarily*.

And once again, it's Ridge to the rescue with exactly what we need, offering to let Rosie and Stern crash in his empty stables.

It isn't fair.

We've only been here a day, but Ridge has this freaky perception. He knows Dad is in no condition to hit the road.

Dad knows it, too, but he's too pigheaded to admit it.

At least he realizes traveling without the horses will be easier. Faster. Safer.

It certainly would be, only...we still don't have anywhere to go, with or without the horses.

"Gracie, did you hear me?" he asks, raspy as ever. "I...I said I'm sorry."

"Loud and clear," I answer, continuing to put the items I'd washed back into the boxes that I'd used to carry them to the house. Placating him is the best strategy for now, even if part of me is closer to spitting mad. "Ridge has a setup that'd make most farmers jealous. Rosie and Stern could be very comfortable in the barn. I guess they won't mind staying for a bit."

"That barn does look awfully nice," Dad says, scratching his arm. My ears are so sensitive it's almost like chalkboard. "Hell, I wish I felt good enough to walk out there and see it. Is it as state of the art as it looks?"

I let out the breath I'd been holding in, keeping my hands busy.

It's impossible to stay mad at him for long.

Dad loves barns, classic cars, equipment of all sorts whether it's sitting in a museum or rolling off a shiny new assembly line. For him to admit he doesn't feel well enough to walk out there and see it...

That says a lot.

A whole lot of nothing good about his condition.

“It’s remarkable. You don’t see a place like that every day with brand new everything. You’ll check it out tomorrow, when you say goodbye to Rosie and Stern.” I say that only to give him something to think about.

He won’t leave those horses without saying goodbye.

Dad loves them just as much as I do.

“I’ll be ready. I think I’m gonna go lay down for a while,” he says, slowly standing up. “Glad we could see eye to eye, Gracie. We’ve got a long road ahead.”

I nod, hoping my eyes hide the mess of feels this conversation stirred up.

My heart does go out to him. I even want to help him into bed, but I know that’ll irritate him like nothing else.

Honestly, I think it’s wishing that keeps him going.

Wishing he felt good enough to keep running, as long as it takes.

Wishing we didn’t have to depend on anyone, whether it’s Ridge or Noelle or the next person who’s ludicrous enough to help us out.

Wishing he could take his hell to the grave, without sucking me in.

I wish he’d never gotten mixed up with any of the demons still haunting him. But I’ve also learned a lot about wishes since Mom died, when she took what little faith I ever had in fake optimism away.

Wishes suck at slaying demons.

They never make a dent in a bad situation.

Oh, and they’re too good at stirring up false hope instead of confronting cold, hard reality.

“Do you want me to turn on the TV in there for you?” I ask, watching as he shuffles toward the hall.

“No. I’m beat tonight and we’ve got an early morning.” Stooped over, he heads straight for the bedroom on the lower floor. “Good night, Gracie.”

“Night, Dad. Hope you feel better in the morning.” I mean it, but I’ll tell you what I won’t do—make more wishes.

The ER doctor hadn’t given us much to go on. A light prescription for a lung infection, a diuretic, and a few suggested dietary changes, but none of that’s helped his shortness of breath.

It feels so hopeless.

“I’m sure I will,” Dad throws back before entering the room and closing the door.

Frustration bears down on me like a boulder.

There’s so little I can do for him.

Not just making him feel better, but finding a way for us to get out of the mess we’re in.

It’s true that we have nowhere to go ever since the Miles City plan fell through, yet, like Dad, I know we can’t stay here. We can’t drag Ridge into a living nightmare.

I’m just grateful we’re here for now, a refuge where Dad can rest for a few days in relative safety and comfort while I search for our next hiding place.

I tuck the last of the antiques in the boxes, finishing with a shiny set of silver spoons that look just as good as new now that they’re polished up. I leave them on the counter and go back to the couch.

Picking up my phone, I scroll through my contacts one more time, hoping a new idea hits. Some place we can go or someone I can call.

But the list of names might as well be total strangers. They’re all friends and college roommates I haven’t spoken to in years.

My thumb idly brings up a tab I’d minimized.

I pause when the website I’d been reading earlier pops up.

It's a link from a clickbait article about Ridge, one from last year. I curl into the corner of the sofa and start reading again, my brows knit together.

A little more snooping can't hurt, just for a little while.

Then I'll plot a course out of North Dakota. Maybe we can go farther than Miles City, wind up in Billings or Bozeman, bigger cities with real hotels. Or maybe we'll get lucky and find somewhere off the beaten path, where Dad can rest for a few days.

For now, I turn back to my screen, and the deeper I get, the more my heart tries to stop mid-beat. The headline almost hurts to read.

DANE BARNET GHOSTS Star-Struck Charity Bash! Tragedy Still Haunts America's Favorite Boy Actor.

ACCORDING TO THE ARTICLE, Ridge's disappearance from the Hollywood scene happened after his mom's death several years ago.

Judy Barnet's demise was labeled a 'probable suicide' by investigators. I vaguely remember hearing about it but forgot until now. She'd fallen off a balcony at this luxury ski resort.

The piece goes on to discuss an earlier disappearance from the industry, a time when he'd abruptly left his childhood acting career to join the Army.

That 'disappearance,' they attributed to a child actor meltdown.

Yeah. I think I've got a nose for crap, and the breakdown they're implying doesn't jibe at all with the man I know.

Well, sorta maybe know for all of one action-packed day.

Overall, the article is negative, which irritates me, but also fills me with more questions.

And not just about how little I can believe.

I wonder what *really* brought Ridge to the desolate hills of North Dakota.

He doesn't seem like the kinda guy to go into hiding because his mom committed suicide—which is what the article seems to be pressing readers to believe.

Too intrigued to stop now, I continue searching, reading, scowring for everything I can find about Ridge Barnet since the day he was born. I keep an open mind.

We won't be staying here long, but however lengthy our stay, I'd love to find out more about our mysterious, generous host and what makes him tick.

~

EVERYTHING I'D READ last night lingers in the back of my mind come morning.

It's Dad in the front and center. Another rough night.

Even from my room, I'd heard him coughing so hard he was literally gasping sometimes.

He finally fell into an exhausted slumber after midnight. I pray he'll stay asleep until I return.

There's a drugstore in Dallas and that's where I'm heading. Before I deal with anything else today, I have to throw something at that nasty cough.

I'll see what the pharmacist suggests. Whatever it takes to make him feel better. It's my only hope.

I already know I could talk until I'm blue in the face, but Dad won't see another doctor while we're stuck here.

“Back at it this soon or just an early riser?”

I'm almost to the truck when I hear a deep, booming voice.

I turn toward the house. Ridge shrugs on his coat as he walks down the front steps.

“No, not exactly,” I answer, knowing he's referring to the crates in the shed where my old Ford is also parked. “I'm heading into town.”

“What for?” he asks, zipping his leather coat while catching up to me.

“I’m not sure yet.” I reach for the handle on the shed door. “Anything the pharmacist suggests.”

“Shit. Nelson’s doing that bad?”

A deflated sigh hisses out of me. There’s no use in sugarcoating the obvious.

“He had a really rough night. He’s sleeping now, so I need to hurry.”

“I’ll drive you. We’ll get there and back faster with my ride. I’ll go tell Tobin to keep an eye on Nelson until we get back.”

“No, that’s sweet, but not necessary,” I say. “But if you could check on Dad...that’d be good.”

He folds his arms and rakes a look up my body. All sinful, demanding blue-eyed beast-man today, apparently.

“Driving you is necessary,” he says, already turning back to the house. “The roads are less than pristine around here until they’ve had a few good passes. Yesterday was just the start of the cleanup. Last thing you want to do is risk getting stuck while you’re on a medicine run.”

I hate how he’s right.

The thought occurred to me, but now I don’t have a choice. Dad needs some relief and I have to find it.

Letting Ridge give me a lift would be the smartest choice. I just hate becoming even more indebted to this man, who’s wrestling with his own demons aplenty if anything in those articles is true.

A few seconds later, one of the four garage doors on the house opens, making the decision for me. I hear the familiar growl of his truck.

When life gives you lemons...sometimes you just drink that damn lemonade with the biggest forced smile.

~

MINUTES LATER, we're in the truck and heading into town.

Despite the plows out yesterday, more snow drifted over in places with the overnight winds, just like Ridge suggested.

Instead of pointing it out, he asks about Dad, how long he's been sick, and assures me that Tobin will be with him the whole time we're gone.

I explain that it came on suddenly around December. We both thought it was a cold at first, and it'd go away in a week or two, but it lingered several months until the cough became almost crippling.

I mention the recent ER trip where he was diagnosed with a viral infection they couldn't give him much for, not without a follow-up, and the suspected congestive heart failure.

I tell him I want to talk to the pharmacist about what might really help Dad, the best over-the-counter medication money can buy.

"While you're doing that, I'll hit the grocery store," Ridge says, his hands tightening on the wheel. "Tobin made some suggestions. He needs more stuff for another round of chicken soup. Everything we grabbed the other day wasn't enough to keep it coming."

My heart sinks.

Again, his kindness crushes my soul, but we really, really can't be staying here much longer.

"Thank you," I say, fully meaning it.

I sincerely appreciate what he's doing for us. Even though Dad is first and foremost on my mind, I can't help but think about all the things I'd read about Ridge last night.

Troubled child actor who's had multiple meltdowns over the years seems so flipping hard to believe.

That's not who's in the driver's seat right now, eyes fixed sternly on the road, treating this supply run like it's some kind of life-or-death mission.

Really, the man driving me into town doesn't seem like an award-winning actor at all—just a normal guy in his truck.

A nice guy with searing good looks and shredded abs that were definitely *too nice* on the scale of *ohhh to ahhh* when I saw him with his shirt off.

Okay, so I'm probably talking out of my butt.

I've never known any actors. I've never done interviews. I've never so much as performed in a high school musical.

But Ridge Barnet seems shockingly down-to-earth.

Too genuine to ever walk out on a huge charity event for no good reason like that last article suggested. Certainly not the kinda man who'd snap over his mom's death—more crass speculation by whoever threw together that hack piece.

I also wonder...what actually happened to Judy Barnet?

There wasn't a chance to dive deep into the suicide case.

I just know, more often than not, real investigative journalism is a dying art.

Now things get posted online more for eyes and ad revenue than truth.

“So this is Dallas?” I wonder out loud, scanning over the cute little rows of storefronts as the truck enters what looks like the main drag.

Everything looks Christmas card perfect out here when it's dusted in snow.

It's almost idyllic, small-town Americana stamped into everything from the candy-cane-striped sign at the barber's shop, to the little wooden airplane cut outs attached to the streetlamps with the town's name painted on every single one.

Wait, airplanes?

“What's up with that?” I point out the windshield.

“Huh?” Ridge needs a second to get what I'm gesturing at. “Oh, those. Yeah, that's part of the local lore. This town wouldn't exist without North Earhart Oil employing half the

folks here. There was some drama a couple years back when old man Reed died and turned the company over to his daughter—but they’ve been established here for years. Business took off during the boom about ten years ago.”

“Earhart, like Amelia Earhart?”

“So they say. The old man who started the company swore she was a distant relative, but you want to start a shouting match at the Bobcat, just walk in some night and ask.” He looks over, flashing me a grin that should come with a wildfire warning. “The townies love to fight over it all the time. Especially when there’s booze involved. Hell, if you’re here long enough—”

“Oh, um, thanks but...I doubt we’ll have the time.” My face heats.

Looks like Dad isn’t the only man I need to let down easy. Eventually, we’ll have to leave, the sooner the better. That doesn’t leave time for fumbling around town.

“We’ve arrived. The pharmacy’s here and Filmore’s grocery store is just around the corner. I’ll grab the goods and meet you back here shortly, you dig?” Ridge asks as he pulls up next to the curb near the drugstore.

“I...dig. Apparently.”

Confession: I don’t know the first thing about how to *dig*, much less get used to Ridge Barnet’s weird vernacular.

He lets out a friendly snort, shaking his head.

“What?” I whip my face toward him, trying not to let his smile infect me.

“You, darlin’. Lighten up. I know you’ve got a lot of shit on your plate, but now’s not the time to worry yourself sick. Long as you’re under my roof—roof of this big fat truck included—you’re good.”

His eyes shift over. I can’t shake the sense that I’m *very* good.

“And I appreciate it, you just...you kinda have this eighties action hero thing going on.”

“Hey, I’m not *that* frigging ancient,” he growls, face going mock-stern and steely-eyed. “I’ll take it as a compliment. You ever see the ladies still pining away over gunslingers and ass-kickers in kilts from those days? I’ve *heard* about it from the actors. They keep sticks around to fight off the mobs. *Fucking. Chick. Magnets.*”

If he’s trying to make me laugh like an idiot...mission accomplished.

Whatever else happens, something tells me I’ll need a good long while to get over this man.

When my sides stop aching, I reach for the door.

“All right, Chick Magnet,” I say, unclasping my seat belt. “Thanks for the town history lesson and the laugh. And, um, for not having a mullet.”

I fly out onto the snowy pavement before he has a chance to give me a tongue-lashing.

The store isn’t far.

Pushing open the glass doors, I feel like bad eighties jokes aren’t the only reason I’ve stepped back in time. The drugstore could be right at home in a nostalgic magazine with its worn, hardwood floors and slowly rotating ceiling fans overhead.

I walk through aisles of greeting cards and cutesy souvenirs, trying to get my bearings.

Eventually, the shelves turn whiter and blander, filled up with Band-Aids, pain relievers, and various medical supplies that stretch to the back of the store.

The pharmacist is a young woman with short brown hair.

Dr. Milly is just as pleasant and attentive as her smile while I explain Dad’s history, symptoms, and that hideous rattling cough that follows him everywhere.

She goes over a few of their offerings, warning me the over-the-counter stuff will only go so far.

Big surprise.

With concern on her face, she says, “I highly recommend he sees a doctor ASAP. His infection could’ve been misdiagnosed, or you might be dealing with pneumonia now, considering the time that’s passed. That could be very serious.”

Crap. My blood runs warmer and I wipe the sudden sweat building on my brow. The fluorescent lights overhead feel like twin suns, though I know it’s just my imagination.

“Is there any way to know for sure?”

“X-rays and a full exam. Accept no substitutes,” she says, ringing up my purchases. “Our clinic is small, but it’s good, and so are the doctors. I can put you in touch with Dr. Elroy or Dr. Abrams later today, if you’d like.”

I’d like that a lot but...besides the impossible task of talking Dad into it, the sanest thing to do is keep a low profile while we’re here.

I’m already taking a small risk coming into town like this. What if Jackknife didn’t blow town?

“Thanks, it’s just...” I pull out my credit card, shaking my head. “My father’s so stubborn. You know how older guys are.”

“Oh, yes.” Her brown eyes glow with understanding. “Mine’s the same way. I don’t know why some men let their egos get in the way of their health. It’s easier with dogs. There are times when I wish I could just put my dad in a kennel and call the vet.”

“It’d make a lot of things easier.” Despite my anxiety over Dad, I laugh.

Milly smiles back. “Right? I’ve threatened it with my father and my husband both, but fortunately I haven’t had to follow through. These lunks call up the vet every time one of their cows sneezes, but for themselves? They think peroxide, gauze pads, and duct tape work miracles.”

“So true,” I say, shaking my head again. “That’s my dad and I wish it wasn’t.”

“Well, don’t give up,” she says, handing me back my credit card and the receipt. “Call the number on the receipt if he gets worse. Maybe I can convince him to go in. I’m very good at putting on my doctor’s voice and scaring a little sense into the folks who aren’t used to it.”

She winks.

“I appreciate it,” I say, putting the card and receipt in my purse.

“No problem.” She hands me the bag of over-the-counter meds. “Oh, and don’t forget the chicken noodle soup! There’s more research coming out every day that it’s more than an old wives’ tale.”

I take the bag and smile.

“I have a friend working on that right this instant.”

She nods, then points to a door past a display of reading glasses. “Use that exit. It leads into the alley between us and the grocery store. There’s a walkway between Filmore’s and the hardware store that we keep shoveled out so we can run over to the deli on our lunch break.”

I twist enough to see over the aisle shelves and out the front windows.

The space where Ridge dropped me off is empty, so he’s probably still at the grocery store.

“Thanks.” I hold up the bag. “And thanks again for all your help.”

“Good luck!” the pharmacist chirps, giving me one more friendly wave.

I hook the bag over my arm and walk to the door. It’s heavy metal, and I’m half expecting an alarm to start blaring as I twist the knob. Luckily, that doesn’t happen.

I step outside into Jack Frost’s den. The alley is cleared out like she promised.

Piles of snow are pushed up against the buildings on both sides. I see the shoveled walkway on the other side, just a

short distance up the alley, and follow the path.

Surely fifty dollars' worth of cough and cold medicines will give Dad some relief.

Pneumonia scares me.

Seriously freaks me out.

If we get to a point where he needs to be hospitalized, I'm not sure what we'll do.

God, for all I know, he's already there.

But every day we're not moving, putting a little more distance between us and the monsters in Milwaukee, is another day we might be found. And this time, with no escape.

I *have* to get him to a doctor, I decide. Who knows how I'll pay for it, but that's the least of our problems right now.

This schtick is getting old.

We can't be sick, broke, and on the run forever.

My spine ices up as that thought crosses my mind. Then I glance up and have a better reason for my insides to freeze.

A black SUV has pulled into the alley and it's rolling to a stop.

Two men jump out with black stocking caps.

Even without his bald head shining, I recognize one of them by the mean, stocky build and chaotic tattoo running up one side of his face.

Holy Jackknife Pete!

For a split second, everything just stops. I momentarily tense, then the fight-or-flight adrenaline kicks in, and I make a mad dash for the shoveled walkway.

I'm fast, but they're no sloths.

The heavy *thud, thud, thud* of thick boots closes in at an alarming speed.

I question if I should've made a run for the drugstore door instead, glancing behind me.

Too bad it's not any closer. Crap!

They're going to catch me. Take me. Drag me away some place where I'll never be able to help Dad again.

Move! I tell myself, throwing everything I've got into my knees, my hips, my ankles.

For the longest ten seconds of my life, it works. I'm actually breaking ahead of them, leaping over scattered smears of snow, almost to the semi-safety of the streets when—

A thick hand claps over my mouth.

I fight, I kick, I try to get away. Swinging my arms, my feet, my head, I bite down on a meaty part of the hand against my mouth, but it's not helping.

The thug has a glove on that a rabid dog couldn't chew through.

The surprise weakens his grip at first, though, but as soon as I break one hold, the other guy catches up, grabbing at my belly with both arms.

Jesus, I can't fight both of them!

I'm losing ground fast.

They're dragging my body like a rag doll, flinging me around, shoving me toward the yawning hell of that SUV.

My entire world comes apart in a blurred mess fueled by every sour emotion in the known universe.

Panic.

Fear.

Tears.

So freaking many *tears*.

My heart echoes in my ears like this sinister drum, pounding so hard I swear I'm about to pass out.

I don't know what to do.

I just keep thinking it can't end like this.

It can't!

Their thick gloved hands cover my screams, pushing them back down my throat. Jackknife shoves me forward, harder, even as I'm fighting, kicking, twisting, trying to break their grip.

It's not working.

But I'm not going with them.

If they want me so bad, it's going to be with blood and bruises and hopefully a few ruptured testicles.

Calling up my last reserve of strength, I throw myself backward in a messy, off-balance cannonball, breaking their holds.

Turns out, a lucky patch of ice helps, sending the other man spinning off his feet. He hits the pavement and yells, struggling to get up.

Holy hell.

Now for the bad news: he isn't the only one whirling out of control.

I hit the ground so hard it rattles my bones.

A fierce stinging sensation darts up my tailbone. I'm in the snow, lungs heaving, piled up against the building in a hot mess of raw, confused adrenaline.

Running didn't work, so I scoot backward, up against the wall, and bury my butt in the snow. I fold at my knees, wrapping my arms around my shins, and tuck my head down, curling into the tightest ball humanly possible, so they don't have anything to grab.

Oh, but they *try*.

Muffled curses spill out behind their masks. Four angry hands yank at my coat, my hood, my hair.

They try forcing their hands under my arms to lift me up, grabbing at my ankles and forearms.

My muscles burn as I fight to keep my arms locked around my knees, head down, hoping something gives.

They're digging their hands under me, trying to pick me up. I wriggle my butt deeper in the snow, hurting my back, desperately wishing for a lucky break.

Wishing, yeah.

I said it.

That should tell me how desperate I am, but a second later there's more to worry about as everything just...stops.

Their hands quit trying to grab me.

It sounds like they're moving away. There's a dull roar in my ears past my pounding heart.

A shout.

Footsteps slapping the ground so hard it echoes.

I'm officially scared to hope that someone heard me or saw the commotion. I can't bring myself to open my eyes.

It could just be a trick, or the savages running back to their truck for something to knock me out for good. All the cannonball-girl skills in the world can't beat a gun, a knife, or the rag soaked with chloroform that shows up in every bad suspense movie.

I'm not falling for it.

I won't be taken.

Dad needs me too much, and so do Rosie and Stern.

An engine revs again, louder than before.

Crud. I can't stay blinded like this so...

So, keeping my arms locked around my knees and my head down, I open my eyes and crane my face up.

Dirty grey snow uncovered from the plowing is all I can see at first, even when I look out the corners of my eyes. But I hear a vehicle moving, its tires rolling, engine rumbling like summer thunder.

Someone grabs my arm.

I scream, stuffing myself back into a ball so hard I think I sprain something in my belly.

Make that several somethings—*ow*.

“Hey, it’s me, snap out of it, Grace! It’s Ridge. Let me help you up.”

Ridge?

Oh my God.

“Ridge!” I belt out his name, launching myself at him.

“The one and only. Can you walk, or do you need me to carry you?”

I don’t even know.

I try to get up, holding on to his arm, but he doesn’t waste more than a second before those huge arms of his envelop me. Then I’m just gliding on air, my hands locked tight around his strong neck.

He lifts me off the ground and carries me like I’m lighter than a goose feather.

I’ve never been so relieved or wanted to cry so badly in my life.

Holding back the tears, I relax in his arms and let him carry me to the sidewalk where his truck waits. It’s extra reassuring when I breathe in deep, cold breaths mingled with his scent.

If Ridge had his smell bottled up, I think they’d call it *glory*.

The only word that captures his rough, manly perfection, the faint overtone of cinnamon and citrus melded into something more primal.

If only I had time to enjoy it.

Muscles I didn’t know I had *scream* from being so tense and awkwardly bent. My legs are trembling.

Heck, *I’m* trembling all over like a deer that just skittered away from a cougar’s jaws.

When he sets me down on even ground and I finally turn toward him, I can't stop my arms from wrapping around him tighter, just holding on.

"It's okay," he whispers. "Those fucks shook you up, but they're gone now. I already called Sheriff Wallace to go looking for them."

Huh? When did that happen?

"I think I zoned out, Ridge," I say in a weak voice that's just as shaky as my body.

My senses are returning, thoughts coming back through the haze of panic that hadn't let me think beyond not letting them take me.

"It was Jackknife." I don't know why I bother stating the obvious. Maybe because my heart keeps pounding so hard I'm gasping for air, and I need something to ground me again.

"I know. There's no mistaking a shit-stack that high," he grumbles, giving me a solid hug and then running those long languid fingers down my back. "Don't worry, they're not going to hurt you. You're not leaving my sight."

He holds me while the soft breeze blusters around us.

Thankfully, it's almost as warm as yesterday. It's the touch of spring I need to pull myself together again.

At least I can finally breathe, pushing out a few solid breaths before nodding, releasing my hold on him.

Ridge isn't ready to let go. His hands run up my arms, gently testing me with a cautious touch every few inches.

"You hurt anywhere?" He cups my face, blue-eyed worry bleeding into mine.

It's so raw, so real, I almost burst out crying.

"Grace," he says my name again when I don't answer.

"I'm fine...I think. I just hurt everywhere, but I'm not really injured. I'll survive if you've got an ice pack or heated blanket or something."

“All that, darlin’.” He wraps an arm around my shoulder. “Come on, let’s go.”

I take a step, then remember why I’m here. “Oh, crap. I need my purse! The bag of medicine for Dad...”

“It’s up here. Already fetched it while you were catching your breath.”

God, I don’t remember that either.

It’s amazing how a nasty shock can just totally fry the system.

Seeing my purse and the bag on the ground a few steps away, as well as his pickup, I let out a long, harsh hiss of relief.

“I didn’t see them. They were just...there all of a sudden. Thanks, Ridge. The pharmacist, Milly, told me I could walk to the grocery store, that the path back here was shoveled, and —” I bite my lips together to stop my rambling. “I’m sorry, Ridge. I never in a million years expected them to—”

“I didn’t, either,” he rumbles, stopping to pick up my purse and the bag of cold meds. “But I really fucking should have. No excuses.”

He carries my stuff to the passenger side of his truck and helps me climb in, then passes it over before closing the door.

My heart sinks.

He can’t really think it’s his fault?

In any sane world, Jackknife and his men should’ve been long gone. Yet he’d stuck around. Watching, waiting, something I wanted to believe wasn’t a real worry since Ridge humiliated him and took the trackers off our truck.

When Ridge climbs in his side, he’s on his phone.

“Yeah. Yep. Please do. Already told Wallace. That’s right, Ridge...Dane...Barnet. Do what you have to. No, I don’t give a fuck about making it official...I read you loud and clear, Drake. Thanks.”

I can't hear anything besides his clipped, but calm and clear answers.

My stomach churns, knowing he's called the police.

"Thanks again, man. I owe you." He clicks off his phone and sets it on the console. Flashing me a grin that doesn't quite match the storm in his eyes, he asks, "Still doing okay? Do you need a doctor?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Dad's the one who should see somebody." I tighten my hold on the bag from the drugstore. "And I need to get this to Dad. Pronto."

"On it." He puts the truck in drive and slowly guides us to the end of the alley where the black SUV had been.

There, he stops, checks for traffic, and then pulls out onto the street.

"So you called the police?" I can't hold my silence any longer, rubbing my head, where I find a new bruise waiting to bloom.

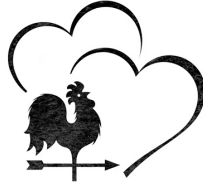
"I called in their plate number ASAP." He huffs out a false laugh. "The sheriff and my buddy, Drake, both have it out to the whole police force several towns over. That's the silver lining about dicking around in Hollywood as long as I did. Years of memorizing scripts helps a man remember everything."

Finally, some good news.

As soon as the ambush ended, I expected aches and pains and a whole lot of nightmares.

One thing I never expected?

To smile again this soon.

NO KEPT SECRETS (RIDGE)

I hit the end call button on my phone and stare at the screen, hardly surprised by the news.

Stolen plates.

Of course they were. Right off a Ford registered to a dead gal in Michigan.

Mother-fuckers.

No reports of a black SUV by any patrol officers, either. Considering Dallas has a minuscule roster of cops, it's a miracle old Rodney Wallace can even spare my neighbor, Drake Larkin, to go looking for Dickless Pete and his minions.

Thankfully, Drake's a veteran soldier when it comes to trouble in this town. He took down an evil company muscling into town and a serial killer, no less.

If there's anyone in Dallas truly qualified to hunt down mobsters, it's him. And if Drake corners that sneering boar of a man with the ugly ink etched on his face, what I did that night at the Bobcat will look like a nice sunny day at the zoo.

Shit.

Yanking open a desk drawer, I scrounge around for the notepad where I'd jotted down the intel that Faulkner reported last night.

There wasn't much—what else is new?

Mundane crap about Sellers' Pumpkins, a nine-year-old business with a still-active listing in the state of Wisconsin.

One owner: Nelson Sellers.

Former occupation: retired railroad worker. Yard Supervisor.

A daughter: Grace Imogene Sellers.

Wife's cause of death: cancer.

A perfectly boring record without a hint of a troubled man with hardened thugs on his tail.

Faulk said he hadn't heard back from a few sources yet, and he'd email a full report once his old FBI hounds checked in.

Fine.

I hope to Hades they turn up something.

My computer is on, email open. Nothing shows up in my inbox, other than an email asking me to rate my latest purchase—a history book on the Boer War I'd ordered for Tobin's birthday last month.

I'll never know how he has the time or energy to devour as many books as he does. The man lives, breathes, eats, sleeps, and shits books of all genres. I think he could go toe-to-toe with most PhDs.

Glancing at my phone again, I drop it on the desk with a sigh.

There's no use in bothering Faulk again. Not this soon.

He'll call when he's got something worth my attention. He's a bloodhound when it comes to these cases, unearthing every bone.

Honestly, I think he's happy to go hunting, too. He's been bored ever since some trouble made him leave the Feds and go private.

I just wish I had his ice-cold patience.

Standing up, I rub my forehead. All the disappointments from earlier come racing back.

Grace was almost fucking *kidnapped*.

I don't even know what made me look down that alley when I did. I'd been planning to pull up and wait for her at the main entrance after grabbing our groceries.

First I noticed the SUV.

Too new, too shiny, and too damn familiar after the run-in at the Purple Bobcat.

I'd stared in disbelief, hoping it belonged to someone else, gobsmacked at the notion a guy named *Jackknife* could get four shredded tires swapped out in roughly twenty-four hours. In one of the biggest winter storms of the year, no less.

I'd underestimated how prepared they were for trouble, and that almost cost me dearly.

At first, I'd thought those two idiots were there to clear snow when they came stomping out of their vehicle. Then I caught sight of the fur on the hood of her white coat.

Thinking she'd fallen, gotten hurt, I'd backed up and shot into the alley.

That's when I realized what was going down.

Those wolves were the reason she was ass-planted in the snow while they tried to rip her arm off.

I'm grateful Cinderella decided to turn herself into a human pumpkin.

They couldn't pick her up in time, couldn't get a good hold on her because she'd damn near buried herself in the snow, up against the wall.

They scattered like a couple flippant crows as soon as they heard me coming.

My hands ball into fists as the anger hits in a hot, needling rush.

Fuck. Them.

I'd wanted to get my hands around their throats real bad. Bury them alive in that discolored, muddy snow.

Remembering how she was shivering in the truck makes me *sick*.

I'd cranked the heat up as high as it could go on the way home, even though I knew full well it wasn't just her wet jeans leaving her chilled to the bone.

She'd been scared for her life.

Shell-shocked.

Her face was as bone-white as her coat when she'd climbed out of the truck at the house, trembling so hard she'd barely been able to stand. She asked me to stay with her until she could calm down enough to face her old man without piling more worries on his brittle shoulders.

Of course I did.

I gathered her up in my arms, pushed my chin to her forehead, and held the fuck on.

It's in a man's makeup to protect a woman who's been savaged.

I don't just mean bodily harm, but a little soul-mending, too.

Everything I never got the chance to do with Mom.

With Grace? I'll flip her demon-run world upside down if it means holding her heart together when it's trying so hard to shatter.

I'll hold her, just like I did this morning, chasing her pain away with my embrace and wordless, soft breaths that'll have to do for medicine.

Because I'd be a reckless fool to kiss her for real.

"What the *hell* is going on?" I mutter to myself, downright flustered. "What could those freaks possibly want from an old man selling pumpkins that'd be worth this trouble?"

"Money, perhaps. Don't they say it's the root of all evil?"

I whip around in my chair, forgetting I'd left my office open.

Tobin stands there in the doorway, a human statue bathed in shadows with soft winter light reflecting off his glasses.

“How many times have I said I’m gonna put a bell on you one of these days?” I growl, wondering how long he’s been there.

“Please order from Dublin, should you decide to go ahead. There’s this lovely little abbey there that makes these handsome brass bells. They’re lightweight, elegant, and won’t detract from my work,” he says, taking several steps into my office and pausing.

“When were you in Dublin? 1980? I haven’t seen you take a real vacation for at least a decade.”

He raises a brow. “You, sir, would be surprised.”

“What do you want, anyway?” I grunt. “Are Grace and Nelson around?”

“Haven’t seen hide nor hair of them since you returned, escorting Miss Sellers to the guest cabin. I believe that’s how you wanted it.”

Damn this android of a man. He’s too perceptive for his own good sometimes.

“Yeah, well, since you were eavesdropping—”

“Tending to your well-being,” he says matter-of-factly, adjusting his spectacles. “Exactly what you pay me to do.”

“Whatever. You probably know I reached out to Faulk for more on the Sellers, right?”

He stares quietly, admitting to nothing.

“C’mon, there’s no need to play dumb! Tobin, I need you on board with this. Everybody on the same page, if we’re going to help them.” I reach up, pushing a hand through my hair, waiting for him to crack and show me some goddamn sign he’s a human being under there.

“Have I ever let you down, Ridge?” he asks cautiously.

We both know what he’s referring to. I can still see the horror in his eyes when he told me the truth and sent me on the

warpath that ended my career.

Just like I can see him pleading, begging me not to go, to control my need for revenge before something horrible happened.

Newsflash: something horrible *did* happen.

I should count myself lucky I never had to pay the price for what I did to Linus Hammond. Even if the sick, conniving fuck deserved every last bit of it.

“Never,” I grind out. “Quit playing coy. If you’re worried about another situation—”

“No. This isn’t like that,” he says sharply. “I simply have one request.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m forever at your service, Ridge. You know that. And you’d make this peculiar situation easier to manage if you’d keep me apprised of the latest developments,” he says, his eyes mellow green pinpricks of light and shadow behind his glasses. “I’ve earned that much, haven’t I?”

“You have,” I say, giving a firm nod. “Of course, Tobin.”

“Then since I’ve seemingly failed at arguing the wisdom of sharing your home with two complete strangers in questionable legal territory...I’d deeply appreciate not having to guess at the details.”

Biting my tongue, I motion to the chair across from my desk.

“Sit your ass down, then,” I say. “Please. I’m sorry I didn’t keep you posted, there’s been a new development this morning. Hell, *several* developments. I know you’re not fond of this, but you’ve always had my back. Let me clue you in on everything.”



WE TALK FOR ALMOST AN HOUR.

It’s a relief to get some of this shit off my chest with a guy I can trust, even if he makes me want to rip my hair out

sometimes.

By the time we're finished, I grab my phone off the desk and leave the office with Tobin several paces ahead of me.

Back in the kitchen, I pluck my coat off the hook we installed for the times when I can't be bothered to head for the mudroom. I fling the back door open.

It's been a few hours since we got home, plenty of time for her to tell Nelson about everything.

If she hasn't, I will.

Talking with Tobin made me realize that keeping the latest run-in from the old man isn't in anybody's interest.

The sooner he gets that he's safer here with me—the sooner both of them do—the better.

Maybe then he'll open up. Tell me what the hell's really going on with his past and why these vampires want blood.

Grace opens the cabin door on my second knock. I instantly notice she's wearing different clothes, and her hair looks freshly washed, pretty spun gold tucked behind her ears.

"You're looking a lot better," I tell her. "Can I come in?"

With a nod, she offers a meek smile and waves a hand for me to enter.

"How're you feeling?" I ask, studying her expression.

"Fine for now," she answers quietly, glancing at the sofa where Nelson slumps against several pillows, but very awake.

I catch the tension in the air instantly, which tells me she's filled him in.

Unzipping my coat, I walk to the sofa.

"How about you, Nelson? Any of that stuff from the drugstore helping?"

"I'm better than I was yesterday," he says, trying to hold in a cough, but it has to come out.

"I'm hoping the stuff that's supposed to break up the mucus works," she says as she walks around the sofa and leans

against the back of the matching armchair.

An array of over-the-counter meds sit on the coffee table, along with a half drunk mug of coffee, a bottle of water, and a barely touched orange juice. I'd loaded up a cart full of soups, juices, and anything else I could think of for a sick person.

She's working her sweet little ass off for him, and that affects me, deeply.

A kid loves their folks, even when those kids grow up. Then it's the child's turn to protect dear old mom and dad from the shit this world flings.

I know.

I tried.

I couldn't.

Sitting down in the rocking chair that makes up the U-shaped furniture around the coffee table in front of the fireplace, I push my feet gently against the floor, letting the chair bob as my thoughts race around like it's in Daytona instead of Dallas.

"I talked to the police," I tell them, my hands gripping the wooden armrests.

Nelson's face tightens as he shoots a look at Grace. *An unhappy one.*

Her shoulders stiffen as she closes her eyes for a moment.

"And? What did they say?" she finally asks.

"The plate number I gave them was reported stolen off a vehicle in Michigan over a year ago. The owner's deceased."

"Oh, God." She turns white, the hope draining from her eyes. "Recently deceased?"

I shake my head.

Her relief shows as she leans against the back of the chair.

"They have police patrols out now looking for the SUV. Well, *patrol*, I should say, my man Drake. I asked them to touch base with the state troopers too, but no guarantees." I

rock back a little harder than I mean to and have to catch myself.

The highway patrol in this area of North Dakota is the same kind of skeleton crew as the official Dallas police. Speeders, drunk drivers, cows in the road, deer accidents... those are the types of issues they deal with regularly.

Not chasing down hardened criminals.

An attempted kidnapping might raise the alarm, but not enough to call in a full posse from over a hundred miles away to hunt down Jackknife and his boys.

“Listen. I want to say thanks for, uh, for looking out for Grace today,” Nelson says quietly, taking a ragged breath. “Once I’m on my feet, we’ll be heading out. Leaving the horses in your excellent care, of course.”

Seriously?

He’s still stuck on this half-baked plan?

The dude looks like hot death and must feel like a rotten egg. I cast a slow glance at Grace, raising a brow.

She pushes off the chair, stands straight, and tugs the hem of her green t-shirt down.

“That’s right. I was just packing our bags. Had to use the washer and dryer downstairs.”

Her answer stuns me, but it shouldn’t. She’s trying to placate Nelson. I hope.

She knows as well as I do that they don’t stand a chance in hell against those maniacs out on the open road.

Hell, they wouldn’t make it more than a few miles before disappearing into the ether. And then...who knows.

I sure don’t, and it pisses me off.

She’s lucky to be here now. Nelson knows it in his bones, I’m sure, but he’s desperate and trying to save face.

I don’t know why, maybe it’s the fear or his condition. I just know Grace is scared out of her wits.

What a life.

Her nerves must be totally shot.

Not just from today, but from everything.

The goons. Nelson's health. The horses. The ambush. Whatever it is they're still hiding.

Like why in God's name these brutes pursuing them sent an entire pack of coyotes.

That's unusual, no question.

I heard enough stories in Hollywood to know no crime syndicate sends a team—if these bumble-fucks can be called that—into the sticks, hundreds of miles from home, without an insanely good reason.

I like her, though. Her stamina goes a long way.

Let's not even get into that saucy burn she puts in my blood, especially when it winds its way down to a lower part of my anatomy aching to rebel against common sense.

“Well,” I say, letting the word hang in the air while I stand up. “I've already given you my thoughts on your departure. Let me reiterate: you'd both be goddamn crazy to hit the road while he's sick and you've got no defense for human scum.”

They both look at me, surprised.

Yeah, I'm overdoing it, but even the thought of Grace and Nelson on the road, helpless, sends a shock-current straight up my spine.

“Look. I've got no doubt Grace is a skilled driver. She's smart, scrappy, capable of handling issues as they come up. Still, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned. I'd be a fool not to speak up while I still can and tell you it's not just a bad idea—it's a death sentence, guys.” I turn to her father. “What happens if a tire blows, Nelson? She'd be out there, on the road, changing it all by herself. You're too sick to help. And when you're relying on a truck I think they brought over on the Mayflower, anything could happen at any time.”

Nelson's lips twitch, but he says nothing, just peels his gaze off both of us. Let him digest what I said.

It won't go down easy.

Too bad.

I'm not done.

"If you want, I'll take a look at it, make sure the air pressure is up in the tires, check the fluids, the filters..." Hell, I can't think of anything else off the top of my head. I've had roadside assistance forever, and I certainly wasn't a mechanic in the Army. But I went through the flashy muscle car phase most kids do at sixteen and I was rich enough to own a couple. I learned to take good care of them. "And I'll need a bill of sale on the horses if you're hell bent on taking off. In case they need a vet visit or something happens, I'll need proof they're mine."

"We can do that," Grace says tightly, looking at her father. "He'll grab Stern and Rosie's papers. They're still in the glove box, aren't they?"

Nelson nods slowly.

In just the short time I've been here, it's like his eyes droop, turning a shade paler than they were ten minutes ago. I pat the arm of the sofa.

"Why don't you take a quick nap? I know from experience some of those medications could knock an elephant out. Grace can get me their papers, and I'll type up a bill of sale for her to bring back to you to sign. Nice and neat. Then I'll take a look at your truck."

I think there's a hint of reluctant appreciation in his eyes as Nelson looks at me.

"There's oil in the back of the truck, and washer fluid, the below zero stuff." He pulls the blanket around his shoulders, slowly cocooning himself. "Make sure the jack is easy to get to, would you?"

Although I can't stand his eerie insistence on leaving, I empathize with his condition.

He's a sick, desperate, broken man.

And sick, desperate, broken people who still have a fighting spirit don't listen to their bodies or good sense.

"Sure. You rest easy now."

"Thanks, Ridge." He rubs one eye and settles back in the sofa cushions. "We'll sort this out later, when I'm feeling better, I'm sure..."

I'd pat his shoulder if I was close enough, but I'm not, so instead I pat the arm of the sofa.

"Certainly." Glancing at Grace, I lift a brow. "You coming?"

"I'll be along shortly," she says, a barely detectable edge in her voice. "I just want to get another dose of cough medicine in him before he's out."

"Okay." I zip up my coat and exit the cabin, waiting on the porch, where she can see me through the window.

I watch my breath curling out in small smoky puffs in the cool air, wondering if spring will ever come.

Also wonder if I just pissed her off by trying to play Mr. Tough Guy and lay down the law.

If so, I'm not sorry.

She needed to hear it, and that goes double for Nelson.

You can't be Mr. Nice Guy when you're trying to save someone's life. Especially a couple of folks with their backbone and relentless appetite for rotten luck.

Grace finally steps outside a few minutes later, blonde curls bobbing on her shoulders. She's all sugar, good enough to eat, except for those eyes that tell me I might get chewed up if I tried.

"Really? You had to do that?" she asks, scowling me into a hole in the ground.

I'm about to protest when I see it's not all venom in her eyes. There's a teasing glimmer, too.

Grinning, I wave for her to step down next to me.

“We’re on the same page, trying to get your dad to see the light. Like it or not, he has to realize he’s in a fight he can’t win. Not alone and sick, anyway.”

“So, what, you’re Batman? And you don’t trust me to handle it?” She’s dead serious again, keeping even with my face.

“I played a couple superheroes in my time. It goes with the territory,” I tell her, remembering what a mess that last film *Hannibal the Incredible* was. Elephants get awfully pissed when they have to spend five hours under a makeup artist trying to make them look like woolly mammoths. “And I trust you just fine. Didn’t mean to step on any toes, figured you could use the help.”

“Next time, wait for me to ask,” she says as we walk side by side. “But I guess I hadn’t thought about mentioning a flat tire or a bill of sale. That was good thinking.”

Her coat smells freshly washed, same for her hair. It’s soft, clean, subtly flowery, a scent that rubs my nose in all the less-than-pure things I’d love to do to her.

Fuck, she smells good.

“You tried everything else, right?”

“Unfortunately.” Sighing, she shakes her head. “He’s so stubborn.”

“Must run in the family,” I bite off, holding back a smile.

“Thanks, pot. I’m kettle. Looks like we’re both black. What else is new?”

I chuckle, enjoying how the banter lightens the mood.

“I look good in black. Did you ever see *Vampires of New York*? I was seventeen and my producer had to get a restraining order against six crazy chicks trying to break in and kidnap me. They never would’ve taken me alive, but still...I think I did the whole creature of the night vibe well, thank you very much.”

She laughs, a light, carefree giggle that floats on the air.

“Whatever, batboy. Do you even know how to check the air pressure in tires?”

“I’ve had grease on these hands a few times, believe it or not.”

The way she looks up at me is half humor, half doubt.

I shrug, resisting the urge to show her what else these hands can do.

“We left in a rush so the back of the truck’s kind of a mess. But I’ll show you where the jack is. I loaded it myself.”

I don’t doubt that for a moment. Trouble is, when she mentions ‘rush,’ all I can think about is the gaping hole in their story. Everything I still don’t know about what we’re truly up against.

Goddamn.

I need her to throw me the bone her father won’t.

“On second thought, it’d be dumb to get our hands messy before we handle that paperwork. C’mon.” I veer back toward the house, watching for her to follow. “We’ll go to my office first, type up some sort of fake bill of sale.”

“I can get their papers from the glovebox. We kept them handy in case we got pulled over. You typically need to have their records in order to bring horses across state lines.”

“We won’t need any papers for Nelson. Just something realistic enough to fake him out.” I open the door, hold it for her to enter, and then escort her through the kitchen, through the living room, and down into my office.

Closing the door, even though Tobin is the only other person in the house, I take off my jacket and toss it on the leather couch against the wall.

Although I hate to ruin the lightheartedness that was there while we’d been walking to the house, it’s time to get serious.

“Now that you’re here and we can talk in private...I’ve got a few questions I want answered first. What’s really going on?”

Bottom line with the hyenas looking to eat you alive?” I ask.

Her hands pause as she’s removing her coat. She glances up, a blue-eyed mess of surprise.

“I’m not stupid, Grace. I know scum when I see it. The men in that alley wanted to take you, kicking and screaming if they had to. That’s a pretty fucking brazen thing to do in broad daylight. Whatever it is they want, they must want it bad.” I lean against the edge of my desk. “I’m hoping you’ll tell me what they’re after and where they wanted to take you.”

She finishes removing her coat, drapes it over the back of a chair, and lifts her chin, looking at me with fresh fortitude. “You think I don’t know that? I *knew* they’d get me in their vehicle any way they could, but I don’t know where they would’ve taken me. Probably back to Milwaukee, or wherever hole in the wall that creep hides in. I never knew and Dad never told me.”

“Define *that creep*. Something tells me you don’t mean Jackknife, darlin’.” I level a dense stare at her, waiting for more.

She glares right back, without backing down.

Damn. Knowing she’s part wildcat just makes this harder.

Despite it all, I like her backbone. Respect it.

I also know a way around it.

“I’m not here to badger your father. He’s old. He’s tired. He’s sick. That’s why I’m coming to you, asking for something more I can go on to help besides just screwing around with a truck that won’t get you anywhere but Trouble, USA.”

She looks away, blinks, pinching her lips together until they turn white.

“Grace. I’m not asking for the moon. Don’t I deserve a few answers?”

“No argument about that,” she says, lifting her chin again as if that gives her potency. “But the thing is, I don’t have them.”

“Bull. I can’t believe that. The creep you’re talking about is some kind of head honcho back home, isn’t he?” My fingers stretch, pushing against my desk.

Her eyes are full of hopelessness as she shakes her head, shrugs, and looks away again.

She’s already admitted that her father had gotten mixed up with the wrong crowd, and I know for damn sure that someone in that crowd wants her. Today was more proof.

Anger roils my stomach.

The worst part is, it’s hard to stay mad when she looks as innocent as she does. This fiery slip of a woman breathing up a storm as she glares at me, defiant as ever, making my dick ache to take her over my knee.

And yeah, I’m conscious of how fucked up that is to think when I’m busy trying to save her life.

Sighing, I push off the desk and walk around it, then tap the mouse to wake up the computer screen and see if Faulk sent anything new. Something I can use to ease the truth out of her.

No new messages. It only increases my frustration.

“Dammit, Grace, what is it? What do they want? Drugs? Guns? Money? Diamonds?” Fuck, I don’t know, I’m grasping at straws. “Are you hauling shit for them? Playing mule?”

Her head snaps up at the word *mule* and genuine fear whips across her face.

“No,” she snaps. “We’re just trying to get away.”

I study her flashing blue eyes, sense that she’s telling me the truth through her hot anger. Which just makes this more baffling than ever.

“*Who* are you running from? Give me a name.”

She bows her head, the spark in her eyes fading as she presses a hand over her mouth.

Now I’ve done it.

The tiny, strangled sob she chokes out makes me feel like absolute shit.

Sure, I want my answers, but not by grinding her down to a pulp for them.

She's had enough of that. It's been obvious from the beginning.

I cross the room, rubbing my hands softly up her arms.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I went too far. I'm just trying to figure out what we're up against, how I can make it fuck off and leave you alone. Those idiots aren't going away. Today proved it."

"I-I know," she whispers.

She sniffs, trying to hide the fact that she's crying.

That I *made* her cry.

Fuck.

Apparently, I'm no good at this hero shit in real life.

All the boy wonder superhero roles ever written can't prepare you for the grim reality of trying to clean up a mess like this without making a girl's heart collateral damage.

Or maybe I've just always been a bit of a moose in a furniture store when it comes to handling emotions.

That's why I was an actor. Let a script dictate what I'm supposed to think, feel, or do next.

What I say. How I act. How the story ends.

Sounds a hell of a lot easier than trying to come up with a solution on my own and accidentally pushing her down a dark hole in the process.

I rub her shoulder and then pull her closer, giving her a hug, fitting her head neatly under my chin.

It feels good, having her in my arms. The warmth of her body. The clean, fresh, flowery scent of her hair.

And I don't deserve a single damn bit of it.

“Sorry,” I whisper. “I promise you, I want to help. I can’t stand seeing you suffer. Grace, if I could find out—”

“No!” She stiffens. “No one can help us. Nobody ever could. We need to go, pull our things together and get out of ___”

“You need to stay here,” I rumble firmly, holding her tighter. “Go on. Hate me if you want. Just don’t put yourself in danger again. Nelson’s sick; you barely got away after being roughed up, and...”

I pause, amazed I’m able to bring myself to say the next words.

“And part of me still likes the thought of you sprucing up this dreary castle. Give me something to look at besides an urn that doubles as a vase for yellow roses.”

She pushes against my chest like I’ve slapped her across the face, breaking the hold I’d had around her shoulders.

I don’t understand.

“Urn?” she spits out.

Head cocked, I nod.

There’s a different form of distress in her eyes, something I can’t pin down.

It’s not that odd, is it?

Plenty of people keep urns of loved ones around. Maybe the custom vase thing is a little out of most people’s budgets, but hell, it’s tasteful and it gives Mom’s ashes some kind of life until I can figure out what to do with them.

I shrug, plenty confused now. “I wasn’t sure what to do with my mom. It was sudden and so were the arrangements. Tobin did most of the stuff with the funeral director, if I recall...I was too fucked up at the time. We wound up having her ashes sealed up in the core of that vase. The flower chamber, they crafted separately, so the two would never mingle. Never cared to understand the process but...she loved yellow roses.”

In my mind's eye, I can still see her beaming after she came home from this big promo shoot for this film where she played a florist in love. She got to lay down in the flowers, laughing, and she brought big bundles of yellow roses home. I swear, Tobin smelled like perfume for the next week after unloading them and struggling to find enough vases to hold them all.

It's the best I could do to honor her.

All I could *bring* myself to do, not counting the night I lost my mind.

Half of Hollywood wouldn't leave me the fuck alone after her "suicide." Then I tried taking justice into my own hands, and that botched attempt made me a recluse...

"What?" I snap, more harshly than I intend. "Why're you looking at me like I'm some kind of freak? I'm not clinging to her forever like some mama's boy. Hell, I'm planning to inter her, when I can find the right time, the right place, and—"

"Ridge, I...no. It's not that. I'm sorry. We all grieve in our own ways and I just..." She spins around, plucking her coat off the chair like it's about to burn. "I have to go check on Dad."

I'm frozen, watching as she bolts out of the room.

What the hell just happened?

I think about stopping her because she just left the cabin twenty minutes ago, but I can tell she's in flight mode. Freaked out over the ashes for some bizarre reason.

I'm fucking stumped.

She's so down-to-earth, I wouldn't think keeping ashes around respectfully would bother her.

I walk to the mirror, staring at my grave reflection.

Am I that ruined without even knowing it?

Some kind of morbid vampire in the flesh?

Have I isolated myself for too long, eaten up by acid guilt, to the point where I *scare* people like her?

My head flops against the glass, banging it with a *thud*.

I can't believe I'm that far gone.

Tobin isn't exactly winning awards for charisma and socializing, but he'd tell me if he thought I was mental. If it was that bad, he'd probably drug me and drive me to a shrink.

What's the deal?

I dragged her here like a barking idiot looking for answers.

Instead, all I've got from Grace Sellers is a hard-on for more questions.

THE WAY she reacted sticks with me all afternoon while I check out her truck and the horse trailer.

It feels good to put my hands to work since I can't shut my brain off.

I go over their vehicle with a fine-toothed comb, checking everything.

Not just the fluids, the oil, and tire pressure, but every nook and cranny, anywhere something might be hidden.

I come up empty-handed, or close enough.

Besides a pistol with ammunition in the glovebox, I find the envelopes with old vet records on the horses and a worn, dog-eared owner's manual for the truck.

Neither she nor Nelson come to the house for dinner.

Tobin brings them food anyway, without me suggesting it, and when he returns after delivering their dinner, he says Nelson slept most of the day.

The news is a double-edged sword.

I want Nelson to get better, of course, but if he does, it'll be that much harder keeping them here.

A little while later, my phone pings. I see a new email from Faulk.

Here's what I have so far. More to follow.

Damn, the first line of his email is already disappointing.

I'd wanted everything by now. Red meat. Solid intel.

What's contained in the message is the same old shit: more questions than answers.

Some financial records that don't quite add up. Past due bills for the deceased Mrs. Sellers. *Massive ones.*

Then they're suddenly paid off in lump sums that I know didn't come from some railroad pension.

The police reports are worse.

Disasters at the pumpkin farm, mysterious fires, crop destruction, thefts with no probable suspects or active investigations.

There's also a medical record for Nelson from a few years back.

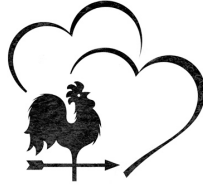
A gunshot wound.

I hold in a breath and let it out slowly.

Swiping my email closed, I hit the contacts on my phone.

I still need more info, but what I've read is enough to tell me I can't wait.

Ready or not, Grace Sellers, it's showtime.

NO REST FOR THE WEARY (GRACE)

For the first time since the holidays, Dad slept almost all day, and then through the night.

I'm not sure if it's the meds I've been shoving at him every time he opens his eyes helping, or if he's getting worse.

A miserable part of me worries he'll just fall asleep one day and won't ever wake up.

I push the thought out of my head, refusing to go there.

It has to be the medications.

He *has* to be getting better.

No, I'm not turning into my mother, and I'm not daring to wish for anything.

Taking a tall sip of the coffee I'm holding while standing in the doorway of the bedroom, I watch the steady rise and fall of Dad's chest.

I fold one hand over the other, clasping the warm mug, trying not to let my fingers shake.

I remember the last time I was this worried like yesterday.

My mind goes back in time to the farm, shortly after Mom died.

~
Three Years Ago

MY FIRST INSTINCT was to scream.

Who wouldn't when you come home from shopping and find your dad in the bathroom, trying to bandage himself with blood everywhere?

"What...what happened?" I strain out about two seconds before I fly into the bathroom next to him, trying to decipher why he's streaked with rusty red smudges, thick as paint.

"Gracie, no. Leave me be. I just need to sit for a little and...and..." He collapses on the toilet, holding his head.

At first, I thought it was some kind of freak accident. The freshly cut smell of grass outside tells me maybe he'd cut himself with the mower, but he's not missing any fingers.

Then I see the raw, ugly *hole* in his shoulder.

He's been shot.

Oh my God.

I can't guess how much blood he's lost to save my life. But I know we don't have much time, not with that wound he can't even keep a stained towel against, still cradling his head in one hand like he's about to pass out.

"Dad, come on, this way! If...if you can walk. No, don't fight me!"

For once in his life, Dad listens.

He leans against me, grunting and cursing up a blue streak under his breath as I guide him clumsily down the hall to his room.

Somehow, I get him on the bed, race to the linen closet, and pull out half the towels to try to stop the bleeding.

It helps slow it down, I guess. Thank God.

But the thing that makes my blood run ice-cold is the fact that I don't need a background in medicine to see this could've been so much worse.

A few more inches, and it would've been right through his heart.

He doesn't fight me as I reach for the phone, bawling so frantically to 9-1-1 I'm amazed they can get the gist of what I'm saying.

"Who did this?" I ask, nostrils flaring, shaking with fury as we wait for the ambulance. "I swear to God, if I find out, I'll —"

"Gracie, no," he hisses weakly. "You can't."

I don't know why I bothered to ask.

I knew who did it the second he tried to shrug it off as nothing. Still do.

The same asshole who'd always called him 'Slick.'

The same brutish, bear-faced man who leered at me with every smile, who handwrote *give my best to Gracie* in a note fixed to the blood red roses he'd sent for Mom's funeral.

The monster.

The man I wish—yes, *wish*—to utterly destroy.

But I'll settle for having him gone.


Present

DAD FOUGHT TOOTH and nail that day in the hospital room when I could see him again.

He begged me to keep my mouth shut, don't say anything, didn't I understand it'd be *the end* of us?

The way he said it with tears in his dark eyes was scary persuasive.

But I'd won that day, to a point.

I did go along with his story that he'd been cleaning his gun and it accidentally discharged. The doctors doubted it, but eventually let it go, because I'd corroborated Dad's tale.

I told the police where they could find Dad's .45, the same caliber as the bullet they dug out of him.

Thank God they never followed up or asked to see the gun.

It hadn't been recently fired.

I knew that for sure.

It was on my nightstand. I'd taken permit classes over the past year and kept it in my bedroom because I knew Clay was far from done.

He still isn't.

Never will be.

It makes me sick.

Angry-sick at myself, mostly, as I spin around, leaving my cup in the kitchen. I grab my coat and throw the door open.

The sun is out today in force. God, I wish I could enjoy the warmth.

Relish an ounce of hope that I can end all of this, some way.

But Clay has men, loyal guns who'll keep hunting us down for as long as he says.

I head for the barn. Despite the anger, the grief, the disgust living inside me, I have to grin at a shrieking crow that greets me.

I'd like to think that's how Cornelius Pecker says hello.

The rooster flaps his wings, sitting on the top rail of Stern's stall.

He belts out another heavy metal *cock-a-doodle-doo!* Just like he's not sure that I'd heard him the first time.

Stern snorts and lays his ears back as he twists his long neck to shoot a dirty look at Cornelius.

"He's just saying good morning, I think," I tell Stern and then nod at the chicken. "Good morning to you, too, Cornelius."

The rooster flaps his wings loudly and then struts along the rail. I've never seen a muscular chicken before, but this one looks like he could beat up every other bird in town.

Stern snorts again, thoroughly done with his crap, and I laugh.

This is Cornelius' roost and apparently he's not going to let anyone forget it.

He's got his pride, I have to give him that.

I feed and water the horses and Cornelius, then open the wide doors leading into the corral. The snow has melted considerably. It's actually starting to feel like what must pass for spring heat in rural North Dakota.

I walk out into the corral and around it, through the center, back and forth several times, looking for any icy patches that the horses might slip on. A broken leg would be a final straw right now.

The ground feels firm, but not slick.

So I walk back inside and let both Stern and Rosie out of their stalls. Their hooves clop the ground softly as they follow the fresh air blowing in.

As I'm following them into the corral, I look at Cornelius. "What about you, my man? Want to get a little sun?"

As if he knows exactly what I said, he flutters down off the stall and walks to the door with us, his long white tail feathers waving with each step.

Out in the bright sunshine again, I can't help but appreciate the beauty.

Not just the sunny day, but the place itself.

It's a gorgeous ranch.

Private, isolated, remote, and totally country despite the multimillion-dollar estate.

Anyone would feel safe out here tucked in their own little luxury island among the fields that must green up beautifully in the summer and the rolling hills in the distance. North Dakota doesn't have the kind of sky-kissing mountains you find farther west, but it's pretty in its own way.

A loud *thud* breaks my trance, staring off at the horizon.

I spin around, recognize Ridge, and try to act like he hasn't just scared the bejeezus out of me.

He knows my cold, aloof statue thing is an act.

At least he doesn't say it.

The look in his eyes tells me without words.

God. It'd be so easy to tell him what was truly going on when I freaked out on him in his office.

Well, maybe not easy, but it might be nice to share the weight, the burden, if only it weren't my cross to bear.

Mine and Dad's.

Not a reclusive movie star's.

"I see Corny sweet-talked you into letting him outside," Ridge says, arriving at the open doors leading into the corral. "Hope your ears aren't bleeding too much."

"I hope it's all right," I say, cracking a smile. "The horses need some exercise. I'll keep an eye on him."

"No need. The rooster does what he wants, when he wants, and he's happy to shout it from the rafters. This is his kingdom." Ridge waves a hand back at the barn. "He's got it made here, and he knows it. He's not leaving and abandoning all of this for cougar territory."

There's a soft breeze blowing. I hold my face up, letting it wash over me.

I never imagined I'd want to be a chicken—a rooster, specifically—but what Ridge said is true.

Cornelius has it made.

Anyone who lives here has their own lovely slice of peace and quiet. It hurts my heart how rare, how unreachable that seems.

"How's Nelson doing this morning?"

"He slept well last night," I say. Then, because I'm so worried, I add, "I'm not sure if it's the meds or if he's..."

“What?” he presses, those blue eyes shifting a shade darker, soft seas to midnight blue.

“I don’t know. Getting worse. He slept almost all day yesterday and last night. That’s not like him.”

“The sandman’s a hell of a healer, darlin’.”

“I know,” I admit, huffing out a breath. I just can’t get past what the pharmacist said about pneumonia.

I’d searched the symptoms last night.

Dad has them all. He also has what seems like congestive heart failure, just like the ER doc suggested, and a whole conglomerate of other illnesses that made me bite my lip with worry.

“I’ve got a guy showing up here soon,” Ridge says. “No one to worry about. He’s a neighbor and a friend, part of the Dallas police. Drake Larkin.”

“Oh?” I’m sure he wants me to know so I don’t freak out, seeing a stranger around.

That’s thoughtful, but it also makes me feel like a complete nervous Nellie.

“We talked. I didn’t tell him everything, but he knows about those fucks and the SUV. He’s bringing over some surveillance equipment to help reinforce this place.”

My spine shivers. I glance his way, staring at his profile.

He’s incredible from every angle. The scattered light and darkness dancing across that corded, rock-hard body captures my attention, makes it way too hard to rip my eyes away.

Holy Toledo.

I chide myself for having thoughts like this in the middle of a situation that just keeps getting better by the day.

I’m only human, though. Sex has been the furthest thing from my mind for so long it might as well belong to an alternate universe.

Ridge is a man sculpted with a perfect hand that never touches most mortals.

A rich, powerful, built, and yes, freakishly kindhearted soul who makes me go to pieces because I can't stand it.

Can't handle being the one who's hurting him, messing up his life.

Yesterday, when he'd hugged me in his office, I'd—I swallow.

Damn. It felt good, despite how pissed I was. So good, just being held like that, even when I went off on him like a crazy person for mentioning his mom's ashes.

I owe him an explanation for lashing out like a crazy woman, but this isn't the time or place.

He turns, catches me staring at him, and grins.

Welp, here comes the blush. Cornelius' cherry-red comb isn't the brightest thing here anymore.

I look away while I still can.

"You okay? All this talk about security isn't too much, is it?" he asks softly.

I shake my head fiercely.

I'm...totally not fine.

"The house has a top-notch security system," he goes on. "But I've decided to beef it up as a precaution."

A familiar, crushing weight returns to my shoulders.

"Because of us," I whisper, hanging my head.

"Because you're staying," he says, unabashed. "Because I need to spot any braindead goon stupid enough to step foot on my property so I can kick their asses to Egypt and back. That's a long damn trip, Grace."

I burst out laughing. He's so ridiculous, but I love that it makes this kind of talk less than the fear-fest it'd be otherwise.

"Ridge—"

“Don’t tell me it’s not necessary, because it is, and my mind’s made up. You and your old man are crashing here for as long as it takes.”

Whoa. He’s all kinds of serious, judging by the hot glint in his eye.

He takes my hand, squeezes it, flooding my system with a new deluge of mixed up emotions.

“I do have one favor to ask,” he says.

Part of me wants to laugh. A favor?

I owe him a hell of a lot more for everything he’s already done for us. And I guess if he needs to know more about Clay, about his minions, then maybe it’s time to put on my game face, get over the agony, and tell him.

“Sure,” I say. “What do you need?”

“The items you found in the shed and washed...I know you don’t have time to do everything you wanted to with them, but would you mind giving them to Tobin? Tell him what you had in mind?”

Frowning, because I’m ninety percent sure he’d only gone along with the whole redecorating scheme to appease my father that first morning, I give him a puzzled look.

“I mean...sure. That’s no big deal at all,” I say hesitantly. “But why?”

“Tobin asked me about it this morning. I know he’s a stiff, that’s just Tobin. But he’s also a shameless history buff. He saw everything in the cabin while checking up on you and Nelson and was curious. When I told him those were some of the things you were going to use to decorate the house with, he was...” He swallows what seems like a laugh and shakes his head. “Excited.”

I can’t help smiling with relief.

“I don’t know that I’ve ever seen Tobin genuinely *excited* before,” he says with a chuckle.

I eye him critically, trying to figure out if he's trying to appease me so I don't freak out about the cop coming around.

No, there's too much amusement dancing in his eyes.

I like this look a lot.

"I'll do it tonight," I tell him.

"Seriously," he says. "Haul a box of that stuff in the house and you'll see I'm telling the truth. Bet he rips it right out of your hands."

"All right," I agree, trying to imagine it.

Tobin seems kind enough in his own way, but he's very standoffish. I can't see him getting excited over anything, let alone a few old jars, crocks, and tack from an old farm.

Then again, I've been wrong about a lot of things.

The longer I stare at Ridge Barnet and those sneaky smiles that are impossible not to beam back, the more I wonder.

What if he's everything I need?

IT'S LATE the next day before I fully realize Ridge, once again, was right.

Tobin was excited about the items. He was even more excited about helping me carry in more of the things I'd set aside in the shed.

During the evening that followed and yet again today, the entire kitchen morphed into his own personal lab of sorts.

With meticulous care, he washed, dried and at times, repaired items I couldn't get to or didn't know how to fix, while I worked on drafting the best spots to display them. We barely stopped for lunch between talking and consulting each other on displaying the antiques.

Later, I make the latest of several trips to the cabin to check on Dad.

He's finally awake. I'm not sure he even realizes he's been out for the better part of a whole day.

“Don’t know why I’m so tired,” he says, lying back down in the bed after taking another big dose of medicine.

“Because you’re sick. Your body’s worn down, and you’ve been lacking sleep for months. The sandman’s a hell of a healer,” I say, repeating Ridge’s words from this morning.

“Come again?” His face jerks up.

“Uh, nothing.” My face heats. “Just a funny phrase I heard.”

“Well, whatever they put in that stuff helped the coughing. And the pain in my chest,” Dad tells me, rubbing at a drowsy eye before flopping back on the pillow with a heavy sigh.

“I’m glad something did.”

Words will never be enough to express how grateful I am.

“I’m still weak, but I bet by tomorrow...yeah, I’ll be ready to pack up and hit the road. Let me know what you find on the Google Maps, will you?”

Oh, no.

Without answering, I lean down, kissing his forehead.

“It’s nice of you to get more of that decorating done, too,” he says drowsily. “Maybe we’ll see this place in a few months, whenever we come back for Rosie and Stern.”

I wait until he falls asleep again, and then tiptoe out of the cabin.

Walking toward the house, I see Ridge now on the roof of the barn. I try to pull my eyes away but can’t.

He’s been working outside all day, putting up cameras and sensors with that other guy, Drake...

He’s been at it for hours.

Going through so much trouble, for me.

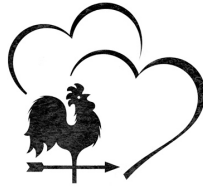
The nicest, most handsome, sexiest man alive—hardly an exaggeration considering who he is—and I’ve got him working his butt off trying to save mine.

I don't know how this ends, but by the time I turn around, flicking my eyes away from Ridge's silhouette on the barn, I'm determined.

I'm so not letting him put that brutally gorgeous butt of his in harm's way.

Not if I can stop it first.

NO COMFORT (RIDGE)



A smug grin tugs at my lips.

So far, I like what I'm seeing, clicking through the software that shows the locations of the cameras I'd set up today and testing each one. The program matches the app on my phone, but there's something about testing everything behind a desk that makes me feel like a better watchdog.

Still, no point in getting too cocky.

Before totally accepting these *damn-I'm-good* accolades, I pick up my phone, open the app, and check to make sure every single camera works via phone, too.

Everything looks flawless.

Thank fuck for Drake.

It'd have taken me twice as long without his help, but I can't deny the sense of accomplishment that comes with climbing around on roofs all day, meticulously wiring everything in, all for that little blonde stray of mine.

Nothing's going to hurt her here.

I'll turn this place into a fortress of doom before I let Jackknife and the rest of his clowns catch me with my pants down, or snatch Grace and her old man from right under my nose.

No need for a workout today, either. I got plenty of that doing installation on the house, cabin, storage shed, and barn.

That last one was dicey. The roof was still slippery from melting ice and steep angles unfit for a bird.

My calves are still stinging with a satisfied burn.

I'm damn glad Drake loaned me the climbing rope so I could tie myself off. It kept me from falling off the roof and snapping my neck.

I'm thankful for everything he brought over, really. I'd noticed all the cameras at his place last fall, the first time he invited me over for a beer.

"Old habits," he said, and I knew exactly what that meant.

He'd kept their whole place wired up ever since the trouble with Jupiter Oil, a rival pack of dirty, backstabbing oilmen.

Nothing dangerous has come to Drake and Bella's doorstep since then, but I'd be the last person to blame a man for being *too* careful.

I'm grateful he kept them now for a whole new reason.

The minute I called, asking him if he'd purchased them locally, he'd offered to bring the whole set over since they've had a good run of peace.

I'd happily accepted. Even with overnight shipping, I couldn't have gotten anything else up and running this quick, and after what happened to Grace in that alley, speed is of the essence.

Those fucks could show up again anytime, right on my doorstep.

Now?

I'll know it before they get within a mile of the house. Several miles if they come down the main service road. My place is on higher ground and I just gave it eyes.

We're ready for them.

"Dinner call," Tobin says, walking in through the open door. "I trust you won't delay after the day you've had? Must've worked up a fierce appetite."

“No way, I’m starving,” I say, just as my stomach growls like a bear.

“Missing lunch will do that,” he says, pedantic as ever.

“Huh?” Scowling, I push away from the desk and stand, stretching my arms high over my head. “I ate the sandwich you left on the front porch.”

“That wasn’t me. Miss Sellers’ offering,” Tobin says, stiff as ever. “She left it there without interrupting your work. Also, she agrees with me that you should’ve hired someone rather than climbing up on those treacherous roofs by yourselves. Even with an officer assisting, you could’ve gotten injured.”

“Tobin, Tobin. You realize it would’ve taken a week to drag some poor contractor out here from town to rig up cameras, right?” I laugh at him and secretly smile at the notion Grace made sure I had something to fill my gut.

“Perhaps. But perhaps you also realize luck has its limits, Ridge,” he says quietly.

I study him for a minute, never quite sure what’s going on behind this damn android-man’s glasses.

Of course, I’d seen Grace walking between the house and cabin today.

Every time, it made me feel good to know I was busting my hump for her.

I haven’t done anything like this since Afghanistan. Life hadn’t allowed it, and the one time I put myself in real danger after my discharge...that was about *me*.

Even while I was enlisted, I’d been serving my country.

That was plenty rewarding, but this is different.

This is all for her, a lovely young woman counting on me to keep her safe. A brilliant streak of sunshine who *still* won’t admit she needs me.

Somehow, that makes this insanity more intimate.

“Is she already here?” I ask.

When I'd come inside an hour ago, I'd gone straight to the bathroom downstairs after seeing Drake off and then to my office to check the cameras.

"She's still at the cabin, I believe."

"Aren't they joining us for dinner?" I do a double take and instantly regret it.

I swear, I'm not fucking holding my breath over whether or not this lady wants to eat with us but...I'll be surprised if she doesn't.

Tobin looks at me over his frames.

"Her father requested soup for supper again, and she said she'd have the same herself. I believe she planned to stay with him for the night." He turns, heading for the door. "I already carried their food over with some bread, fresh fruit, and a pie. In case they'd rather have a fuller meal."

I laugh to myself. He'll never admit what a softie he is.

"Fine. Did she mention any new ideas for all that old crap we found?"

"The antiques, you mean?" He stops in the doorway and looks at me, adjusting his glasses on his nose.

"No, the mummy we unearthed in the field. Come on, man, you know what I mean." I groan, dragging a hand across my face.

"Their age commands a certain respect," he says, suddenly the old-timey teacher rapping me across the knuckles for a dumb answer. "It sounds like you didn't notice all the work she did today."

"Work? Where? You mean she's already getting it in place?"

"You're a hopeless man, Ridge Barnet." He huffs out a breath. "Follow me."

I bite back a grin.

Even Tobin has his limits with my shit sometimes.

“Been busy. I haven’t had a chance to prowling around the house all day,” I say, catching up to him.

We head to the next floor.

As soon as I enter the foyer, I stop, stare, and look around.

I was so focused on my own work when I’d walked in, I hadn’t noticed anything, and now I wonder how the hell I’d missed the obvious.

The entire area is transformed.

Mother’s portrait, the vase with the yellow roses, it’s all there, but...

“Damn,” I whisper, glancing at Tobin.

He nods, not even trying to hide a smile like usual, and then turns, heading for the living room.

I walk to the center of the foyer, taking it all in.

It’s the little things that make it shine. An old horse harness hanging on the wall. An aged wooden barrel with the hooked end of an umbrella sticking out the top. Two crocks on the base of the stairs, one full of pinecones, the other a few pine boughs that give my nose an instant punch of freshness.

Then there’s an *antique*—I’ll use the proper word for Tobin’s sake—washboard with the word WELCOME painted on it in a girly script.

Finally, an old, scuffed-up grey board, with a rope looped around it and several pictures attached, hanging on the wall near my mom’s portrait.

Walking closer, my heart swells as I realize they’re candid photos of my mother throughout her career, carefully selected from several different movies.

Talk about memories galore.

Shit, the one where she’s smiling, half toppled over, dusted with flour...I remember being on the set.

I think I was seven years old. The set crew even let me fling big fistfuls of flour around to help create the scene where

Mom fell over in her own cake factory after trying to keep up with a hundred delicious confections for a big Italian wedding with eight hundred people.

It's one of those classic, funny, awkwardly organic rom com scenes. Very *I Love Lucy*.

I don't realize how much I'm smiling until I turn.

Yeah. There's no question these pictures are better memories than that towering portrait with its thick gold frame.

I step back, staring at the wall, the table below it holding the vase and its roses.

There, too, she's made a subtle change.

The vase has been moved just slightly, making room for an old oil lamp and two horseshoes. Both linked together, lying between the lamp and the vase.

Impressive.

With barely a few tweaks, she's altered the entire feel of that wall.

The in-your-face memorial is more subdued now, as if it's a natural part of my house, rather than a bitter piece of the past I'd agreed to on Tobin's whim.

Slowly, I make my way into the living room. Again, no jaw-dropping changes, just little things.

Old odds and ends. Antiques. Natural art.

A few empty metal containers and crocks, probably waiting for the flowers we talked about.

Each bit of décor more fitting than the last.

Right down to the three blue canning jars on the coffee table. They're inside a flat wooden tray with stones and miniature candles. Her insight about bringing in nature to make the house feel less sterile was dead-on.

There's another old board attached to the wall. This one is wider and has silvery wire around it, and then more pictures.

This time, they're all me.

I recognize several of my boy wonder superhero flicks, the angsty high school quarterback I'd played half a lifetime ago, a few scenes from more recent Western flops.

Here come those memories again.

And they come with a smile I just can't shake.

There's also a handsome saddle blanket draped on the back of the sofa. It's old, subtly frayed, but freshly washed, and it adds a perfectly rustic touch to the room. So does the scarred wooden bowl with a small antler lying inside it on an end table.

I feel like I'm teleported back to the Westerns without the stress or the market indigestion at the end.

Just the good times.

When I had this place built, I wanted balance. Country and classy paired up in equal measure.

A whole team of architects and interior designers from California might've started it, but Grace Sellers gave it a soul.

She's turned old junk into unique, heartfelt warmth.

She's given me a home—at least a few room's worth—and suddenly it's not just her dilemma that makes me want to keep her around.

Goddamn, this woman could be *lethal* to bachelorhood.

If only claiming her wouldn't be the biggest dick move on the planet.



I MAKE my way into the kitchen and have to stop, taking a look at another board lined with pictures.

For this one, she used copper wiring. It has pictures of me I barely remember from my military days.

An infectious grin eats at my face as an old Polaroid catches my eye, my younger self standing outside Kandahar with Faulk and a few other guys. We'd finished up a

dangerous recon that day and pitched our camp in this dangerous stretch of mountains.

“She made that one to hang in your office, but you were in there,” Tobin says, sneaky as ever.

I whip around, flashing him a dirty look.

“Dick move, buddy. That bell’s coming one day, I swear.” I shake my head, turning back to the pictures.

“She wanted to surprise you. I dug out the old albums and supplied her with photos that seemed suitable. The final product has a certain aesthetic, doesn’t it?” he muses softly.

“Sure. Did I ever tell you about the time in that picture? We reconned this insurgent compound tucked away in the mountains. Faulk, he found this old tank on the way back half buried in mud. Must’ve been left over from the Russians, but the important thing is what we found inside.”

Tobin looks at me slowly, raising an eyebrow. “Please tell me it’s not X-rated.”

“Nah, you wish. It was this ancient bottle of vodka in perfect condition, probably twenty or thirty years old. Knowing the Soviet shit was little better than moonshine sometimes, we drew straws on who’d be the first to try it.” I stab a thumb at my chest. “Lucky me. I lived to tell the tale, obviously, but I was so plastered off my ass an hour later the guys couldn’t stop roaring.”

“Charming.” He’s completely iced over with sarcasm. “However, if you’re satisfied with Miss Sellers’ work, I suppose—”

“Satisfied? Everything I’ve seen is the shit, Tobin.” I clap him loudly on the shoulder. “Thanks for getting her that stuff.”

He gives me a slight smile. I know Tobin, and as much as he appreciates etiquette that’d drive a royal crazy, he hates when people slobber all over him with praise, too.

Still, I’m grateful he was a part of this, even if Grace was the miracle worker.

I follow him into the dining room where dinner waits, noticing other new additions on the walls, floor, and counters.

“See?” I tell Tobin as I sit down at the table. “Perfection. Nothing overdone. It’s all little things that seem to flow together. This place already feels brighter.”

His lips pull into a thin line as he serves us both these sinful steaks with asparagus in some citrus glaze, a chickpea mash with roasted garlic on the side.

“I have to agree,” Tobin says. “She’s off to a running start. I helped her place an order online for some pillows, rugs, candles, and other miscellaneous items. The flowers should arrive next week. We also have another box of artifacts in the laundry room waiting to be cleaned. I’ll take care of it tonight.”

When this project started and he showed a twitch of enthusiasm, I was surprised.

Now I’m amazed at how enthralled he is.

“Grace has a rare creative hand,” Tobin tells me between perfectly paced bites of food. “You should’ve seen her. She’d simply pick up an item, look at it, and then tell me what we could do and where we could find it a home. I was skeptical at first, but I tell you, Ridge...her vision is remarkable. She just crafts a scene in her head, sketches a few scenes, and then brings it to life.”

“I can tell,” I say. “The place looks great.”

We spend—well, actually Tobin spends—most of the meal discussing other ideas he and Grace schemed up. I listen, but I don’t hear everything because my mind is mainly on Grace herself.

She’s damn good at what she does.

No denying it.

She’ll be able to do whatever she wants with home décor, once this crap is behind her.

Hell, all I’d have to do is make a couple phone calls, and she’d be slammed with so many orders for those old boards

with personalized photos that she'd need to hire a whole team.

I smile between bites of steak. It's rare when something bridges my old life with the new so cleanly.

Her work does that without any bitterness, regret, or flash of the hell that drove me out here.

If I can look at her stuff for the rest of my life this easily, then maybe I can learn to let the fuck go, too.



AFTER SUPPER, I open the back door to walk over to the cabin and thank her in person, but I see her walking up the pathway from the barn first.

“Grace!” I yell from a few paces away.

She turns and spots me as I jog down the steps.

“I just brought the horses and Cornelius in for the night. They're fed and watered,” she says, giving a saucy flip of her gold locks that says *accomplished*.

Shit, I'd half-forgotten the animals with everything else going on today.

Some rancher I'll make.

“Thanks, lady. You're a lifesaver. I just wanted to drop by and say thanks for the Midas touch. You turned junk into gold.”

Her eyes ignite, twinkling pearl-blue stars as she laughs.

“Better not use the j-word around Tobin.”

“Already screwed that up a few times. I'm a better looker than I am a talker when it comes to furnishings, I guess.” I cock my head, mesmerized by her pretty face.

I can't pull my eyes off her. She's more than just this sweet wisp of a woman.

She's adorable, natural, curves in all the right places and a heart that never quits. The urge to kiss her, lay down the law on that strawberry-shaped mouth, hits me like a raging bull.

Hell.

It's not just her junk-fixing skills I'm thinking about. The thought of doing more than just kissing hits *my* junk hard.

It's been awhile, yeah, but I'm not so blue in the balls I've turned into an antique myself just yet.

"Um, thanks again. I'm really glad you like it." She breaks eye contact, glancing at the cabin. "I...I have to get inside, Ridge. Dad's in the bath, and I told him not to get out until I was inside, in case he's unstable."

I don't want her to go. "He felt good enough to take a bath?"

"Yep, he insisted." Her chest plumps and then shallows again with obvious relief.

Holy melons. The things I'd love to do to those lush, palm-sized, maddeningly perky—

"Hold up. I'll come with, see if he needs any help." It just flies out of me.

I had to say something so I could get my fool brain unglued from her chest.

She grasps my arm. "No. He wouldn't want that."

She's right. Seeing an old man in the buff isn't my idea of fun, either, but I'm not ready to let her go.

"Grace..."

"Night, Ridge," she says, releasing my arm and quick-stepping her way back to the guesthouse. "Let's talk more tomorrow about the designs."

Damn it. It's like she can sense the heat ray shooting out of my pants.

The fact that I can't remember the last time a girl walked away when I was this riled just makes me want her ass under me even more.

But I can't chase after her. Not tonight. Not ever.

Fuck, chase her? What am I even thinking?

I've never chased down a woman in my life, and I sure as hell don't plan to start with a girl who needs more complications in her life like a hole through the head.

Sighing, I spin around and walk back to the house where I spend one of the most miserable nights of my life with balls bluer than Huckleberry Hound.

I'd kill to be an animated dog and not have to put up with a hard-on that's got a mind of its own, throbbing under the sheets, waking me several times with these fevered sex dreams involving a deserted island, me, and a blonde mermaid who used to farm sea-pumpkins.

Her name? Gracelyn.

Fuck originality, right?

She's a hot current in my brain when I wake up the next morning in a sweat—to the sound of my cellphone. One look at the number has me scowling.

Letting the call go to voicemail, which I won't listen to, I shower, get dressed, and go downstairs where Tobin already has fresh coffee waiting in a Chemex.

He's watching me oddly.

"What?" I ask, taking a slurp of coffee. "Is my fly unzipped or something?"

"Miss Silk called me this morning."

"Welcome to the club. Bebe called me, too," I grumble. "Must be pure desperation if she's blowing up both our phones."

"And?" He reaches for the Chemex, refilling his own cup.

"And you already know the rest. I didn't answer. I don't care what she has to say or how bad she begs. They'll have to drag me back to L.A. in a body bag if they want me in a studio again."

Expressionless as ever, Tobin looks at me. "Don't you worry it will cause issues?"

“It?” My stomach sinks. Fuck. “What the hell has Bebe done now?”

“Miss Silk hasn’t done anything this time, Ridge.” Tobin picks his phone up off the counter, makes a couple swipes on the screen, and passes it to me. “It seems, well...you did.”

“What? I didn’t even—” I stop, coffee in midair, reading the words on his screen.

A SCANDALICIOUS MAG EXCLUSIVE! The elusive, reclusive, once famous Dane Barnet has been reported living on a secluded ranch near Dallas, a tiny North Dakota oil boomtown. The tragically fallen star and brain behind several recent what-were-they-thinking Westerns is living, intimately, with a pumpkin farmer from Wisconsin half his age!

WHAT THE SHIT!

I start scrolling past the endless popup ads and pictures of me, stopping when pictures of Grace pop up. *Pictures of us from the day we went into town.*

Except they don’t look right.

“These are fucking photoshopped,” I snarl. “Grace looks like she’s about eighteen in these pics.”

Grace! Who’s got every reason in the world to keep an even lower profile than I do. Unless...

Tobin gives me this pained look I haven’t seen since the night I walked out on him and took payback into my own hands, not long after Mom’s funeral.

“Ridge...I suggest you have an urgent talk with Miss Sellers. If it’s as it seems, then—”

I’m on my feet before he can even finish his sentence.

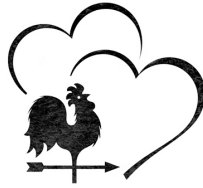
Son of a bitch.

Unless I’ve had my head so far up my ass I’ve gone blind.

The moment I yank open the back door, I hear an engine running.

Jogging around the corner of the house, I see exactly what I expect—an old Ford backing up to the horse trailer parked next to the barn.

NO LUCKY BREAK (GRACE)



I see Ridge coming for the truck and have to breathe through the anger that's been boiling me alive for the past two hours.

God.

I was hoping to have the horses loaded and out of here before he woke up, but I couldn't push Dad that hard. Sure, he sprang up the second I mentioned the possibility of leaving, but he's been dragging ever since.

He was doing so well last night, and now he's in the barn, gasping for air just from walking that far. I didn't tell him *why* we have to leave so suddenly or why I've had an abrupt change of heart.

He doesn't need the extra stress, and frankly, he never asked.

"Did your job so now you're leaving?" Ridge says, jerking open my door.

I ignore him, keep backing up, using my rearview mirror, forcing him to walk or get smacked by the open door...

...until I hear the clink of the ball hitting the hitch on the horse trailer.

That's my cue to throw the truck in park, turn it off, and glare.

I can't believe I thought I could trust him.

That he was truly out to help us, with nothing in this superhero act for him.

For all I know, he threw those cameras up for show.

Just so he could wait for the perfect second to run outside and make a big stupid show for the paparazzi.

“How much are they paying you?” he asks, his voice this animal growl.

I’ve heard it before—the morning he chased those men off me in the alley.

Only, now the same dark storm in his voice is aimed at me.

“Paying me? You’re serious?” I shove at his chest, barely pushing him out of the way as I barrel out of the truck so I can attach the trailer.

He rocks back as I slip past. I’m ready to bite him when he grabs me, but by some miracle, he keeps his paws to himself.

“Grace—”

“You’re *such* a flipping idiot, Ridge Barnet! Are you trying to get yourself killed? Because that’s what your little stunt will do.” Shaking my head, I walk to the back of the truck.

Little, my ass.

It’s actually a ginormous reckless stunt.

I truly can’t fathom what’s running through his head.

“My stunt? Excuse the fuck out of you, darlin’, I wasn’t born yesterday. I see what you’re up to. Pretending to be on the run? Showing up at the almost-deserted Bobcat in the middle of a blizzard, that bald asshole, your stuntman. You’re a fine actress, Grace. Hats off to you and the rest of your crew. Shit, that scene in the alley in town was worth ten Oscars.”

“Oscars? What are you talking about? I don’t—”

“This!” He roars, holding a phone in front of me.

It’s one of the many ugly articles I’d read this morning.

I’d searched his name so many times the past few days that it auto-appeared in my Google interests. There wasn’t even a

need to go looking.

As soon as I'd looked at my phone to check the weather report this morning, the page was full of *breaking news* about Ridge Dane Barnet, scandalously living with a pumpkin farmer nymph in Dallas, North Dakota.

Nymph! That's what a few of those trash pieces called me, making it seem like I'm not even old enough to drink, much less date a famous movie star.

"That's not even the best one," I mutter, swatting the phone away from my face. "The one where my face is photoshopped on some lady's body in a bikini is a real doozie. I hope you aren't *paying* whoever you've got doing your dirty work too much. Two of the pictures they lifted off my old social media page aren't even me!"

They were, in fact, ancient photos of my mom that I'd uploaded and posted after she died. Pictures from when she was young and alive. That was enough to trigger hot, angry tears before I'd even scanned through three of those twisted PR pieces.

"Bastard!" I add, tottering a step backward.

"Me? Fuck, you...you think *I'm* the one who did this?" He blinks like he's straining to comprehend his own question.

"Who else? Unless you're going to tell me Cornelius can pick up a phone and speak backstabber-ese..." I walk to the back of the truck and start cranking up the trailer hitch.

"You've lost it. Why the hell would I broadcast where I'm staying to the entire world? Much less your business. The whole fucking point of moving here was to get away."

I flash him a vicious look that tells him I'm past done with his lies.

"I wish I knew," I huff out. "Because if you pulled this crap trying to save your career, congratulations. It's enough to get you and Tobin killed before you're ever cast in another film!"

His brows pull together into angry, thick thunderheads. “You can’t even come up with a motive before you point your finger? Bullshit, Grace.”

“Is it? There must be a hundred articles online calling you disgraced, desperate, saying you had some kind of breakdown and trashed your career.” I take a deep breath, wondering who’s saying these words.

Oh, he’s got me hotter than a pistol, but I know my words hit him straight in the balls.

He gives back dagger eyes. I fold my arms, ready to stand my ground.

“It’s too perfect. A hot little scandal you can control. A kept woman, maybe. Someone to smile and look pretty and make you marketable again. Maybe that’s why you stepped up at that bar and implied we’re engaged. Some of those articles, they said you’re...” I lose my nerve.

“What?” he snaps. “Spit it out, woman. Let me fucking have it.”

Deranged. Disturbed. Crazy.

I can’t force it out because I don’t want to believe it.

He moves a step closer, an image of walking stone.

“You know why I stepped in that night at the Bobcat. I saved you from that ogre-fuck—and I hope it was real. Christ. I’ve seen crazy fans before and media traps, but you’re delusional if you think I’d marry you for a story, a payoff, whatever the fuck you’re after. Delusional!”

“Marry you? You’re the delusional one!” Furious, I push my hair back out of my eyes after it’d fallen in and ask, “Is your ego so huge that you think you’re untouchable, Ridge? Newsflash: you’re not! And you’re a bigger fool if you think I’ve done anything underhanded.”

“Gracie?”

I glance over at Dad standing in the barn door. World’s worst timing.

No, not standing. Holding himself up. Barely.

Oh, no.

“Dad!” I leap over the trailer hitch and run to him.

Ridge reaches him first and catches his other arm just as Dad starts slipping to the ground.

“It’s all right, Nelson,” he says, the fury in his voice gone. “We’ve got you.”

For a second, our eyes lock, and I hate that he can see my naked fear.

“We have to get him in the house,” he tells me, looking over Dad’s bobbing head.

Ugh, he’s right.

I’ll have to hold the urge to sink my teeth into his stupid handsome face and find out if he tastes like a filthy liar.

~

RIDGE DOES most of the muscle work, carrying Dad more than supporting him into the house, straight to the posh couch in his living room.

“H-hell. I’m sorry,” Dad says, gasping loudly. “I...I was feeling so much better but...”

“It’s okay, Dad,” I say, sitting beside him. “Don’t worry.”

Easier said than done.

Guilt gnaws at my insides in huge, monstrous bites.

I’d pushed him too hard this morning.

This half-baked plan, this reflex, to run away on a whim.

“What were you two yelling about?” Dad asks, leaning his head against the back of the sofa and sucking in air.

“Nothing.” Ridge says it without skipping a beat.

I pat Dad’s knee. “He’s right. We were just trying to get the horses ready.”

“Don’t lie to me, Gracie,” Dad says, his face miserably pale. “I heard you screaming about...about being killed.”

Crud.

Busted.

My concern doesn’t override my anger at Ridge, or my fear for him. If he thinks I faked him out to thieve a story for the press, he’s going to get himself killed.

Clay Grendal and his men are very real. And now I’m sure he’s seen the headlines. He knows where we are and who’s been helping us.

“We’ve had a leak. Someone blabbed to the media that you and Grace are staying here, Nelson,” Ridge says with soldier precision, delivering the facts. None of the rage he’d shown earlier.

“The media?” Dad echoes.

“Yes, leaked. I haven’t told anyone.” Ridge looks at me with disdain. “I wouldn’t have told anyone.”

“Neither would I,” I snap, glaring back.

This isn’t the time or place, but holy hell. I’m so not letting Mr. Snarlypants Actor tread all over me.

Dad looks at me slowly. “It’s him. That’s what he does... gets to you by using the people you love, and anyone who’d dare help you. Pete and his minions know we’re here. I knew he’d come. Come back and find us.”

A chill rips up my spine at how he says *find us*.

I know he’s right, though. That’s exactly what Clay did to Noelle and her husband. Got to her so we couldn’t go there.

Now, he’s targeting Ridge, and since direct threats won’t work with him, he’s trying a different tactic so we’ll leave.

“Want to give *him* a name, Nelson?” Ridge asks, shifting his gaze.

“Satan himself.” Dad bows his head and shakes it hopelessly.

“If you’re right, he’ll have to do better than a few cheap tabloid tricks,” Ridge says, undaunted. “I have security. High-tech cameras. A direct line to the Dallas police. You’re safe.”

“No!” Dad heaves in a breath, his eyes bulging out. “And neither are you. Not if he knows who you are.”

He breaks into a new coughing fit. I’m more concerned than ever because he can’t seem to stop.

“Here,” Tobin says, appearing at my side with a glass of water.

Dad stops long enough to take a sip, coughs again, then leans his head back, straining to fill his lungs. He’s a statue of pain, suffocating in his own body.

“Dad, forget him for a minute,” I whisper quietly. “We need to get you to the doctor.”

“No, no.” He heaves out a rattling sigh. “It’s...it’s too dangerous, Gracie. I just need some more medicine you bought me and then we’ll...we’ll...”

He looks at me with blank, confused eyes.

My heart leaps into my throat.

Tobin touches Dad’s cheek, then his forehead. “He’s burning up. We have to get this man immediate medical attention.”

I press a hand to Dad’s forehead and see how right he is. My hand feels like I just put it on a stove burner.

“Jesus,” I whisper to myself. “Where should we take him?”

“We’ll call a doctor,” Ridge says, giving Tobin a sharp look. “Find one who’ll drive out here. I don’t care what it costs, tell them I’ll pay it.”

“Right away.” Tobin rushes out of the room, his immaculately polished shoes hitting the floor loudly.

“I’ll go to the cabin and grab the medications you bought,” Ridge tells me, rising to his feet. “There has to be something to tide him over before we can get a pro out here.”

I nod while standing up.

“Here, Dad, just lie down. Don’t move.” From decorating, I know they keep pillows in the huge linen closet in the laundry room. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to get you a pillow and a nice cold washcloth.”

The way he flops into the cushions, without argument, his delirious eyes pinched shut, proves just how sick he is. I haven’t seen him so helpless since the day I found him shot and bleeding.

God. Things can’t possibly get any worse...right?

A heavy haze of fear, frustration, and dread shrouds me by the time I’ve gathered a couple of pillows and a washcloth that I run under cold water for Dad’s forehead.

I need to call an ambulance and take Dad to town, wherever the nearest hospital is. Tobin isn’t going to find a doctor to drive out here for a house call.

Both Ridge and Tobin are at Dad’s side when I return, which surprises me, because I wasn’t dilly-dallying.

It also makes it that much harder to hate him when he’s stooped over Dad’s frail figure, concern blazing hot in those starry blue eyes.

Why is it the guys who have souls also hulk out and transform into such screaming assholes?

“The doctor’s on her way,” Ridge tells me, glancing up. “Should be ten minutes or so.”


I’m stunned.

Nodding, I lay the cool cloth on Dad’s forehead.

“Rest easy. Everything’s gonna be okay,” I whisper, stroking his brow.

I can’t bear to look at Ridge because it hits me then.

Whether I like it or not, he’s the key to our lives ever being okay again.

THE NUMBING BLUR of fear  lingers for the next few hours as the doctor, a middle-aged no-nonsense woman, gives Dad a thorough exam.

Finally, she delivers a diagnosis—pneumonia.

At first I'm so scared I can't breathe.

But she assures us that hospitalization isn't our only option and recommends hiring a home health company to oversee his care for the next few days.

In hours, I've signed a contract for a home health agency. Ridge insisted, telling me I shouldn't waste a second worrying about the cost.

There'll be time for that later, I guess, but for now...

I'll swallow my pride and put Dad's health first.

The RN arrives later. We transfer Dad to the cabin, get him situated in bed with a portable oxygen condenser and an IV of saline solution and antibiotics. He's out, sleeping relatively peacefully in no time.

Big relief.

It's all been such a whirlwind that I'm dizzy, but also so thankful it hurts.

Dr. Abrams is an amazing woman. She promises she'll be back to check on Dad the day after tomorrow, and we'll go from there. She has a small clinic in Dallas, but she only works a few days a week.

Tobin had seen her last fall—more to scope her out as a suitable care option rather than for any real issue, I suspect—and put her on retainer as their private on-call doctor.

It's easy to think of everything when you've got a full-time valet, apparently.

Tobin knew they'd eventually need a doctor out here, though, and he was right.

Now for the hard part.

I owe Ridge so flipping much, including an apology for thinking he'd been behind those media lies.

For thinking he'd ever be so ugly, so selfish, when he's proven otherwise today a dozen times.

"He's sleeping like a baby," Nurse Jackie Owens says, smiling as she steps out of the bedroom.

She's an older woman with dark curly hair, bright-green eyes, and so far hasn't taken one bit of crap from Dad the few times he worked up the energy to fuss.

I give it a day. He's never liked being coddled.

"I can take him, easy," she assures me with a wink. "I've knocked sense into country boys from around here missing fingers and toes and *still* insisting all they need is a Band-Aid and a shot of Jack."

I hope she's right. I'm glad she's been a nurse for thirty years and swears she's seen it all.

"Thank you." I truly don't know what more to say.

It's all coming down on me like an avalanche right now.

This day. This week. This year.

This *life*.

"Why don't you get some shut-eye yourself, young lady? Sure looks like you could use it," Jackie says, patting my shoulder. "He's in good hands."

A burning ache scratches my throat.

Sure, with her looking after him, Dad will be all right. *But for how long?*

I pinch my lips together and nod.

Needing a bit of air, I say, "I need to go check on our horses."

And I do. I haven't been to the barn since this morning, when Dad collapsed and Ridge nearly carried him into the house.

I put on my coat and head outside, into the darkening purple glow of evening. A somber day for the sky to look so beautiful.

Zippering my coat, I head for the barn.

“Hey,” a gruff voice calls.

The ache in my throat burns hotter as Ridge shuts the door to his house behind him, rapidly striding my way on those powerful legs.

“Hey yourself,” I answer.

He’s been back and forth between the house and the cabin all day, the same as Tobin.

Tears burn my eyes and I turn, starting for the barn again.

Not now. I’m so not ready to face him again.

“I was just going out to check the horses,” I say, fighting hard to control my pitch.

“I’ll join you.”

Of course he will.

Lovely.

But I can’t say no. In fact, I have a whole hecking lot I need to say to him.

Starting with *I’m sorry*.

I’ll wait until we’re inside the barn, I guess, with the horses between us. An emotional barrier of sorts. I need one bad right now.

Cornelius struts out the door, his head bobbing, as we walk around the corner of the barn. I think nothing of it until I don’t hear Ridge’s footsteps and turn, seeing he’s fallen back.

“Was the door open all day?” he asks.

“I haven’t been here since this morning,” I admit. “Haven’t even had a chance to look out the window.”

“Me, neith—Shit!”

“What’s wrong?” I step up, heart banging in my chest, and look around him into the empty barn. “Oh, no. No, no, nooo!” I shoulder around, racing into the barn, praying to everything holy that this isn’t happening. My luck can’t be this bad.

But seeing the stall doors flung open and no sign of Rosie and Stern anywhere...yep, it’s atrocious.

“Grace?”

“They’re gone. Dad...he opened the stalls before he walked outside and collapsed. He said he’d get the horses ready while I hooked up the trailer.” My heart sinks into a black pit as I spin around, staring at the open door. It might as well be a sawed-off shotgun aimed at my head. “Holy hell, they’ve been gone *all day*.”

Ridge sweeps forward, grabbing my arm, holding me up when I’m not sure my knees will anymore.

“We’ll find them,” he growls. “They couldn’t have gotten far. The snow’s a lot less melted in these hills and fields. They couldn’t have moved much faster than turtles out there.”

His words are hardly any comfort.

A horrible flash of the horses dead in the fields hits me, their legs twisted from uneven, icy ground.

Just when I thought my heart had nothing left to break, the last piece teeters on a cliff.

If something horrid happened to Rosie and Stern, it’ll be the end of me.



IT’S GROWING darker by the minute.

After Ridge spots hoofprints in the snow, we’re in his truck, bouncing along barely cleaned up field roads, eyes darting around in all directions for Rosie and Stern.

The urge to curl up and die, knowing it’s my fault, gnaws at my heart.

I should’ve checked up on them.

I should've realized Dad was going to open their stalls, getting them ready for the trailer.

I should've just had an effing *brain*.

“Grace, I’m sorry,” Ridge says suddenly, raking me with this deep blue gaze. “For this morning. Accusing you of that media leak...I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking. Actually, I do. It was Hollywood hitting me in the face, everything I wanted left behind, and I panicked. Jumped to conclusions I shouldn’t have.”

I’m frozen.

Just when I thought nothing could make me feel worse, boom, there it is.

It’s not nearly as absurd to believe I’d ratted him out when I think about it.

He’s rich, famous, and reclusive.

Who *wouldn’t* want everyone and their dog to know they’re staying at his ranch? What scummy gutter reporter wouldn’t want inside baseball on the tragic boy actor who’s turned into a haunted man?

Practically everyone.

I’m sure he’s encountered his share of deranged fans, too, like the girls who came after him when he was America’s favorite teenage vampire heartthrob. Strangers on a selfish mission to upend his already messy, mysterious life.

Hello, *I’m* deranged!

“Grace, I—”

“Don’t say it, Ridge. I’m the one who should be sorry.” I keep my gaze glued to the windows, searching the area lit up by the headlights for the horses. “I know what your privacy means to you, and should’ve realized that when you got after me. It’s just...” I’m searching for a justification, a reason why I believed he’d use me as a tool for his career.

Stupid, I know.

All signs point to him meaning it when he calls himself retired.

“I’m the one who started it and got up in your business,” he says. “I told Jackknife Pete we were engaged that night at the bar, so...I get how you thought I’d told others, too.”

“But you wouldn’t have,” I argue. “You came here for privacy, a clean start, and now, thanks to me, you won’t have it any longer.”

I’m downplaying it so much. The reality is far worse.

And that reality slaps me across the face when he looks at me, his eyes twin blue fires, and asks, “Tell me one thing, Grace. Who the hell’s at the top of the pyramid? Who’s the real man after you?”

I instantly know he’s referring to Dad’s comment this morning. My stomach churns so hard bile rises in the back of my throat.

It’s the least he deserves, isn’t it?

An explanation.

He’s done so much for me, and now he’s wrapped up in the same sick chase I never would’ve wished on my worst enemy.

Without him, Dad and I would be—I clamp my back teeth together. I don’t even want to think where we’d be without Ridge Barnet right now.

“I told you, Dad hooked up with bad people years ago. Their leader is a man named Clay Grendal. I honestly don’t know the specifics, Dad never told me how they worked or what they did together, he never wanted me to know everything. What I do know is...Dad was involved when he worked at the railroad. He helped them with cargo, I think, probably tweaked manifests and oversaw transfers and such.”

“Yeah, he couldn’t have been in deep. They wouldn’t have even let him walk away,” Ridge says.

I nod weakly. “I don’t know what happened, but Dad decided to break away while he could. I was young, still a teenager then. We moved out of the city to the farm. Life was

good, and then Mom got ill. Health insurance couldn't cover everything, much less what she needed to really be comfortable and keep Sellers' Pumpkins going. So Dad refinanced the place, but it still wasn't nearly enough."

I have to stop. Swallow. Blink back the tears.

He reaches over the center console, grasping my hand. "It's okay. Now that everyone knows where you're at, including this Grendal trash, we can fix it. The bastard just played his hand."

It isn't fair.

How those words coming from a heart in the right place can be so dead wrong.

Doesn't he understand this isn't one of his movies?

It isn't that easy.

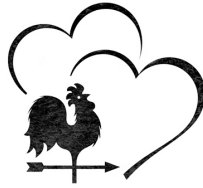
The ice-cold confidence in his voice chills me to my toes.

My throat locks up. I squeeze my eyes shut, holding back tears.

Nothing gets better with Clay knowing where we are. I'm sure he knows how to take Ridge apart piece by piece to savage my protector, my shield, my island of sanity.

Because of me, the next article those gossip mills write might be an obituary.

NO BUTS (RIDGE)



I give Grace's hand another squeeze before releasing it to hold the steering wheel, needing both hands to keep the truck steady on the rough unpaved roads between the fields.

She's had one hell of a day.

It's my job to make sure it ends without another death blow to her heart.

I have to find those damn horses.

Can't help but feel partly responsible for this slip up, too, even if looking after Nelson took priority and nobody could've remembered what happened in the barn.

I wish I hadn't jumped to conclusions this morning and barked so much shit at her.

Yeah, I've been screwed over by so many women that I'd assumed—expected—her to be like them.

It was arrogant, asinine, and wrong.

The only reason she's here is because of her dad, not to sell me down the river to coyote muckrakers.

Paranoid and stupid barely covers it.

I'm Ridge Barnet. Billionaire. Award-winning actor.

Known by all, scorned by many, still adored by some.

She should want to be here because of me. It's humbling how egotistical I've been, always assuming I could crash into

someone else's life, even with good intentions, and they'd fall to my feet in gratitude.

Maybe I needed that barbed wire tongue lashing to plant my feet back on solid ground.

This is more serious than I realized.

And now I know this freak after her, Nelson, and all of us isn't some small-time thug with a few hired guns. He's got the brains and resources to hit us in ways I hadn't imagined.

No script ever written had stakes this high.

I need to find the horses, get her home, and get a hold of Faulk, ASAP, to dig up everything he can on Clay Grendal.

I'm going to have to talk to Bebe, too.

She's been blowing up my phone all day, ever since the story broke to the press. I just have to figure out how to spin this leak to my advantage first.

Ideally, to Grace's advantage, too.

"Ridge! It's a horse, right over there," she hisses, sitting up in her seat, pointing to a spot just off the road.

I see the horse she's pointing at, standing near a grove of trees at the edge of the headlights.

"Wait, wait, that can't be them," she says, confused and deflated. "That looks like...a black horse?"

Sure enough. I recognize the beast with the coal-black coat and white streak on his head, his mane billowing in the wind.

"That's Edison." A hint of excitement rips through me, and I hit the brake. "Shit, and here I thought he'd stop pulling his Houdini escape tricks sooner or later..."

"Edison?"

"Yep. Drake and Bella Larkin's old boy. Possibly the smartest horse on the planet if you ask anyone in town. He made quite a ruckus before I showed up here." I crane my head to see, letting out a soft whistle. "Damn. I think we're almost to Big Fish Lake. It's on the other side of those trees."

We slowly bounce over the snow-packed ruts as I hit the gas again, getting closer to the trees. “Hold up. I had a feeling he wasn’t alone...see between those two big trees, in front of the pines?”

I lift a hand, pointing to the spot.

“Rosie and Stern! Oh my God.” She leans forward, closer to the dashboard, smiling so pretty I could kiss her right here. “Edison looks like...he’s keeping them company? That’s crazy.”

Once again, the horse proves why he’s a bigger celebrity around here than me.

He glances at us and tosses his head, as if to say, *damn right*.

Edison kept Rosie and Stern from getting closer to the frozen lake. They could’ve broken straight through with the kind of melt we’ve had, or slipped on the ice and shattered a leg.

He’s barricaded them in by the trees, or maybe he’s using whatever weird secret signals horses have to warn them.

“Now you see why he’s a legend around here. Dallas folk say he’s half bloodhound, but I think he’s half sheepdog tonight. The way he tracked his owner, Bella, all the way to town one time...”

I don’t get a chance to finish. Grace whirls, throws her hands around my neck, and I swear to God she’s *squealing*.

“I can’t believe we found them!” She jerks away, flustered, leaning back in her seat. “Sorry.”

Finally, a lucky break. We’ll need a few more before this shit’s over and life can get back to normal.

An odd knot forms in my stomach as I glance at Grace, bringing the truck to a stop so we can figure out how to handle the horses.

Hell, what normal is that? My life’s never been average, and hers hasn’t, either.

Me, I was born into strange, high-stakes living, but the fact that Grace was thrown into a cauldron against her will?

That pisses me right off.

Whoever Clay Grendal is, he's about to find out that he chose the wrong mark.

My unit in Afghanistan took down demons who'd wasted entire villages while plotting bigger attacks abroad. And I didn't have a billion dollars at my disposal then.

One two-bit mobster from Milwaukee should be a stroll through the park.

Frankly, though, when I look at Grace again and see that wispy blonde hair tucked around her smiling face like a halo, those soft blue eyes shining like a piece of the sky, I don't care if I have to walk through hell for her.

I'll do it in a heartbeat.

I'll fight the whole damn world to keep her as happy as she is right now, seeing her horses ready to come home.



IT TAKES a few hours to get the horses back in the barn, including making sure Edison gets home to the Larkin ranch and his mare, Edna, safe and sound.

By the time Grace and I leave the barn, I can see how exhausted she is.

I also know she's barely eaten today.

We walk straight to the guest cabin. Tobin throws the door open as soon as we step onto the porch, his expression actually readable this time. He's full of concern.

I'd texted him when we'd left, told him to make sure Nelson never found out the horses ran off.

The old man doesn't need a setback.

"All's quiet on this front," Tobin says to me, nodding politely at Grace.

She smiles softly while removing her coat.

I step up and help her out of it, and can't resist running my hand down the small of her back.

Draping it over the back of the couch, I watch her walk straight to the bedroom to check on her father.

"Miss Owens and I were discussing sleeping arrangements," Tobin tells me, a cautious note in his voice.

"Yeah?" I pull my eyes off Grace as she enters the bedroom and pushes the door shut. "What about them?"

"Well, she needs to stay here, in the cabin with Nelson considering the round-the-clock care we've agreed to. There are only two bedrooms," Tobin says, glancing at the nurse. "She says she can sleep on the couch, however, I said there's hardly any reason for that. We have spare rooms in the main house."

He's right. I nod, yet question why he's looking at me expectantly.

"And?"

He lifts his chin in that haughty way he has, adjusting his spectacles. "I trust you'll let Miss Sellers know gently, while I carry her suitcase over."

Oh, shit.

It dawns on me why he's dancing around and why he doesn't want to be the messenger.

She's not going to like being separated from her old man when he's this sick, even by the short distance from house to cabin.

Still, he's right.

The couch I'm leaning on with its cushions tucked in a rustic frame of solid cedar is made for looks, not comfort. Nobody would get any quality rest sleeping on this thing.

Nelson was only able to make it tolerable for naps with lots of blankets, extra pillows, and the fact that he's utterly sleep deprived.

Nurse Owens and Grace both desperately need their beauty sleep.

“Okay, okay, I’ll tell her,” I bite off.

My quickening pulse and the tension in my jeans tells me I like the idea of Grace being in the house.

One unruly part of me with a mind of its own loves the idea, at least.

The knot in my stomach tells me to fucking behave.

It also reminds me I’d probably have an easier time wrestling a porcupine than convincing her to go along with this plan.

She walks out of the bedroom, relief written on her face. “Has he been asleep the whole time?”

“Not quite,” Owens says. “He was awake long enough to eat some soup and whine about me hovering over him.”

“Sounds like him, all right,” Grace says, a laugh slipping out of her.

I’m glad Nelson’s still in fighting spirits. Plus, it gives me a good idea of how to get Grace over to the house and convince her to stay put.

Hell, she’ll sleep on the floor in the cabin if I don’t.

I sweep her coat off the couch and look at my valet.

“Tobin, I’m going to take Grace over to the house. Fix us some sandwiches, please?” I give the order direct to him so she can’t refuse.

“Oh, it’s fine. I’m not that hungry,” she says.

“I am. And I don’t fancy eating alone,” I tell her firmly.

She shakes her head, shoulders bowed up. Her hand pushes her gold locks back behind her ear as those blue eyes flash a warning.

Aw, hell.

Here we go.

“We have some...urgent matters to discuss,” I growl, trying to put my inner caveman back in his box and channel Tobin’s diplomacy.

Yeah. Part of me feels bad saying that because she looks so worn out, but it’s in her best interest.

“If the sandwiches can wait, then I’ll stay here to keep Miss Owens company and ensure she’s set up properly,” Tobin says, giving me a knowing glance.

I grin internally and smother a laugh.

Can’t say he never goes out on a limb for me.

I’m pretty sure the list of people Tobin ever liked keeping company ends with me and Mother. He damn sure doesn’t want to be the one to get Grace to sleep in the house because he knows he’ll lose.

Not me.

“Sounds like a plan,” I tell him.

Walking over, I hold out her coat.

Grace gives me a slow, heavy look and sighs, turns around, and shoves her arms in the sleeves.

I help her into it and place a hand on her back to steer her to the door.

“I’ll be right back,” she tells the nurse.

“No worries, I’m sure he’ll sleep comfortably all night,” Owens says. “If not, I’ll be here. That’s what you’re paying me for.”

Grace nods and walks out the door.

“Seriously, I’m not hungry, Ridge,” she says the second I shut the door behind us.

“You will be. We’re not waiting up for Tobin. I make a mean sandwich. Grilled onions, cheese, and bacon that’ll knock you on your ass. *Ass*, baby.”

“Um, I think I’ve had enough surprises for one day.” She spits out what sounds like a half laugh. “Is there anything the

infamous Ridge Barnet can't do?"

"No," I say, because I want her to believe it. "There's a whole team of quacks still trying to discover my kryptonite."

I want her to believe that I'm going to get her out of this mess.

So fucking far out of it that they'll never have to deal with a vicious little troll like Grendal again. I texted his info to Faulk a little while ago, and I'm waiting to hear back.

Once we're in the house, she leaves the room to use the bathroom.

I wash my hands and dig the ingredients out of the fridge to make us a couple of my death-by-decadence sandwiches. I also pull some hot cocoa out of the cupboard, this imported stuff Tobin buys.

Can't say I have much of a sweet tooth, but it's done the trick in the past when he serves guests who do.

I go easy on the chocolate. Caffeine will only keep her awake, and she needs sleep after what we've been through.

"I said I'm not hungry," she pouts, standing at the entryway to the kitchen.

"Too bad, you're eating, woman, so get over here," I tell her, sliding a plate across the breakfast bar along with a glass of water. "Have a seat."

She takes a stool at the counter and plops her chin in one hand. A heavy sigh sizzles out of her as she looks at the sandwich and takes a bite.

"It's tasty, I'll give you that. Happy now?" she whispers, still chewing, taking another good-sized chomp.

"Now I am. Clean your plate before the cocoa or we're gonna have issues, darlin'."

"I don't know what to do, Ridge. You're in real danger. So is Tobin, and Jackie, and...everyone who gets mixed up in this. We're tainted."

“Jackie?” My hand pauses as I finish assembling my own dinner.

“Miss Owens, the nurse?” She huffs out a breath. “The lady you must be paying a fortune for, instead of me. I don’t know how you can—”

“Grace. Money’s the least of my concerns. Look around,” I tell her, spreading the mayo thick before setting the knife down, loading onions over the bacon, and pressing my bread together. “I learned a long damn time ago life isn’t always about chasing more coin.”

“Says someone who’s never had to do without it. Money’s why we’re in this mess with Clay.” She slaps a hand over her mouth, suddenly wide-eyed. “Um, sorry. That was rude of me. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s understandable,” I say. “I was set real pretty from the day I was born, even without Mom’s career adding to the family coffers. My grandfather co-founded an airline, one with the first big commercial routes to Hawaii and the rest of the Pacific. Dad inherited his seat on the board, and then it was merged into a major carrier. Never had to do without it, but I have been without it.”

She looks at me like she can’t imagine how.

“The Army,” I explain. “My bank account was still full, but in Afghanistan, that didn’t do me a lick of good. I couldn’t spend a dime. We had to stretch everything with whatever the good old U S of A supplied us.”

Her eyes flash in the mellow light, something like respect shining brightly.

“How long did you serve?” she asks softly.

“Just a couple tours.” A heaviness settles in my chest. “My mother didn’t want a son in the military, always risking his neck overseas. She wanted her boy on the silver screen, following in her footsteps.”

I don’t realize how bitter I sound until I see the way she’s looking at me.

Fuck.

Holding in the hot air scorching my lungs, I realize just how true that statement is and how it irritated me, even back then.

I'd left Hollywood and enlisted because I'd hated that life already, but because of Mom, I'd returned. Let her have her way because she was my mother.

I loved her, and I didn't understand then why the life had gone out of her, why she sounded so sad, so defeated, every time we'd talk about my future.

If I'd only known how desperate she was to stay in the limelight, while there was still time...

"I'm rambling," I say, severing that train of thought. "Back to more important shit than my Army days."

"It's none of my business but...you didn't like acting?" she asks, eyes lit with curiosity.

These are the times when I wish they made foot removal kits for mouths.

"Yes and no. I mean, who wouldn't love being a star? The praise, the money, the prestige, the creativity...it's all fine and dandy for the ego stroke and sense of accomplishment. Real easy to get caught up in the high of your next film or a brand-new digit in your investment portfolio, but it's also an ugly fuckin' world."

She blinks, taken aback at how I say it.

I don't blame her.

"Picture a world with no privacy. The sleekest, sexiest human zoo you've ever imagined. Always somebody watching every step you take. Plenty of vultures circling, ready to pounce if your mistake is their gain."

Shit, rambling doesn't begin to cover this.

I've never opened up to anyone and played the world's tiniest violin. Not even to Tobin.

But if it helps her open up and trust me, it's worth it.

I'm not looking for sympathy. I've had a great life with luxuries and experiences most people can only dream of.

And honestly? It feels genuinely good to get a fraction of this toxic load off my chest.

“Ridge, I'm really, really sorry about those articles. The nasty things they said, always painting you like you're some kind of crazy, broken person who just wanted to run away...it isn't fair.”

I look up, surprised at the venom in her voice.

It's rare when I hear someone genuinely angry.

Not at me, but *for* me.

I shrug. “I've had hot garbage written about me before a thousand times. You should've seen the time I showed up for my co-star's birthday in the big *Romeo and Juliet* remake. Don't know who the fuck was more embarrassed over the imminent wedding rumors, her or me.”

She laughs, her cheeks flushed sexy pink.

Goddamn.

Seeing Grace squirming in her seat over old gossip does terrible things to my cock.

“Good news is, I doubt Grendal has any clue how showbiz works. They're hungry-ass lions in the media. You'd better keep the red meat coming or else they'll move right on to the next big flap about who's in rehab or what dress malfunctioned and exposed a shiny new boob job.”

“Maybe so.” Her smile fades. “But your privacy was really breached this time.”

I know, and I plan on calling Faulkner for an update as soon as she's in bed.

Preferably several walls away from my case of blue balls, which is a subject I still need to broach. Not the smurf nuts, obviously, but keeping her here.

I take a few big bites of my sandwich, swallow, and then go to the stove where the cocoa's just waiting for a splash of

hot water, warm milk, my secret sauce, and a drizzled topping of chocolate sauce and shaved coconut.

Billionaire or not, I was raised right—I know to use both water and milk for the best damn cocoa this side of the Mississippi. Plus, I think Tobin would have a conniption fit if he caught me throwing it together any differently.

Sitting down next to her, I pick up my sandwich and finish the last few bites, urging her to do the same.

“Go ahead. Eat.” Nodding at the cup, I add, “And drink your ambrosia. I make a mean sandwich, but my hot chocolate blows panties into the stratosphere.”

She snorts and gives me a suspicious look. “Don’t tell me that’s how you pick up dates. I thought fame, riches, and good looks would beat a cocoa recipe any day?”

“Casanova never had Bavarian chocolate.” I pause, taking a pull off my water. “Hell, or maybe he did. I’m a better cook than a literary expert.”

Right now, there’s only one woman I’m aiming to please, and ironically, it’s to send her off to a bed I won’t even share.

She glances at the empty hot chocolate packets on the counter and lifts an eyebrow. Luxury brand or not, they come from Europe in these single-serve packages just like the stuff in the stores.

“Looks can be deceiving,” I say. “Trust me.”

Shrugging, she eats her sandwich and looks at me with a grin.

“Honestly, it doesn’t look like much when I pick it up but...it’s plenty tasty. Oh, and I like that it has a kick.”

I wink at her. “Hot sriracha-curry sauce mixed in the mayo. Tobin’s secret, passed down to me.”

Then she closes her eyes, bites into the last of it, and damn near kills me as I watch her devour my creation.

I pick up my hot chocolate. “Glad you like it. Cheers.”

She raises her cup, looking at me over the rim, and nods as she takes a long sip. Her brows lift as she takes a second swallow. “Um. Holy. Wow. This is just...effing delicious.”

I grin. “Told ya.”

“You’re a good liar.” Eyes still locked on me, she takes another drink. “No way this came out of those packets.”

“Sure did. I just doctored it up.”

“Doctored?” She takes another drink and holds it in her mouth for a moment, then swallows. “Vanilla. Coconut. Ohh, I definitely taste vanilla.”

“Bingo. A couple drops. Makes all the difference in the world, doesn’t it?”

“Jesus, yes. I’m going to remember that.” She sets down her cup. “I wish I’d known it before now. This stuff would’ve sold like gangbusters at the pumpkin patch.”

Taking my cue, I set my cup down and look at her. “There’s something else we need to talk about. Jackie Owens needs a place to sleep.”

Swallowing, she takes another sip of hot chocolate, revealing nothing in her eyes.

“Right. I told her she could sleep in the other bed, and I’ll crash on the couch.”

I shake my head. “No way to live. You’ll wake up every time she checks on Nelson and run yourself ragged.”

“Well, I’ll *want* to wake up and check on him, too.”

“That’s Nurse Owens’ job, darlin’. We’re paying her very well to take the load off all of us and give him the care he needs. I already told Tobin to bring your stuff over here soon, after we’ve had a chance to talk. There are several spare rooms upstairs. You can pick your favorite and tell us what you need.”

“Ridge, no, I—”

“You agree? Awesome. Look at it this way—if he was in the hospital, you wouldn’t be able to stay there. Frankly, if we

weren't able to get the nurse and Dr. Abrams out here, that's where he would've wound up."

She tries to deny it, the little firecracker, but I watch her lips twitch and whiten as they pinch shut.

"Fine," she whispers.

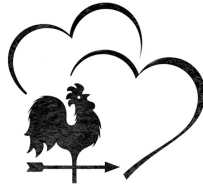
Ouch. I'm old enough to know that's one of the most cryptic, lethal words in a woman's lexicon.

"Grace, I'm not just doing this to shut you down. I'm trying to look after *your* health the same as Nelson's. If he were in a hospital, they'd tell you to go home and get some rest. That's what you'll do here, too, as long as we're sharing one roof."

"But—"

"Too late for buts. Save the effort. Your dad needs rest and Owens needs to do her job with no one else in the way. There'll be plenty of time during the day to visit. Look, I know you don't like it. I know it's hard as shit after everything that's happened, and you're both used to looking after each other. I just want to hear one thing," I say, holding out a hand. "Will you trust me on this? Will you let me take care of you?"

NO PLACE TO HIDE (GRACE)



Common sense tells me what he's saying is true, but this is my father we're talking about.

I need to be at the cabin.

I stare at that big, thick hand he's holding out with my heart on fire.

"If you won't do it for your dad or the nurse, or even yourself, then please...do it for me," Ridge says quietly. "You want to help, I get it. Trouble is, you won't be much help to anybody if you're so exhausted and sick with worry you can't switch off. When people use up every last ounce of mojo, they have an ugly way of screwing themselves over. I learned that in the military, too."

Guilt hits my stomach like a stone.

He'd been visibly repulsed when he'd mentioned his mother not wanting a son in the military.

I wonder again about what I read concerning Judy Barnet's death.

Possible suicide.

I wonder if us being here, and Dad being critically ill, brings back bitter memories.

I'm not comfortable asking because he's already given up more than he should.

Answers about his murky private life are his, and his alone. Whatever secrets he's hiding, I've decided one thing.

I can trust this man.

He hasn't asked me for anything outrageous, either, not even now, when all he wants is for me to stay out of the nurse's way and get some sleep.

"Point taken," I say, taking his hand. "I'll spend the night here."

"Nights." He emphasizes the plural S. "Until Nelson gets well enough not to need a nurse."

Just when I'm about to pull my fingers away, his hold tightens. It's like grasping some gentle beast's paw, thick and strong and pleading.

Those bright-blue stares he beams at me send a hot current down my spine.

Sighing, I nod in agreement.

I may hate it, but there's really no argument.

Besides, Jackie Owens seems very competent, and the cabin is a lot closer than if Dad was shuffled off to the nearest hospital.

"Glad that's settled," he tells me, tracing his fingers lightly over mine one last time before letting go.

Dear God.

What am I even doing?

Letting my body freak out over a man who's helping me without being creepy.

A man who's so freaking far out of my league, I wonder if he's even from this planet.

Ridge Barnet lives with the immortals, gods of good looks and wealth and adoration.

I shake my head at him and at my own thoughts.

Truly, despite backing down, nothing seems settled tonight at all.

Aside from Dad's health, hopefully.

“Thanks, Ridge, for all you’re doing. All you’ve done. I couldn’t believe it when Tobin had a doctor drive out here. That would’ve never happened where we lived.”

“It’s the country.” He stands up and carries his plate to the sink. “It’s been that way since I moved here. The people are down-to-earth. Honest. Helpful. I’d heard other guys in the Army talk about their hometowns, the hospitality, places tucked away in Oklahoma or little Colorado mountain towns. I never had that back in California, but I felt it instantly on my first visit to Dallas. I told Tobin I was buying this place even before I’d seen it because of the way we’d been treated in town. They’d been warm, welcoming, without even knowing who I was behind the baseball cap and shades.”

“That must’ve been nice. I can’t complain about anything here so far.” I smile and stand to carry my cup and plate to the sink.

The sandwich was as good as he promised, and the hot chocolate slayed.

Thank God my panties are still intact and not in orbit.

He carries the sandwich fixings to the fridge.

“I haven’t regretted my move here yet,” he says. “Not even with winter smothering everything for half the damn year.”

“Until I came along, you mean, and your privacy went up in smoke.”

Closing the fridge, he turns, grasps my hands, and holds them firmly.

“How many times are you going to make me say it? That wasn’t your fault, darlin’. Shit, if anyone wanted to know where I was, they’d have found me. It’s not like I changed my name and went into witness protection. Just kept a low profile here since we landed, revealing myself very selectively. My buddy, Faulk, he knew me from way back in the Army. Grady and Drake, I told later as I got to know them, knowing they’d seen enough crap to be trusted.”

Holy sex-eyes, batman.

My entire being snaps, crackles, and sizzles at the way he's looking at me, and my heart skips a beat when he leans closer.

Try to breathe.

Try to not *dare* think about kissing him.

I don't even know where those thoughts, those desires are coming from. But they're there, grinding me down with reckless heat.

And he's still coming closer.

It takes a hot, heavy second to realize what hits me.

Ridge's lips, warm and soft and deliberate, touch my forehead in this sweet, chaste kiss that still feels dirty.

"It's going to be all right," he tells me, those blue eyes burning a hole through my skin. "Let's get you to bed."

I take a step back, trying to separate myself from him, from the sheer disappointment of wanting him to kiss far more than my forehead. "Uh, sure thing. I just...I need to go get my suitcase."

"Tobin will bring it over."

"Oh, yeah!" I wonder how maniacal I look wearing the world's most awkward smile.

I nod, and needing to put some space between myself and Hotlips, I say, "I'll take the room at the end of the hall. I saw it's got plenty of space and its own bathroom."

I know the layout of the house well enough from my decorating walk-through.

"Smart pick. That one that has a window facing the cabin," he says with a grin.

I nod again, feeling like my head still wants to drop off.

"Go on up to bed. I'll have Tobin set your suitcase outside your door. Holler if you need anything."

I look down, breath stalling in my lungs.

Uh-oh.

So he still hasn't let go of my hands, ruining my dreams of a normal pulse.

Crud. I haven't even thought about kissing or how unbearably handsome a man can be, or how good they can smell, in a long while.

Before, there wasn't time. Not with Mom being ill, work to do on the farm, and then stressing, running, escaping.

There isn't time now either, you idiot, a dark voice says from the back of my mind. *Don't ruin this. Don't ruin yourself with bad memories.*

With a parting smile, I snatch my hands out of his and start walking, resisting the urge to run.

I'm flushed, dizzy, overheated, and more confused than I've ever been in my life.

Mostly, I'm just shell-shocked this is even happening.

After what had happened with Clay, I thought I'd never, ever let a man touch me again.

By the time I make it upstairs, down the hall, and into the bedroom, I'm trembling, refusing to let my mind drift back in time to the worst day of my life.

The day I made things go from bad to worse.

There has to be something I can do...

Crossing the room, I yank aside the curtain and see Tobin's dark shape on the walkway below, carrying my suitcase. The very same pink-and-black rock chick bag I'd packed this morning and set beside the door.

I was ready to carry it to the truck, but Dad was on the porch, trying to make his way to the barn to fetch the horses.

I'd helped him over there and then got in the truck.

Stupid.

If I'd known then how weak Dad was, that leaving here was totally impossible...


Sighing, I push my face into my palm, trying to rub away the fierce throb in my temples.

Even if a miracle happens today—several Hail Marys fulfilled—we're still years late and so many dollars short it makes me sick.

So what if Dad gets better? What then?

What if Ridge manages to scare Grendal and his crew off our trail without getting hurt?

What do you do when your life isn't just going off the rails, but takes every dream you had with it?

I'M STILL MULLING  painful questions the next day after checking on Dad.

He's already awake by ten a.m. and feeling somewhat better, thank God.

Good enough to tell me to go away because he sure as hell doesn't need two women hovering over him. That's Dad, all right, and he's already figured out that Jackie won't take any crap from him, and getting rid of her is next to impossible.

She also mentions how much she likes the picture collages I'd made for Ridge's house out of the old barn wood I'd found in the shed, so I decide to throw together another one for her as a thank you for looking after my grump of a father.

It doesn't take long to find another board in the storage shed, wash it down with saddle soap to bring out the grain, and also nip off a few spindly twigs to attach to the board.

I bring it into the sunroom off the laundry room for several reasons.

One side of it faces the cabin. It has a large table for me to work on, and Tobin swears Ridge has barely spent an hour in this room ever since they moved here.

His loss. It's so freaking beautiful. Especially today, when the sun shines down so bright, banishing the blanket of winter one inch of melt at a time.

The wicker furniture with pink floral cushions must've been Tobin's idea, too. They might have something to do with why Ridge wants no part of trying to stuff his tall Herculean frame into a granny chair.

And honestly, after last night?

I desperately need space to hash things out in my head.

It's hard for me to look at him when every glance stirs up swarms of butterflies. And these particular butterflies are dicks, swooping in with a hundred wicked thoughts about this man I shouldn't be having.

For the next twenty minutes, I work on painting *Owens* delicately on the wood, wondering if there's a subtle way I can sneak a dozen or so family pictures from her without blowing the surprise.

Then I hear it, a sound that just seems out of place in this house.

My spine stiffens and I sit up straighter, listening.

It's a woman's voice, and it's not Jackie's.

But it's Ridge's voice, too.

I hurry out of the sunroom, walk down the hall to the kitchen, and then stop just outside the living room. The voices are coming from the front foyer, I think.

"What the hell did you expect me to do, you ego freak?" the woman says, her voice high-pitched and strained. "You didn't answer any of my calls. You must've told Tobin not to, either, because he only answered one. How else was I supposed to track you down?"

"There's your mistake, hunting me down in the first place. None of this is any of your goddamn business, Bebe." Ridge's voice is pure thunder.

"None of my business, huh? How about the creep with a voice like a bad Tom Waits impression? He left me a message saying you'd better quit boasting about being engaged to some pumpkin bumpkin from Wisconsin or I'd be real sorry! And I'm not supposed to be upset? I'm not supposed to wonder

what the *hell* is going on with you ever since you ran off to go cow tipping?”

My stomach sinks.

Another message.

Just like the one they left for Noelle.

If there was ever any doubt Clay isn't behind all this, it's gone up in smoke.

“Jesus, look...you don't need this, Ridge,” the woman continues. “A bunch of rotten PR claiming you're some kind of weirdo going after farmers' daughters fresh out of high school is the last thing you need. I'll never be able to shop your name again.”

“One, she's in her twenties and those shit-eating jackals made up the rest like they always do, hand to God. Two, it's complicated, but let me reiterate it's none of your business. Three, fuck you for still trying to shop me around,” he growls. “How many times do I need to tell you, Bebe? I left L.A. I'm done with Hollywood and every last cup of its shit.”

“Ridge, listen.” Her voice softens as she sucks in a breath. “I get it. I empathize with how traumatic losing your mother must've been. I just think it's time to—”

“No. It's time to hop on a jet and go home. Find yourself some new talent. I can't believe you wasted a day coming all the way out here to dirty up your designer heels.”

I'm about to back down the hall when my foot scuffs the floor. Ridge turns around and sees me.

Uh-oh.

My insides sink to my feet as he stares at me, his eyes still a dense blue storm.

“That's *her* I'm assuming,” the woman says, turning up her nose. “The mysterious Miss Sellers.”

I wiggle several fingers like a waving idiot.

Nothing prepared me for this.

She steps up next to Ridge for a better look, all Hollywood fierceness distilled into a pint-sized lioness.

Her hair is red, professionally dyed and styled. If she wanted to, the woman could be a Reba McEntire double.

She's tall, slender, wearing a black pencil skirt and fitted jacket that are fashion magazine-perfect. Her white silk blouse and patented leather heels complete the Bitch Queen ensemble.

Her outfit screams *money!* about as strongly as my jeans and basic sweatshirt scream Wisconsin poor. They might be comfortable, but I doubt my whole wardrobe costs as much as one of her shoes.

Ridge walks toward me, flashing a fake smile that only heightens my nerves.

He's only doing it to ease my apprehension, and right now, good freaking luck.

He takes my hand, firmly, urging me into the living room.

"This is Grace Sellers, the one and only, soon to be my other half." He flashes me another fake smile. "Grace, meet Bebe Silk, my *former* agent."

He's got to be kidding. No one has a name like Bebe Silk. Not naturally.

But as much as I'd love to focus on that, I can't ignore the fact that he's leaning into the wind. Playing up the lie he started at the Bobcat, the same whopper those tabloids got ahold of and ran wild with. Desperately asking me to go along with it.

Why?

"Really, Ridge?" Bebe rolls her eyes in her porcelain face.

"Really, Bebe," he snaps. "Play nice."

His tone is so harsh I look over at him, flinching at the anger etched on his face.

Oh, that gets her. Her eyes whip to both of us, dark and focused like some strange hawk rather than a human being.

Pointing past her, he then says, “Now that you’ve had your little peek into my life, how about you get back in your rental, drive out of here, and fly home to L.A.?”

Bebe doesn’t flinch, at least not in a way I notice.

Instead, she lifts her chin proudly and plants her hands on her narrow hips with an audible *thump*.

“You don’t want to talk to me like that, Barnet. I’m your only hope of ever working with a studio again.”

“Hell of a threat, considering I’m *done* with that for the thousandth time,” he says coldly. “You’re the one who wants me back. Royalties and residuals aren’t what they used to be with all the changes in media. But you know they’d kill to see me play one more film—or at least pay through the fucking nose for it.”

“I’ve never denied my interests. It’s you who still can’t figure out they’re the same as yours, money aside.” Bebe shakes her head. “I have people calling me, Ridge, asking if those hit pieces are true.”

“Bull. You didn’t come out here for answers. We’ve been in this industry long enough to know those dung beetles will roll a grain of truth into a fucking boulder.” He gives her a death glare, then raises a hand and points at her. “Tell them it’s true, Bebe. I’m engaged to Grace Sellers. And tell them that anyone who tries to get to her has to come through me.”

She throws her hands in the air. “Lovely. I see *that* temperament is back. That anger is what almost ruined your career. You know, it’s a miracle Hammond wasn’t in his right mind to press charges. Don’t go there again!”

His hand lets mine fall like deadweight.

“Enough. You know better than to say that name around here,” he snarls, his voice like a roaring wave, taking a ferocious step toward her. “*Get. Out.*”

Those two clipped words make me tremble.

Holy hell.

I can feel how stiff he's become, see the fury curdling his face, and...

...I don't have a clue what I should say, do, or think while he's in this state.

The man I'm looking at now is a beast of brewing rage, a stranger, not the kindhearted guardian I know.

Bebe isn't amused. She stands in the arched doorway between the foyer and the living room, tapping one heel, and waves a hand at the portrait of Ridge's mother.

"What would she think of all this? Think of you? What you're doing, still playing these games?"

"Breaking news: she's dead," he says coldly.

Again, I shiver, tucking my arms around me.

"And who was there to get you through it when she died?" Bebe jabs a thumb at her chest. "Me. That's who. I'm the only person you've ever been able to count on! When you ran off, joined the Army, who covered your stupid ass? Me! That night, when the cops wanted to talk to you, who had a pretty little alibi waiting for you, Prince Charming? You guessed it—me!"

Alibi? Cops?

My insides go cold.

The world starts spinning.

Sure, police could mean anything, but I have this dread building.

Whatever happened was serious and somehow just...dirty.

Ridge turns, casting his stormy gaze. I feel like I'm shrinking into the floor.

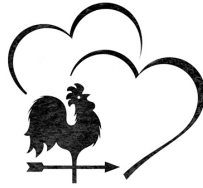
I don't understand that look. I'm too afraid.

I can't connect with the pain, the agony, the brute plea in his dark pupils screaming, *Grace, wait!*

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I say, "So, I...I think you two need some privacy. Excuse me."

Without waiting for a response, I pivot around and practically run down the hall.

NO GRAND SCHEME (RIDGE)



To no one's surprise, I've officially hit my fucking limit on drama.

The frustrated growl I'd been holding in damn near shakes the room. It's not because the slick, mouthy, all too catlike woman in front of me ever said anything wrong.

It's because Bebe Silk—goddamn her—is absolutely right.

She was there for me all of those times. Second only to Tobin in helping ensure I didn't drown in my own bad decisions.

I'm right, too. She'd done it for the money. I was her biggest workhorse.

Even now, I think she'd take a bullet for me if it meant getting my ass to agree to one more film and a cool seven-figure payoff.

Anything to keep her in designer shoes, imported wines, and a new addition for her castle outside Huntington Beach.

I try to swallow my hot anger without choking on puffed up pride.

“Let's go. Right now,” I bite off, waving a hand, marching her straight to my office without explanation.

Since she's already poisoned my day, we're going to settle this now. Then I'm going to send her packing, even if I have to personally drag her to the nearest airstrip and throw her on a plane.

Bebe walks in first, dark amusement lashing her eyes.

Of course she's enjoying this.

Of-fucking-course.

Closing the door, I walk over and sit down at my desk, pushing my hands out farther than they really need to be, blocking her from any dumb ideas. I swear to fuck, if this woman tries to sit on my desk...

The worst part is, she'd picked a great time to interrupt.

I'd been down here talking to Faulk, checking up on his intel, when the sensor at the end of the driveway pinged me with an unexpected visitor. The camera down there snapped a clear picture of who it was, and truthfully, seeing it was Bebe hadn't surprised me.

I should've heeded Tobin's warning and called her back.

"Well? What's really going on here, Ridge?" she asks, plopping all four-foot something of herself into the chair across from me.

I hold in a sigh of relief.

"I'm engaged to Grace Sellers," I say. "End of story."

"Bullshit." She shakes her head like she's trying to get something out of those fiery-red ripples.

I shrug. "That's my story and I'm sticking to it, lady."

"You know, for an A-lister, you're not very original. Didn't any of those scripts rub off? Some of them had damn good writers behind them. That line is so old it wouldn't work on my grandmother."

"What if I need it to work?" I ask, staring her down.

"Why?" She frowns, rubbing her chin with inch-long red fingernails.

"No." I shake my head. "You don't deserve that. Not after you barged in here and had to self-insert into my business again."

“Let’s cut the crap, Barnet.” She looks me in the eye. “You’re in trouble again. I knew it as soon as those trashy tabloids and gossip blogs started shouting your name from the rooftops. And that freak on the phone? *My Gawd*, I’ve heard better big shot mafioso threats in auditions. Just tell me what’s really going on and we’ll—”

“No. Not this time,” I whisper.

“Is this still about *him*? I know you must’ve heard...Linus Hammond died a few months ago,” she says.

Good.

That soulless maggot spawned straight from hell deserved a return trip there years ago.

“Yeah. I know. Got your message,” I grind out.

“Oh, cute. A reply would’ve been nice.” She sighs. “His death was purely natural. It had nothing to do with your disagreement...if your disagreement ever escalated that far, wink wink.” She motions like she’s zipping her bright-pink lips.

I stare daggers, wondering if this is the day she starts threatening me.

Blackmailing me with a heinous secret only known to her and Tobin.

There’s no telling if anything is truly beneath this woman.

“I know that, too,” I snap. “What’s your point?”

“What’s *yours*? If this isn’t about Hammond, then what? What else could it be?” she muses.

I say nothing.

Call me a bastard, but I wouldn’t have cared one bit if our *disagreement* killed him.

That’s what I was trying to do, wasn’t it?

That prick had it coming.

If it wasn’t for Tobin, I might’ve brought a fucking gun. Some days I regret not blowing his brains out then and there in

the back of that place, even if it would've meant rotting behind bars.

Only, that would mean I couldn't be here for Grace.

You'd better believe I'll celebrate the day Clay Grendal gets neutralized, or applaud the man, or woman, that does him in. Faulk finally came through with good intel on his group. Lots of it, judging by the attachments.

I can't wait to get this over with so we can pull a few guys together and talk options.

Then again...Bebe could help me play my hand so Grendal shows up where I want him.

"What's it going to take for you to leave?" I ask. "Money? Because if that's what you're after, I'll cut you a check right now. Severance, we'll call it."

She looks at me numbly but then turns and walks past the other side of the desk, to the wall where the new collage of military pictures Grace finished hangs.

"These are rather unique. It's not quite art-art like the kind back home, but it has a certain rustic charm, doesn't it? I saw the one with Judy's pictures in the foyer. Where'd you get them?"

"Grace made them." I don't know why I bother telling her.

She lifts a brow when she glances at me. "Her? Really?"

"It can't be that fucking hard to believe, can it? She's got a good eye for décor."

I let pride in Grace overwhelm the acid derision for this woman steaming in my blood.

Stepping over to my desk, she reaches out, clicking a drumming beat against the polished wood top with her wicked long nails. "I'm no longer your agent; you've said so yourself. So I'm not sure your little severance package would be appropriate."

I've told her that several times.

Don't want to have to tell her again, but if that's what it takes to help Grace, fine.

Bebe can be my agent again.

"I never signed on with anyone else," I say, every last one of those words like a rock on my tongue. "If you're that hard up, then maybe, just maybe, I'll keep the door open on one more film. Don't get too excited. I'm not promising anything."

Her eyes light up like dual suns.

That's when I realize just how much Grace means to me.

Can't imagine there's another woman on earth worth this torture.

~

AN HOUR LATER, after Bebe's gone—satisfied for now and *so willing* to help, gag me—I walk to the cabin, talk to Nelson, and then Grace.

He's still in bed but sitting up without looking like he's about to fall over again. He doesn't look as ash-grey as he did a few days ago.

Progress.

"Feeling better?" I ask.

"Getting there." Nodding, he adds, "I owe you a lot, Ridge. An awful lot. I know I'm a real pain in the butt, but hell. You made the right call, making me cool my heels."

I smile at Grace and the nurse. "If you don't mind, I'd like a chance to talk to Nelson alone, please."

Grace looks at me, nervous and concerned.

"It won't take long," I assure her. "And I promise I won't wear him out."

"Sure," Jackie says, throwing back a kind smile. "We'll be in the other room."

I'm sincere about not wanting to cause Nelson setbacks, but I need him to know I'm trying to help. Sitting down on the

chair beside the bed, I fold my hands in my lap and look at him.

“Remember boot camp, Nelson? Probably different in your day, I’m sure, but if it’s anything like the grind I went through...you had a drill sergeant, who put you through the ropes every day, so when the time came, you didn’t have to think. The response, the instant, was drilled into you.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” he says with a twinkle in his eyes. “How could anybody ever forget that circus?”

I smile, grateful he’s able to pull a little humor out of this. “That’s what we need now. Drills, practice, so we’ll be good and ready when the enemy shows up.”

The laughter leaves his eyes. “No, we’ll leave before they come. You’re crazy if you’re planning to turn your place into a battlefield against those sorry thugs.”

“The two of you don’t stand a chance alone. You have nowhere to go,” I tell him, raking a hand through my hair. “Enough running. It’s time to stand and fight.”

He’s shaking his head fiercely, even though he knows I’m right.

“I know this isn’t how you wanted it, Nelson. Not for you or Grace, and I’m willing to help you change it. Give you both a fresh start, but it’ll take all of us working together.”

He shakes his head, then nods, then shakes his head again.

“I’m no good to you, can’t even help fix this crap. That drill sergeant of a nurse won’t let me out of this bed except to piss,” he groans.

“Yep, that’s her job. It’s how you’re going to get better. Strong enough to help me out.” I don’t want to hint that I know as much as I do about his past, so I shift focus. “You’re paying for her, so you’d better get your money’s worth.”

“I’m not paying—”

“The VA is,” I interject, bending the truth. “You’re a veteran.”

He is, yeah, but I know full well the hoops veterans have to jump through to get decent medical care outside of an authorized facility. Of course I'm paying for the nurse and anything else he needs, and no, he doesn't need to know it just yet.

"How'd you make that happen, anyway?" he asks, a good sign his mind is firing on all cylinders.

I give him a wink. "I have my ways. Something else I wanted to mention...I started this whole media thing. I'm the one who told that Jackknife asshole at the Purple Bobcat that Grace and I were engaged. He told his boss, and we saw the fallout." I shrug, meeting his confused look. "Wouldn't be much of a soldier if I didn't accept responsibility."

He lets that sink in before he asks, "So what's your plan?"

"The media leaks all say Grace and I are engaged. I figure this asshole is trying to run her off, get her away from here by slandering my reputation, thinking I can't stand the spotlight. They have to know I left Hollywood for some peace and quiet. They're using that against me, trying to scare you both into leaving so he can snap you up."

"That's his style," Nelson says glumly. "Bastard thinks he can control everything. Every movement. I'm thankful he's a little out of his element here, having no clue how showbiz works."

"Exactly. My plan is to make his plan *backfire*. Grace and I will put on a show. Act engaged. I'll take her to town, make sure everybody knows your girl hooked the most eligible new bachelor in Dallas. It's time I introduce myself to the town properly, too. I'll encourage folks to go wild, posting their pics of us on their social media sites, giving interviews, the works."

"That's only going to—"

"Piss off the Milwaukee boys? That's what we want. Force their hand. Bring them here, where we'll be ready." I pat his arm. "Our turf, our rules. I have good, capable friends who'll help us out. All former military guys, one was even in the FBI. I know the sheriff and his right-hand man. We'll be ready and

waiting, ready to swing shut the biggest damn mousetrap you've ever seen."

For a second, he turns it over, his eyes brightening. They're a shade paler than Grace's.

Then he shakes his head, heaving out a sigh.

"Nahhh, you can't rope more guys into this. Wouldn't be right. The Old Town Boys are smarter than you'd think, and Clay, he's got *millions* at his disposal." He hangs his head. "Yeah, I know you're probably richer than him, Ridge, but he's a straight-up thug. A savage who's been in this game his whole life. Outsmarting him isn't as easy as you think."

Excitement hits my blood, knowing he trusts me enough to name names.

"I'm planning it down to the last detail," I say, giving him a fierce nod. The more I think about this, the more I know it's our only chance. "My buddies have taken down bigger scum than Clay. They'll have our backs."

He looks at me, studying my face, looking for any sign of weakness.

I can tell he's close to agreeing, he wants to, but he's too used to being prey. After what they've suffered, it's too hard to believe they could be on the hunter's side.

"She won't do it," he says. "Grace, I mean. It's not all up to me."

I lean in closer. "With your permission, leave that to me. It's time this ends, and we can make it happen for both of you."

He rubs his forehead, sighing again. "She won't get hurt? You promise me, mister?"

"I'll protect her with my life. Just like you've done since the day she was born." To bring it home, I add, "Just like you promised her mother, I'm sure. You've seen what I'm willing to do to keep her safe, both of you. You have my word, Nelson."

A hot tear I pretend not to see slips out of his eye.

Wiping at it while I look away, he nods.

“All right, Ridge. Sold. You have my blessing to marry—” He holds up his fingers and makes quotation marks, then smiles. “Marry my little girl. And if she asks, then yeah. I’ll tell her I agree with your plan a hundred percent. Welcome to the family.”

“It’s an honor,” I say, giving him back a joking smile.

From my eyes, it’s nothing but total sincerity pouring out.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Grace and I arrive in town.

Convincing Nelson this plan will work was like eating candy compared to her. I had to mention Nelson name-dropped Clay Grendal and the Old Town Boys before she’d even listen.

She’d gone as white as a sheet.

Swore her father hardly ever spoke their names, even to her, almost like he believes it’s inviting a curse.

I confessed I’d done more homework with Faulk. I know how slippery Grendal is, how cutthroat, and how he believes he’ll never lose.

I watched her walk off to the cabin after telling her to ask her old man himself if she doesn’t believe he agreed to the plan.

She returned to the house with tension and hope dancing in her eyes.

“I still don’t think this is the best idea,” she says, as if reading my mind. “I mean, just driving into town like this and making sure everyone knows what’s up?”

“Just wait. You’ll see how fast word spreads on the gossip vine in this little town.”

She’s staring at the ring on her finger. The one I’d pulled out of the safe in my bedroom.

It's the same engagement ring my father gave to my mom. A blue diamond wrapped in an ornate silvery frame. Supposedly, it once belonged to a Russian royal before revolution scattered the Tsar's jewels to the winds.

They were only married long enough to have me, but my mother kept that ring like it was part of the crown jewels.

It was a relief to find out it fits Grace's finger just like it was made for her.

She lets out a sigh and glances out the window. "So, what's the plan here? Run up and down the street, screaming we're engaged? We should've brought Cornelius for that."

"Less bird poop this way," I say, holding back a snort.

Her head snaps around so fast her neck pops.

"Oh my God. You're serious, aren't you?"

I laugh, park the truck, and turn off the engine.

"Darlin', I learned three things about North Dakota as soon as I got here. One, there's always at least one Lutheran church in every town. Two, the residents do *not* need a reason to fill a bar on Friday or Saturday nights. Three, they eat hotdish like hamburger and tater tots won't be around next year."

At least it gets a laugh out of her.

I point out the window. "First we're going into that diner. We'll eat and then walk across the street to that bar called Libations for a few beers and a little dancing. Don't worry, it's a little more upscale than Grady's place."

"I don't dance."

"You will tonight, sweetheart." I open my door and wink at her.

The way her cheeks light up cherry-red wakes up my dick.



TWO HOURS LATER, I have her on the dance floor.

Turns out, she's a natural, and watching her sway to the loud country music booming from the speakers ignites my

blood.

If it was hell fighting off my hard-on before, it's excruciating now.

I catch her hand, giving her a twirl, loving how she smiles real sweet at me mid-spin.

After she's made a flawless pirouette, I grasp her waist, pulling her up flush against me.

These tits are destroyers of men, I swear.

The urge to do shameful acts of fuckery I'll regret in the morning roars through me like a wind.

"You lied to me, Grace," I say into her ear. "You know damn well how to dance."

She laughs and slips out of my hold.

Twisting her shoulders with a saucy little switch of her hips, she does another twirl before stepping closer again. "I didn't say I *can't dance*. I said I don't dance. Words, mister."

Little minx.

Her smile, the shimmer in her eyes, the way her gold hair flips and falls back in soft waves around her face, over her shoulders, mesmerizes me for life.

I know how insane that sounds.

I'm the dude living this crazy.

Fact remains, I can't take my eyes off her, and I wouldn't be a red-blooded male if I wasn't thinking about fucking her hard and deep.

There's no denying it.

She's had me thinking about that in sweltering flashes ever since I saw her at the Purple Bobcat, hiding her curves behind that puffy white coat.

It's a trope in every romance film ever made to tug on heartstrings.

Instant attraction.

Turns out, it's a hell of a lot more interesting when it happens in real life, when you meet a girl who's such a magnet you wind up fighting yourself tooth and nail to stay sane.

And not giving into pure insanity is getting harder every minute I spend with my eyes glued to those flaming blue eyes, those ample tits, an ass I could hit so hard I'd wake the dead.

Sweet mercy.

I've played more than one role where my character was insta-lusting after a woman, and a couple scenes later, we were in bed together.

I've had my share of flings in real life, too. Cautiously because I've always known the risks. Sleeping with the wrong person has destroyed more than one career in Tinseltown.

I shake my head, dispelling the sex-crazed track I've been heading down and grab Grace by the waist, hold her hips against mine as we fly across the floor to another tune.

The feel of her, the scent, the sight, it's the grounding I need, even if it's still driving me a special kind of crazy.

I need to remember why we're here.

As the music ends, I grasp her hand and pull her up on the small corner stage where the local band—who aren't bad for a group of kids barely old enough to drink—flash a thumbs-up.

They must appreciate how we've been tearing up the floor.

She's frowning as I shoot her a grin before asking the lead singer if I can borrow his mic.

The singer passes it over with a lopsided grin and flips his guitar aside to clap politely as I take center stage, pulling Grace along with me.

Not so much as a beer bottle clinking against the table can be heard as all eyes settle on us.

First, I ask them to give the band a big Dallas hand.

They applaud generously. No surprise. They're being plenty generous to me, too.

When it quiets down, I look out over the crowd, a group of hard-working folks that truly are the heart of this nation.

Farmers and oilmen still smudged up in their clothes, hardworking office women giddy with time off, a couple police officers in their uniforms drinking beers, though I don't see Drake or Sheriff Wallace with them.

Dallas has a pulse. This little town looks out for everybody in it. The very thing I always heard my Army buddies talking about when they'd get homesick.

They'd been jealous of me, of course, and told me point-blank when they found out who I really was. I'd pretended my life was amazing, never letting on how I'd envied them.

All for this sense of *home*.

"Hi, ladies and gents. I have a big announcement," I say into the mic, and for the first time in my life, I'm nervous. I'm speaking from the heart, my words rather than a script. "But first, I want to say thank you. I'd wager a few folks in the crowd knew who I was, even before the latest flap in the media came out. I'm sure you've all seen it. Ever since my arrival in Dallas, you've treated me like I'm just another neighbor. The new guy who bought that ranch on the land old Jonah Reed always swore was no good."

A low rumble of laughs winds through the crowd. I knew mentioning North Earhart Oil's founder would help win over any holdouts.

"It's true. I'll never laugh off winter again after spending entire weeks snowed in," I say. "And I'm glad I did, so the next time I visit Southern California, I'll have plenty of horror stories for the folks who freak if it dips below fifty degrees."

I wait until more laughter dies.

"Seriously, though, it's not the weather telling me how good I've got it. Dallas folk show me every week. I appreciate being able to go to the café, the grocery store, feedstore, gas station, and bars, without being assaulted with newshounds looking to break the next big scoop on Ridge Barnet's scandalous life."

The crowd goes quiet, but faces are smiling.

Grace's hold on my hand tightens.

I squeeze her hand back, silently showing her that I know what I'm doing.

"Y'all made me feel like *one of the guys*, but I never realized what being *one of the guys* meant, until now. Until recently when, as some of you know, the newshounds discovered where I've been holed up. I want to apologize for that, and in advance for any and all hyenas who might pop up around here hounding you folks for info."

I sigh, looking around the room, watching several worried faces.

"I should've known the truth would leak out eventually. I should've introduced myself like this sooner, and thought of you. All of you. You respected my privacy, but I didn't respect your community by keeping my head in the sand since I came here last fall. People, I apologize."

There are a few hushed mumbles, people wondering where I'm going with all this.

I have to admit, I'm better with scripts than I am with improvising on the spot.

Still, I know having the community on my side will help thwart the *real* hyenas I'm worried about coming for Grace and Nelson.

"Guess what?" I flash Grace a grin before continuing. "I don't care what the hell the entertainment media says. They'll print their own words in chickenshit if it sells stories—pardon my French—but here's what I do care about."

I grin, waiting for the laughter to die down again.

"I care what you all think of me. I want you to know I didn't move to Dallas to turn your town upside down with wild rumors. So if anyone asks, I want you to know you heard it from the horse's mouth—and I don't mean Edison's."

A few enthusiastic shouts fly out. I think if they could elect that old horse mayor, they would.

I've got 'em now.

Releasing Grace's hand, I throw my arm around her, tugging her close. "Here's the real news—I just got engaged! Her name's Grace Sellers, and yes, her family owned a pumpkin farm in Wisconsin. No, she's old enough to drink and do a whole lot more. Hell yeah, she's loving Dallas just as much as I am, folks."

The crowd erupts with raucous clapping, cheers, even a few wolf whistles. Those who were seated dart up, a standing ovation, shouting their congratulations.

"I was joking when I said I'd shout it from the streets," Grace whispers as she leans her head on my shoulder.

Laughing, I spin her around, loving how the soft lights pool in her shimmering eyes.

The kiss is for show...until it isn't.

It happens without warning, the instant my mouth finds hers.

Then my whole body goes rigid, electrified with white-hot wow.

Holy fuck.

I don't even need the crowd hooting and hollering to celebrate kissing Grace Sellers for the first time, tasting what's haunted me for too many sweltering nights.

She's surprised, but she wants it as bad as I do.

Her lips part, offering an inch and the sweetest little whine.

I take an entire mile, finding her tongue, chasing her deeply, delicately at first in front of our audience.

Her arms tighten on my neck. She's so far gone I think she's over the crowd, too, and I pull her in closer, lost in the frenzy, claiming her bottom lip with my teeth.

We might have a hundred people around us, stuffed in the busy bar.

But in our own heat, our passion, our need seething out of every pore and dancing on our lips, we'd might as well be the only two people ever made.

It's scary how good her mouth feels on mine.

She tastes like sugar cut with some powerful drug designed to drive me mad.

It's almost impossible to break away for air, remembering where we are.

As the noise dies down, I say into the mic, "Thank you, Dallas! Grace and I have known each other for a while now. I've had to work hard to convince her to give my ranch a try. She's an interior designer. One hell of a designer, I'll add. In just a few days, she transformed my house from a yuppie mausoleum into a home I'm proud to call mine for the rest of my life." I laugh, delivering a good dose of acting when I say, "I was under the impression that just being married to me would be enough."

Laughter fills the room as Grace looks at me and shakes her head.

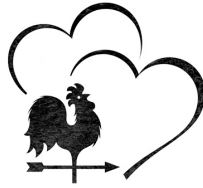
Once again, I wait for the noise to fade.

"Seriously, folks, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Now you've heard it from me, so if anyone asks, you know the real story. Be sure to set 'em straight—and make sure they *pay* you, too. The jackals where I come from will spend an arm and a leg on gossip."

I wave the singer closer, throwing my free arm around the kid. He gives me a goofy grin.

"Before I hand the mic back to my man, I have one more announcement I'm sure you'll be thrilled with. Everybody's bar tab from now until midnight is on Ridge Barnet, so bottoms up!"

NO CONTROLLED BURN (GRACE)



I can't decide if I've ever been more embarrassed or more awed in my life.

I'm still trying to pull my jaw off the ground. Ridge had that crowd eating right out of his hand.

And what he did to me?

Insane.

Indescribable.

Absolutely deadly.

His kiss took me by surprise the first second. Thirty seconds later, it took me over.

He knew when to tease, when to chase, when to spar, and when to give.

I wonder if I'm even in a solid state after melting under his heat, tasting the sexy torment of his lips. And of course I'm already addicted.

That kiss was performance art.

If I didn't know the truth, I'd think we really *are* engaged.

Not just from his little speech, but the way he's still all over me, running a firm hand down the small of my back...

Oh my God.

My panties are so wet it's a struggle to move by the end of the night. The man is a freaking magician when he can make me believe in an illusion I'm supposedly in on.

His touch was too real, like a man who's been awestruck by the woman he's promised to marry.

A woman he's seriously in love with.

He hasn't left my side all night between introducing us to the townspeople, praising me like I was sent down just for him, hugging me, teasing me.

Holy Hades. Teasing me.

Honestly, it was far more than simple teasing. My libido must be halfway to Mars by now.

Dancing with him was a dream. Those slow, close, shockingly graceful movements.

Every time he reeled me in close, I got a whiff of his aftershave mingled with his scent. It leaves me delirious, this dense, earthy shadow in every breath. Inhaling Ridge Barnett affects my ability to breathe, to think, to control myself.

Did I mention his body?

It's hard in all the right places. Muscle and ink fused together by a crazed perfectionist, dusted with a halo of raspy stubble and eyes like a wild thing forever on the hunt.

I could go on forever, but that'd require my wits, which I'm not sure I'll ever find again.

Praise for Ridge aside, I have to admit, I wasn't half bad tonight.

His lead was easy to follow and he told me where to go, to act as in love with him as he is with me.

Never once did the high stakes behind what we're doing leave my brain.

Standing our ground is the best option, and I'm grateful we have it, considering everything else close to going haywire.

After being around him this long, I expect the unexpected from a handsome, overly sexy, foul-mouthed beast-man hell-bent on saving our lives.

What I didn't expect?

That I'd ever have this much fun.

It's easy when your Not Fiancé is a natural jokester, too. He's had people laughing all night, including me.

Especially me.

Astounding, considering I haven't laughed so hard my sides hurt in ages.

I haven't felt so carefree since college.

I'd partied more than one night away back then, and remember how I felt the next morning. So I'm nursing my margaritas rather than doing shots with lime and salt on my well-licked hand.

Truth be told, tequila has nothing on the high he delivers.

Ridge is the life of the party, hell, the entire gravity.

His exuberance has the bar as hyped as he is, everybody in wild spirits. I think they'll be talking for ages about the night a billionaire movie star bought out half the booze on the shelves and let it flow like water.

After another round of dancing where he twirls, dips, and kisses me—leaving me thinking *terrible* things about his god-like stamina—I'm so breathless I could keel over.

"I need to sit," I say, tumbling into a chair.

So, another revelation for the night is just how easily he leaves me in the dust. I'm an active woman, yet I feel my inner couch potato dragging a hundred miles behind an ex-military workout fiend.

"Too much?" He sits beside me, hanging an arm around my shoulders.

I laugh. "You're like the Energizer Bunny."

"Aw." He leans over and nuzzles my neck, stamping several more fiery kisses on the tender skin under my ear. "You sure you want to think of me as some cute, warm thing, darlin'? Whatever else you do, don't think of me as small."

Does. He. Hear. Himself?

Honestly, I'm sure he does. He's trying to kill me with innuendo that's about as subtle as a sausage to the face.

"Does your ego bruise that easily?" I bite my lip and roll my shoulder, easing him back. "How'd you like to be a jackrabbit?"

"Real smooth, Grace. I like the sound of that." He lifts my chin with one hand and kisses my lips, sending another shock through my system. "Never skips leg day? Awesome hearing? Fucks like it's going out of style? I can work with *that* animal."

"You're incorrigible!" I spit back, going slack in his arms, hating myself because it just opens the door to more mischief.

"And you're adorable—especially when you whip out those ten-dollar words, darlin'." He winks at me and then stands. "Ready to call it a night?"

I have to say yes, even as regret floods me, knowing the fun is over.

It's back to stressing over Dad's recovery and the psychos with B-movie villain names who might show up any day.

Ugh.

Nodding, I get up and wait for him to fetch my coat. A shadow falls over me, about as big as Ridge, but when I look up, it's a tall, muscular man with a similar build, dark hair, and emerald-green eyes.

I tense as he extends a hand.

"So you're the little lady giving Ridge all sorts of hell." He grins, an accent in his voice that's not from North Dakota. Somewhere southern, I think. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am. I'm Quinn Faulkner, aka Faulk to almost everybody here."

"Oh!" I snap my hand up and give him a hearty shake. "Right. He's mentioned you. If you're helping us with our problem, I—"

Faulk holds a finger up to his lips, still smiling. He's handsome, chiseled in his own right, almost like Ridge

belongs to some secret club of sexy strange men hiding in this little town. But I know which one's my favorite.

"Sorry. I didn't know you'd be here. Is everything all right?" I whisper.

"Besides losing a night of work so I could enjoy some good music and a buzz, it's peachy," he says with a nod. "I didn't want to interrupt the main man while he was giving his speech, but I had to come over and introduce myself."

"The hell are you doing here, man?" Ridge materializes behind him, holding my coat. "I thought I was hallucinating."

"You know me," Faulk laughs, raking a hand through his hair. "I gotta break up the monotony and put my finger on the pulse in Dallas. I'm just glad I came out and caught a live performance by the amazing Ridge Barnet. Especially seeing how it's starting to feel like spring, and trouble's coming with the pretty weather."

"Yeah." Ridge's face goes serious, his smile melting. "Well, I'm glad you had a chance to say hello. I'm waiting on pins and needles for every email."

His eyes flash, and he slaps Ridge's shoulder. "Enjoy a night off. I heard from Drake that you've got the place all rigged up, looking out for any surprises. Everything's quiet on my end, hoping to have some new leads for you soon. And if shit goes hot..."

He leans in, and I hear them whispering back and forth, but I can't make it out.

"Lovely meeting you again," Faulk says, turning back to me with a wave. "You two make a cute couple. Can't wait for the wedding."

He winks, scurrying away before Ridge can push him.

"What was he saying?" I ask, leaning in closer to his ear.

"Telling me he's got our back. That's Faulk for you, hell of a pain sometimes, but I'd be less of a man without friends like him."

I smile, weirdly warmed at getting to meet someone else close to him.

A friend who's willing to go out on a limb to banish our nightmare.

I slide both arms in my coat as he holds it for me.

The entire time, I tell myself this is all an act. There's no good reason to be disappointed when we get home and everything reverts back to normal.

I'm just relieved it's over and we managed to pull this off without starting a fire.

Well, not one that isn't connected to a suspicious number of nerve endings.

It takes a good while to cross the room. Nearly every patron stops to say congratulations, or asks me a question about starting design work, and to thank Ridge for the open bar.

We're almost to the door when another man walks up to us.

"My compliments to both of you, and thanks. The entire town's gonna be talking this up forever." He frowns, tugging on the bill of his hat. "Say, those newshounds you mentioned...they'll do anything to get the scoop, won't they?"

Ridge nods, but rather than answer, says, "Grace, this is Jess Berland. I bought my truck from his dealership when I first moved here."

"Right, sorry," Jess mumbles. "It's real nice to meet you, Grace. I didn't mean to be rude, I just..."

"You weren't being rude," I say, concerned by how he's frowning.

"I was just asking because I stepped outside for a smoke earlier. Saw two guys near your truck."

My insides freeze.

"They might not have done anything, but it looked kinda funny to me." Jess digs around in his pants pocket and pulls

out a key ring. “Here, take my ride. Just traded my old one in for something better, doesn’t even have its plates yet. It’s parked out back. I’ll have yours towed to the shop and check it over in the morning.”

“Funny how?” Ridge asks, sizing him up.

Jess shakes his head. “Well...it was pretty damn obvious. There was a dude climbing out from under your truck while the other guy stood lookout. They didn’t see me because I’d gone out the back door and walked around the side of the building.” He rattles his keys, still holding them out to Ridge. “Seriously. Take my truck, man.”

“How will you get home?” I ask.

He laughs. “Aw, hell. I’m related to half the people in here. I’ll get a ride.”

Ridge takes the key ring and passes over his own set of keys. “Thanks, Jess. I appreciate it.”

“Not a problem! I’ll check it over real good for bugs—uh, surveillance devices,” Jess says, quickly darting a look around the room before leaning in. “I saw it in a movie once.”

Ridge gives him his best poker smile. “I’m sure it’s nothing like that. Just a few nosy-ass reporters who never learned to mind anybody’s business.”

“I’ve been watching, made sure you didn’t leave until we talked. Sorry it wasn’t sooner. I got held up by Arthur Snowden talking about how he almost cut his finger off fixing his wife’s washing machine last night.” Grinning, he tells me, “Arthur has a frequent flyer card for the clinic. He’s a walking accident and loves to tell everybody about his last ER visit.”

Nodding at me, Ridge says, “Your truck’s out back?”

“Yep. You might as well use the back door so you don’t have to walk around the whole building.”

Jess and Ridge talk about checking the truck as we move to the back door.

As we cross the patio, where there’s a tall outdoor heater blasting hot air, we say good night to several people, including

a hefty-looking man with one hand wrapped in gauze—the infamous Arthur, I assume.

My stomach has been gurgling with dread ever since Jess told us about the men near Ridge’s truck.

I can’t believe I thought this would work.

Clay’s goons are wolves, plain and simple. Trying to scare them off might just make them more determined.

After we climb in a white pickup with *Berland Auto Deals* painted on the doors, I say, “It was Pete, wasn’t it?”

“Probably. A prick with a name like Jackknife seems destined for crappy jobs,” Ridge says. “I’m glad our announcement worked.”

Confused, I look at him. “Did it? How do you know?”

“Jess is a good guy. By showing up tonight, he saw those busy little fucking bees buzzing around the truck. Proves we’ve got someone else on our side looking out for us. And now we have a bar full of fine people who’ll spread our engagement news far and wide. By the end of the weekend, everyone in Dallas will be on the lookout for unfamiliar faces, thinking they’re reporters coming to shake them down.”

That’s...not half bad.

I lean back, letting it sink in.

“You ever lived in a small town?” he asks, looking over, his eyes dancing with blue mischief.

“No. Our farm was outside of the city, but still close enough. The nearest town was a suburb. It was different from city living, but it wasn’t the same as living way off the beaten path.” That’s the only way I can describe it.

“Can’t say I’m flush with experience either,” he says. “But I had Army buddies who came from small, homey places. Split Harbor and Heart’s Edge and plenty more sleepy little places in between. Hearing them talk about their hometowns made me curious. That’s what I was looking for when I hit up my buddy, Faulk, knowing he’d moved out here after years in

the FBI. First time I visited Dallas, I knew I'd found my place."

"Small towns can have their issues, too," I say, having heard that. "I read about that Heart's Edge place one state over. Jesus, all that Galentron stuff..."

"I know. There are demons everywhere and plenty more people who are just damn annoying. I'm used to it. It's the community I'm after," he tells me, this dark, whimsical look coming over his face.

"Why?"

"Can't find that in L.A. Can't even buy it. Plus, when it comes to little towns, their bad apples are easy to root out. Bastard scum like Clay just fester and thrive in their big city cover. And honestly? I've had enough of being worshiped by strangers back home. I want to be part of something normal, deeper, lasting."

His eyes light up the longer he goes on, blue flames dancing around his pupils when he smiles.

If there was any question about Dallas being some kind of phase he's going through, it's gone.

"What about your family?" I ask, glancing over, choosing my words with surgical precision.

We've left town, and now we're on the highway.

He glances in the mirror as he says, "Don't have one anymore. Not counting Tobin, I guess. He's not blood, but the man's been around ever since I was a kid. He's dedicated his entire life to service."

"No one else since your mom died? No extended relatives?"

"No. My father had some kind of falling out when Grandpa's airline was sold off in the merger. If it was deeper than that, I never knew it. So that side was just a big black hole. Mom, she ran off from home when she was sixteen and risked everything for her career. She landed in Hollywood, and always swore her family only reached out for money after

abandoning her for years, so I never met them, either. Her folks are both long dead. Died before I went into the Army.”

My heart aches for him.

He speaks a pain I know too well. Outside Noelle and her family over in Miles City, Dad and I haven’t really had anyone since my mom passed on.

“What made you choose the Army?” I wonder out loud. “When you were arguing with your agent, I overheard her say something about covering for you?”

“Bebe Silk has a big damn savior complex...even if it’s well deserved. I had to get away, Grace.” He reaches across the console and takes my hand.

I turn, studying him, awed by how gorgeous he looks painted in the shadows.

“From everything. Mom had me in commercials and advertising since I was born. Then it was TV. Name a show from the nineties, and I was probably in several episodes as the neighbor kid, the injured kid, or the dead kid. Then I shifted to movies when I got older. Guest appearances in Mom’s big hits at first. By the time I was a teen, like they always do, I rebelled. Just wanted normalcy, to go to school instead of having on-site tutors as we traveled around the world, wherever the next movie was filming.”

“Wow. It sounds stressful.”

“That’s the trouble,” he says darkly. “The pressure became the norm, the only life I knew.”

“And Tobin?” I ask, too curious not to.

“He was my mom’s valet originally, and always too regal to settle for the term ‘butler.’ She couldn’t leave me home alone all the time while she was off filming or meeting very important people, so Tobin looked after me when I was young. Then when I hit my teens, he became my guy full time—another fun thing about being Hollywood royalty. Most kids hit a certain age and can’t wait to have their own lives. I got tied down with a glorified babysitter, who’d gladly report back

to Mom if I snuck out with my friends twenty minutes too long.”

I smile. “It must’ve been hell on dating.”

“Yeah, just a little.” Ridge snorts, a smirk on his lips. “I got lucky he looked the other way one time when a box of condoms fell out of my backpack. He’s not all bad, though. I’m thirty-three and still keeping him around...more for his benefit than mine. But even now, sometimes I appreciate when he saves me from my own dumb ass. *Sometimes.*”

The warmth of his hand sends lightning up my arm.

I should pull away, but I can’t.

“How old were you?”

“Fifteen.” He huffs out a laugh. “By the time I was sixteen, I decided I didn’t much like school either. So I made peace with acting. Started to put some real effort into it, not just going through the motions. It rubbed off on my studies so I could graduate...no thanks to Tobin again.”

“Oh? That good a teacher?”

“I hated the fuck out of history. Flunked every test in my life until junior year,” he says with a scowl. “I’m older and wiser now, and appreciate the past, but it took Tobin screwing my head on straight. He managed to get me interested with his books on trench warfare and heads getting hacked in the French revolution. By senior year, he’d rapped me over the knuckles enough times to get me writing essays on Tom Paine and Teddy Roosevelt...and enjoying it.”

Hilarious. I can almost see a younger Tobin fussing over Ridge with his Peter Pan good looks back in his teens.

I’d read a lot about his career online, especially all the films he’d been in as a child star. I’d even watched a few clips on YouTube, scenes from old movies I haven’t seen in years.

“How long were you in the Army?”

“Four years of active duty, one more in the reserves. I would’ve re-upped for active duty, but a bullet to the leg put me out of commission. Not bad enough to screw me over

permanently. I could've come back, but Mom...it wasn't fair to her anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"She hated having a son in the military and the constant worry that came with it. She thought it was too dangerous, especially when I came home for the last time with a purple heart. I had all sorts of people trying to get my time cut short when Judy Barnett put in the word. Congressman, the governor, it was goddamn embarrassing. So after my second tour was up, I discharged honorably."

I still feel like there's a cloud over him, something he's holding back.

And that explosive exchange with Bebe Silk hinted at a lot more going on with his mother.

But his eyes are dark, distant, and it's not the time to pry answers out of him.

"I'm sorry," I say.

I feel for him.

It's odd how easily a person thinks Prince Charming must have it all, yet never really knows what he went through. Even with a famous mother—which sounds almost as difficult as having a father who got mixed up with an ugly business—life wasn't set on easy.

He flashes me one of those sexy smiles to die for. "Don't be sorry. It was my choice to leave and take back control of my life."

"What did you do then?"

"Went right back to acting after finishing my reserve duties on the side," he says.

"And became a blockbuster hit," I remind him.

"Only a few of my last movies were that big, but it was mostly the timing, the market interest. They weren't any better than some of the others, they just resonated with audiences and took off. Then my mother died and it...threw my shit for a

loop, let's say. I'm sure you looked up my last two films. Turns out, people love Dane Barnet the actor a thousand times more than Barnet the producer."

My fingers thread deeper through his, our palms touching, and I tighten my hold on his hand. "How did she die? I've seen so many articles, but I'm curious...if it's not too personal."

"Suicide."

Boom. Point-blank. He doesn't even hesitate.

"Oh, God." My heart stops. "Oh, Ridge, I'm so sorry."

He shakes his head, those blue eyes flaring in the darkness.

"What's done is done. I knew she'd been having issues the last few years. Big part of the reason I quit the Army, so I could be around more, look in on her." He shakes his head again. "Nobody saw it coming. I couldn't believe it. Tobin, he...fuck."

Breathless, I wait for more, but after the longest ten seconds of my life, I realize it's not coming.

I wish I hadn't asked.

Wish I hadn't dragged him back to that pain.

He sounds so solemn, so wounded, so—I don't know—lost?

"Here we are," he says, his face brightening. "Home sweet home."

I glance up, surprised to see the house. The miles went by in a blur, eaten up by our conversation.

He pulls up in front of the big garage and turns off the engine. "I'll have to open the garage from inside. The remote's in my truck."

"I'll do it."

"No, darlin', let me. You've had a long day."

I have, and I question if I should go see Dad, but it's going on one o'clock in the morning.

Jackie texted a couple of times while we were gone, letting me know that Dad was doing just fine. By ten o'clock, he'd been sleeping soundly after finishing dinner, a plate of chicken and dumplings brought by Tobin.

We walk in the front door together, and as we separate in the foyer, him to go to the garage and me to go up the winding staircase, I stop.

"Night, Ridge," I call out. "And thanks again for...for everything."

"Night, lady. Thanks for making our mission fun. I enjoyed myself for the first time since the snow." He traps me with a gaze so honest, so grateful, I feel like we're back on that stage.

I feel the illusion of *us* all over again.

Wow.

"Me, too." My feet feel like they weigh a hundred pounds as I turn, treading up the steps.

It was a nice night, a break from the endless terror and chaos.

I just hope I didn't spoil it by dredging up his past.

~

IN MY ROOM, I take off the outfit I'd worn to town and put on a pair of loose-fitting shorts and a t-shirt.

It's hard to avoid the remorse that comes down in an avalanche.

I knew his mother committed suicide. I'd read the speculation online.

So why did I *need* to hear it from him? Sure, the crapfest I'd overheard with Ridge and Bebe provoked plenty of questions.

But he's busy doing all he can to save my life, and I repay him with a bad case of foot-in-mouth.

Shame.

Grabbing my toothbrush, I'm ready to rage-brush my teeth, only I can't find any toothpaste. Possibly the one thing they forgot to stock my bathroom with, so I head across the hall.

Ridge stands in the hallway near the stairs. I consider running before he turns.

Too late.

The regret inside me glazes over. I've lived with so much, for so long, I don't need more.

But the grin he flashes makes my knees weak.

If there's any unresolved angst over our conversation and my nosy-as-hell questions, it's sure not in his expression.

Even with my mind full of doubts, my body never left the dance floor where his kiss, his caress, his energy had me pressing my hips against his.

How could I forget the firmness, the thick bulge in his pants?

My eyes flick down his body. Dangerously close to that spot below the waist I desperately need to ignore.

"I, uh, toothpaste!" I sputter.

"Come again?" His smile gets wider and he steps closer.

Okay. I manage to pull my eyes up, meet his, and instantly feel the heat rushing to my face at the way he lifts a brow.

"There wasn't any in the bathroom, so I went searching. Also...I'm sorry, Ridge."

"For what?" he asks softly.

"Barfing up those questions in the truck, mostly," I blurt out while I can still speak. "It wasn't my place, snooping around in your life."

It's also not my place to be as wet as I was when we left Libations.

I haven't forgotten that for a second.

Good Lord, I've never been so turned on by anyone. Not like this. It's been years since I even had the time or energy to mess around, and dates were few and far between, mostly in college.

None of those boys *ever* came close to the Ridge Barnet treatment, the slow-burn sweetness he'd delivered tonight.

"You're still twisted up over that? Grace, I don't mind, I told you," he says, stepping forward and stopping in front of me.

I wonder how long I can hold my breath so I don't get a whiff of his aftershave.

"Doesn't matter. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. Everything you told me, it must've been rough, the kinda thing a person tries hard to forget." I shake my head.

"You didn't know, darlin'. It's natural to be curious, especially when you read that crap online and I'm, well, me." He reaches up, stroking his chin, torturing me without even knowing it as his fingers slide over his stubble. "I'm not even thinking about that shit anymore, to be honest."

"No?" The air heaves out my lungs.

"Nope. I'm thinking about the dance. We gave the crowd a show they'll never forget. You moved across that floor like an angel. Only, I don't think angels are supposed to stir up my head with sin. I've still got plenty rolling around up here."

He moves his hand up and gently taps his temple. His gaze threatens to burn me alive.

Holy hell.

It's almost *worse* that he's playing coy.

Not just coming out with some lewd remark about what he's aching to do to me.

Not just running those firm, rough hands between my legs.

Not just moving in for the kill.

He touches the side of my face then, tracing my jawline. "So are you done sleuthin' around in the mud on Google? Do

you want to know the real Ridge?”

I keep my eyes down, my breath fluttering.

“Yes.”

His laugh comes soft, sexy, heavy as an approaching storm. “You know why else I came up here?”

Lifting my head, meeting his gaze, my mind goes blank, except for the memory of that body grinding against mine as if we’d both been pounding aphrodisiacs at the bar.

“I forgot to kiss you good night, Grace,” he whispers. “It’s the proper thing for a man to do after a big engagement party.”

Oh, God. Oh, no. Oh, please!

I pinch my lips shut to prevent something stupid from ruining the moment.

Then those big, strong hands of his are on my waist and I’m in rapture as he pulls me against him.

It’s a kiss like we’ve never had, the first kiss *alone* we knew was coming.

Ridge Barnett claims my mouth with a vengeance, a low growl, all teeth, tongue, and fire.

I push up on the tips of my toes, sighing, melting into a moaning mess in his arms.

Thank God he holds me up.

Because my knees go out from under me, and every last part of my brain focuses on holding on and giving as good as I get.

From the way he stiffens and the places those hands roam, I think I hold my own.

He barely breaks for air before he’s on me again, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth, giving me this feral love-bite with a snarly demand.

Mine. Tonight.

Wow, and I don’t think he’s taking no for an answer.

Good thing I wouldn't dream of saying it, either.

We're already past reckless, this seething mess of tangled arms and raw emotions. Ridge pushes me against the wall, driving his hot lips against my throat, taking me over.

My legs part, and that bulge I felt back at the bar...

It was nothing—absolutely freaking *nothing*—compared to the hard weight pressed against me, throbbing with vicious need.

Oh.

My.

God.

I lock my arms around his neck, returning the kisses, needing it so bad.

Needing him.

I trace his jaw with one hand, staring into his eyes, panting. He tucks his fingers under my chin, lifts my face, staring like a beast who's driven to swallow me up.

"Fuck," he rasps, those blue eyes pinning me to the wall. "You've been hiding a mouth like that this whole time? You have any clue what you do to me?"

I wonder if I'll even get a chance to find out.

I'm about to die.

Keel right over before I'm even ravaged by a dark prince half the women ever born would fling themselves at. I'm so dizzy I have to lean against him, and he chuckles, low and sultry.

"Ridge...are we getting carried away?" I whimper.

"Probably," he growls, before moving on me again. "Don't think for a second that means we'll stop, darlin'. I want to make you come so good for me you don't have any room left in your head for worries. Let me fuck the bad right out of you tonight."

So much for the filter he had a minute ago, not that I'm complaining one bit.

In fact, I think I like him in this rough and tumble, downright dirty mode.

I'm lucky my body runs on instinct as his hands cup my butt, lifting me high, pressing me firmly against his hard-on. The look he gives me when he sees I can feel it shreds me.

Rips me apart with a wicked blue-eyed fire.

My hands flatten against his chest, and I claw at his shirt, starving.

Shamelessly, I push my breasts harder against his chest, wanting more, but settle for him setting the pace.

He pulls his mouth away from mine, only to drag these amazing kisses down the side of my neck, raking his stubble against my skin.

My head falls back, giving him full access to more skin, more places to kiss, more everything.

His hands slide lower, fingers digging under the hem of my shorts.

I get the impression it wouldn't take much at all to shear them right off. But he takes them down so very slow, skimming my legs as they fall.

God.

My pussy hurts, throbs with a heat that's ravenous, wanting him inside me right now.

Hurt me.

Take it all away.

Make me forget everything except your skin.

My hand drags at his shirt, grabbing a fistful. If he isn't careful, he's going to make me come on the spot with those mad kisses before we've even had a chance to—

“Do you want this?” he pants, pulling back, gazing into my eyes.

“Um...don't you?”

“No.” His finger slides beneath the elastic of my panties as he kisses a spot where my neck blends into my shoulder. “I fucking need it, Grace. But I'm giving you one more chance, if it's too much...”

I quiver, afraid I'm about to erupt.

Before now, I never believed it'd be possible to have an O while I'm still half clothed, but it's a very real risk with every passing second.

Lifting his head, he looks me in the eye as his fingertips brush my folds. One quick, sweeping motion.

My eyes flutter shut at the raging pleasure.

“Last chance, Grace.” He strokes my hair with his free hand. “You want me to stop?”

“No!”

“Do you want to come to my room?” His finger pushes into me, and my eyes snap open as this sultry whine slips off my tongue. “Do you want my mouth? My hands? My cock?”

Oh, shit.

My knees can't stop shaking. He moves closer, helping hold me against the wall. His fingers sink deeper, thumb on my clit, stroking with the skill of a man who knows how to leave a woman locked in a fever-dream.

“Do you want me to pillage you all night, woman?” he growls, bringing his lips to my throat, sucking at my skin, marking me. “Because that's what I'm aiming to do, throw you right the hell over my shoulder, but first...you're gonna give it. Come for me, darlin'. Come right here, right now. I want to hear you.”

I gasp, planting my mouth over his, parting his lips with my tongue.

His weight bangs me against the wall and his fingers work faster, harder thrusts, pushing lightning through me. I'm so slick I can feel it dripping down my thighs with the fabric

pushed aside, those devil's fingers in deep, bringing me off with zero mercy.

When his thumb finds my clit again...

Oh!

He inhales sharply before attacking my mouth, stealing the harsh groan pulsing out as my vision goes white.

My knees buckle.

My thighs clench together around his hand.

My soul leaves my body.

For the next few ferocious minutes, I'm *coming* like I never have in my life, barely biting back screams.

I barely even remember my own name when he sinks his teeth into my lip, hitting my clit again and again with his thumb, pivoting his fingers against my walls, pushing buttons I never knew I flipping had.

Oh, but I do now.

And I wonder if I'm already ruined as I open my eyes again and find him holding me with both hands, staring down.

Ridge pushes his forehead to mine, slowly breathing like he's about to explode, gazing at me like I'm this precious bird he's just witnessed for the first time in his life.

"Darlin'...let's go. We stay out here any longer, I think you'll wake up Tobin on the other end of the house, and everybody in the guesthouse, too." He smiles, pure joy in his eyes—probably because I'm so flushed I think I've invented new shades of red. "Can you still walk?"

Ridiculous question.

I cock my head, staring in disbelief. Come on, it was all kinds of good, but it wasn't—

Oh.

So, maybe it isn't just a crazy ego boast when I try taking a step and instantly stagger.

Smiling, he takes my hand, helping me up, leading me the rest of the way, hand so hot I'm already thinking about the sweet insanity ahead.

I'm not sure how I make it down the hall without self-combusting, nor do I care.

I've never been this hot for a man in my life.

The short break before having sex so hot it folds the fabric of space-time should be a good time to think, to reconsider what I'm doing, but...

Nope.

The ship sailed on that about ten minutes ago, and it's not coming back to port.

Consequences be damned, I want his hands, his lips, his superstar dick.

We enter the room, still kissing, his hand diving back in my panties, working me up to a thick heat again.

It's so flipping good I can't stop trembling.

Ridge shuts the door, spins me around, and pushes me gently down on the bed. He's on me a second later, his manly weight pressing me down, shifting my legs apart with his knee.

Oh, hell.

He goes to town, ripping my panties down my legs, then kissing up my legs again with his mouth. At first it's a slow torture.

Then he dives in, finding my heat, his tongue pulling me apart, and I realize how screwed I am.

I'm addicted in under a minute.

Hooked on his lips, his tongue, the way he makes me ride his dusting of beard, the contrast of his rough, gorgeous face on my soft skin, the pressure of his *tongue* as he licks up and down my folds.

And when he dives in, thrusting deep, grazing my clit and then making it a willing prisoner to his fire...

I'm so done.

Ready to come again.

Right here, right now.

I fight it for a few hopeless seconds, trying to hold back, but there's a better chance of summoning a unicorn from thin air than keeping it together under Ridge Barnett's mouth.

Of course, I've also been starved. That's what happens when your sex life consists of a hot-pink Battery Operated Boyfriend for the last few years.

The fact that I'm being licked by an alpha-licious movie star? It's like a starving woman taking her first bite of German chocolate cake from the finest bakery after having nothing but beans and easy mac for years.

Years.

"Grace," he whispers, lifting his face just enough for me to see fiery blue staring up. "Don't fight me. Let it fucking go."

Not the words my body needs to hear.

The second it does, and he wraps his lips around my clit again, I'm speechless.

When you're coming so hard you can't even bite back your screams or stop for even half a second to worry about interrupting the butler's beauty sleep, you know *words* are the least of your happy problems.

It isn't fair how good it feels to *obey* this man.

To give up control, to grip his shoulders, desperately grinding my hips against his face in frantic jerks, full surrender to the sanity-killing O he whips through my body.

"Grace?" he says. "Still with the living, babe?"

Oh my God.

How much time did I lose?

I flop back against the bed and groan, loving how the cool air feels against the sheen of sweat left behind by his antics.

“Sorry,” I gasp. “It’s just...it’s been awhile.”

He leans over, threading his fingers through my hair, bringing me back to life with another one of those kisses far too X-rated for Sleeping Beauty comparisons.

“Good. Means you’re ready to have some fun,” he tells me.

“Oh?” My heart beats even faster again.

He grasps the hem of my shirt, pulling it up, over my head and off my arms. My boobs have been begging for his hands all night, still are, and at the first touch, my nipples go hard.

“I promise,” he says, kissing my chin. “You’ll walk away satisfied—if you can walk at all.”

Promises, promises.

The bad news is, I know now what he’s truly capable of.

What sounds like a brag is really fair warning when it’s Ridge Barnet saying it.

“What about you?” I ask, trying to sound sexy.

I’m sure I sound more like a bundle of nerves.

He chuckles softly. “I’ll get everything I need. Don’t you worry.”

It’s hard not to shudder at how sure, how smug, how determined he sounds.

That thrills a dark part of me, and my eyes drop to his pants.

He laughs, reaching for my hands.

Reading my mind, he guides them toward his waist, bathing me in blue-eyed heat.

I catch hold of his belt as I sit up, helping unbuckle it while he pulls his shirt off. As I unsnap his jeans, he pushes down, kicks off his pants, then falls on top of me as we both smile.

Skin to skin, heat to heat, soul to soul, we share another deep kiss, tasting and teasing until my senses whirl, my heart pounding, a fire lit between my legs so hot it scares me.

His hands caress my sides, my breasts, teasing my nipples as his mouth slips off mine.

He's too good at what he does, trailing soft kisses down my neck, along my shoulder blades, slowly moving down. I nearly explode as he sucks one of my nipples, then the other.

Ridge looks up, this feral glint in his eyes, reminding me of every wicked thing he did to me before with that tongue.

It's happening again.

Only this time, there's no easy relief, no way to keep my nails off him as they press into his skin.

Please!

I know when he gives me that fullness throbbing behind his boxers, barely covered, it's going to deliver the orgasm of the century.

"Ridge!" I whisper, a brilliant, hot flush spreading over me. "Enough. I want you. So bad. Now."

So yes, it's *bad* when I can't form complete sentences.

He kisses my stomach slowly.

I can barely move, everything below the waist turned to jelly, and I'm still riled for more. But as he steps away from the bed, confusion fills me.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom. Condom." He winks. "And this time I won't even have to worry about hiding anything from Tobin."

"Hurry!" I whisper.

Even while I'm basking in the sweet anticipation, I'm fully aware of how hungry I am.

How eager I am to see what he looks like when he comes and hear the pleasure snarling out of him.

He's seen me twice.

Fair is fair.

He returns a moment later, naked and glorious.

My eyes instantly fall to his erection.

Uh-oh.

Apparently, the Barnet family jewels are actually museum-worthy. Like, ready to be displayed in a gallery with every artist who ever spent hours of their life crafting the perfect manhood.

He's thick. He's granite-hard. He's pulsing.

He's alive and wide-awake with an eagerness that freaks me out as much as it enthralls me.

The very thought of feeling him inside me makes my pulse roar in my ears.

"I'm clean, in case you're wondering," he says, climbing on the bed. "We're not all degenerate fuck-machines with unlimited money. I've never slept with anyone without a condom and never done anything harder than a couple joints in my teens."

I smile. It's sweet that he's able to rein in his lust enough to be real.

His commitment to his health and mine warms my heart.

"Ditto. In case you were wondering," I say, mirroring back his words with a wink. "Mom was good with the birds and the bees. Use the pill for true love and condoms for fun. That was her motto."

"Smart lady."

My heart swells. "She was. She also had a body kinda like this when she was younger."

"Fuck," he growls, burning me alive with those hellfire eyes as his gaze sweeps across me. "You slaughter me, Grace."

Somehow, I think it's the other way around a moment later.

Ridge moves in for another all-too-maddening kiss, tongue chasing mine, palming one breast.

He strokes my full curve, twirling the nipple, raising my temperature from *oh, no* to *inferno*.

Low thunder echoes in his throat as he cups my face in both hands, waiting for me to look at him.

“Gonna let you in on a secret: I’ve never wanted to be inside a woman so bad in my life.” His lips brush mine as he speaks, pulling my bottom lip again with his teeth.

Dead.

I’m telling this story from the Great Beyond (not really).

“Funny,” I whisper, trying to stay cool. “I’ve never wanted a man inside me like I do you, right now.”

Truer words were never spoken. Even if they’re the kind that make me want to hide my face under the covers.

I’ve never been a dirty talker, but God...for this man, a woman could learn.

He smiles, strokes my hair, and finally looks down at his length, pulsing with a life of its own against his abs.

Anticipation fills me as I watch him rip open a condom packet with his teeth, toss the foil behind him, and take my hand. He pushes the rubbery sheath into it.

“Do the honors, darlin’.”

I never thought those goofy Sex Ed lessons like sliding a condom onto something as thick as a banana would come in handy. With Ridge, it’s not even ample practice. He’s bigger.

Thankfully, I manage to get it fit snug without embarrassing myself.

We lock eyes as I wrap my hand around him, pumping his fullness.

Oh, hell yeah.

Here we go.

He moves between my legs, then positions himself above me, grinning. “We’ll go slow. Tell me if I hurt you,” he whispers.

Legs spread, I lift my hips toward him, ignoring his warning.

“Please!”

I bite my lip, watching his hips roll back, gripping his cock by the base as he pushes forward. He bares his teeth like an animal in rut.

His swollen head enters me, feeling so divine I lurch, letting out my pleasure in a breathy moan.

Full penetration completely slays me.

He stretches me, pressing deeper, one hot inch at a time.

A blue-eyed god taking what’s his, rendering me down into a mess of nerves and emotion when he’s finally in to the hilt.

“So fucking tight,” he grinds out. “Grab on, Grace. Won’t be stopping until this pussy comes for me real sweet.”

He slides back, then dips into me again, a colossal moving machine of pure muscle marked with wild ink. My legs tangle with his and I try to match his rhythm.

No easy task.

Ridge surprises me every time, picking up his tempo, then pulling back to leave me in agony.

He doesn’t do it like other men, rushing to their own selfish finish.

Surprise, surprise, he’s a magician in the sheets.

The slow-burn is his art form.

Those hips know when to go turbo and when to peel back, when to caress and when to punish, when to make me shake and how to make me beg for *dear life*.

Holy hell.

The first O, he drags out of me, growling my name as he feels me convulse, tightening around every pistoning inch of him.

“Grace!” he calls out, crashing straight through it, pummeling my hips and igniting this friction with his pubic bone on my clit.

The pleasure comes so hot, so ruthless, it’s almost blinding.

My vision vibrates, the whole freaking world, reality itself bowing to the insane fact that *the* Ridge Barnett is screwing me absolutely stupid.

His thrusts rivet me to the bed, slowing just enough to catch my breath as I come down from the high.

I should be satisfied.

I should need a breather.

But he’s triggered something deeper, more primal, this animal need to feel him come, to milk him dry.

No, my brain doesn’t care about the condom.

No, I’m not thinking like a rational human being anymore as I start panting, throwing my hips up to meet his, pulling him into me.

My nails rake his back, clutching and tearing, totally gone in a riptide of ecstasy.

And when he groans, shoves his forehead to mine, and our eyes lock in this lusty stare to the death, I drown in Ridge.

He never takes his eyes off me on the final stretch of round one, his pace quickening, his cock reaching so deep inside me I have to fight back every scream.

“Ridge!” I belt out, the only coherent word I’m able to still speak with another O threatening to take control.

I want—I need—him to come with me.

Luckily, I think he gets it.

My gaze remains on him as long as possible, until my eyes flutter shut as the storm draws in, but I last just long enough to enjoy his pleasure growling out of him.

Watching, feeling, loving how his muscles tighten, those bright-blue eyes transformed into velvet smoke a split second before his head whips back, and his groan shears the night.

Then it's just both of us in a collision of flesh and sounds that aren't human.

It's heat and pressure and the feel of his cock expanding, throbbing, pouring out his savage tension as he thrusts to the hilt and claims me forever.

Forever, distilled into one hot night.

"Damn it, Grace," he rumbles when I'm conscious enough to hear him again. "You got me at a three to one orgasm ratio. Usually I last a lot longer."

I smile. "Now you know how I feel. It's embarrassing how fast, how easy I..."

"Only one way to even the score," he says, mischief dancing in his eyes as he strokes my hair. "Put that sweet mouth to work helping me up and I'll show you what I mean."

He doesn't have to.

I already know, but of course that's not even in the same universe as learning it in the flesh.

A short time later, I realize I'd been wrong about one thing.

I haven't just had the orgasm of the century.

The one that strikes next as Ridge eases me up after I've finished sucking him, flips me around, and mounts me from behind puts the last few climaxes to shame.

I come so hard I break.

It's a miracle I only sleep a few hours past dawn after we finally bed down for the night.

I wake up feeling happier than ever with his huge, inked arm around me. I'm careful to slide out so he can doze.

Another hour later, after sneaking out of Ridge's bedroom and showering, I walk to the cabin to check on Dad. Mixed emotions flit around my insides like unsettled hornets.

No question, that was the most fun I've had in ages, the best sex of my life, and probably the biggest mistake I've ever made.

All in one night.

Crud city.

"Good morning," Jackie greets me. "He's awake and super grumpy. I think that means he's feeling better in Nelson-speak."

"Oh, good. You picked up his language fast." Giggling as I walk through the living room, I have to admit she really is the best nurse we could've found.

"Morning, Dad," I say, entering his room and closing the door behind me.

"What's good about it?" he grumbles. "Nurse Ratched still won't let me out of this damn bed."

He looks so much better than he did two days ago. There's actual color in his face, he's breathing normally, and it's been a while since I've heard that ugly cough.

I point to the oxygen tube. "Did she say you could take that off?"

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry. She'd have already shoved it back up my nose if she hadn't." He levels a serious gaze on me. "You went to town with Ridge last night, right? How was it?"

He knew, I'd talked to him before leaving.

"Fine and dandy." I bite my tongue, not mentioning the hitch with Jess and the men prowling around the truck. "We went to this bar in town. Not the Bobcat, but a nicer one on

Main, Libations, I think it was called. He announced our engagement just as planned.”

It still feels weird saying those words.

“Hmm. I didn’t think you’d agree at first, but then, I remembered you’re you. And you’ll do anything you possibly can for an old fool who bit off more than he could chew.” His face falls toward the ground. “I’ve been a shitty father.”

Whoa.

Clearly, someone’s been doing some heavy duty thinking while stuck in bed.

My heart breaks a little as I take a shaky step toward him, studying the deep lines of age and stress on his face.

I sit in the chair beside the bed, taking his hand. “No, you haven’t, Dad. You made serious mistakes, but...it wasn’t malicious. We never had much, and I know you grew up poor. Everything you’ve done was for me and Mom. You tried to give us something better, whatever the rights and wrongs.”

I don’t think I’m convincing, judging by the sharp, sad look he throws back.

My mind also tries treading down another road, but I won’t let it.

I have enough to worry about without drowning in my own regrets. My own blame. My own stupid mistake trying to help the situation by fighting Clay and just making it worse.

Dad doesn’t know about it, and if I have my way, he never will.

“You’re making me more noble than I really am, Gracie. It was jackass pride, plain and simple.” He sighs, rolling his shoulders. “I hitched up with Clay for money. I was greedy, jealous, always hating how I busted my hump on the lines for years and saw the managers swapping out their rides every other year for cars I could only dream about. I wanted to buy your ma nice things, the farm she always wanted, and send you off to school without worrying about any damn loans. But I could’ve done that without Clay. If I hadn’t boxed myself in,

if I hadn't been so bitter, too old or stupid to learn anything new..."

"Dad, no," I whisper, rubbing his back. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

Shaking his head, he solemnly adds, "I took the bait, the first easy money that came along. Stupidly thought I'd found us a golden ticket. Truth is, dirty money is *always* filthy. How many people did I help that bastard kill with the stuff he was shipping? How many folks ruined their lives or killed each other, fighting over that junk?"

Drugs.

Just like I always guessed.

Jesus.

He's never admitted it outright before, but now...

Now, I get it, and I know part of what's been wrong with Dad wasn't just his health. It was guilt, poison in the soul, constant and suffocating.

Arguing won't do him any good, though, so I nod.

He isn't wrong.

Dirty money will always be filthy, even when it sucks good people in.

"Well, hindsight is twenty-twenty." I fold my hands on my lap.

"I'm glad you have a good head on your shoulders. I didn't want you to suffer, but Ridge's plan is our only option now. It might even end all of this. You know it's a game to call Grendal out of the woodwork. When it's over and done, then we'll go wherever we want. Start over." He pats my hand. "Hollywood folks get engaged and break up all the time, so no one's even gonna question that. They'll probably figure a man like Ridge would never settle for someone who wasn't born with millions."

Ouch.

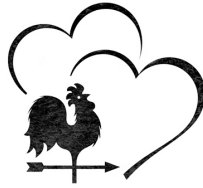
My stomach sinks because he's right.

Fantabulous sex aside, it's all a game.

A plan to neutralize a monster so we'll finally be free. He's on-point about Ridge, too, and if I want to keep my heart intact, I'd better remember it.

Hollywood princes don't fall for pumpkin farmer peasants.

NO REGRETS (RIDGE)



It must be time to get up because Corny Pecker is screaming his beak off.

For once, he's on time, welcoming the morning like a normal rooster. I see it's roughly nine o'clock when I sit up.

His shrieking has nothing on the double jolt I get when I see Grace out the window.

My heart wakes up and so does my cock.

Even after hours of horizontal acrobatics, I still have the biggest hard-on of my life and zero regrets.

I can't muster up any guilt for taking her last night, indulging my lust, my desire.

I'd started it on the dance floor, all for show, or so I'd thought.

Technically, it was part of the act at Libations.

But the showstopper aspect took on a life of its own, leaving me wanting Grace like I've never wanted anyone. When I came upstairs to find her, I knew damn well what I was doing.

A grin jerks at my lips as I watch her enter the barn. She'd wanted me, too.

Of course I sensed it long before we got home, practically felt the smoke rolling off her.

I'd tried to not act on it, even when I came up sniffing around like a moose in rut, but seeing her in the hall shattered my restraint and my judgment.

My senses are still beyond mangled as I clean up and head downstairs to my office, where I dick around with my accounts and reply to a few random fan emails from my website.

Despite my shit-fight with Hollywood, I haven't totally forgotten the people who love me.

Every so often, I'll write to answer a mundane question about one of my movies or promise to send them an autographed photo.

These people are the reason I got stuck in a high-end prison of a life in the first place, and plenty of money to escape when it was time.

"Will you be having breakfast this morning?"

I turn, shaking my head at Tobin, who stands in the doorway of my office like a loyal sentinel.

"Pass. I overslept and it's already coming up on lunch." I'm not hungry—not for food. "Plus, I have to go to town soon. Return Jess' truck and check on mine."

"And?" Tobin lifts a brow. That's damn near screaming for him. "Did he find anything out of sorts?"

"Yep. A tracking device just like the kind I pulled off the Sellers' truck that night at the Bobcat. One of those fuckers slashed a brake line, too."

Tobin mutters a curse under his breath, then straightens like he'd been saying the rosary.

I frown.

It's never a good thing to see him *that* shaken up.

"Bebe called last night. She said she's arrived back in Los Angeles and the press releases should be posted by noon today."

"Perfect."

I'm glad something's gone right and she's following through on her promise.

Whatever else she is, the woman always comes through for me in a pinch, and the dumpster fire performance of my last couple movies wasn't her fault.

She warned me about all the actors who bombed when they tried moving into producer roles.

I'd already checked out by then but hadn't fully moved on.

"I'm going to take some bacon and eggs over to the cabin, in case our guests are getting hungry."

"Great. Try to get some solid grub in the old man. He's improving by the day," I tell him.

Whether he ever admits it in this lifetime, I know Tobin enjoys the company around here.

So do I.

And if I have my way, I'll continue enjoying it, particularly my time with one sexy blonde wildcat.

~

GRACE IS DUMPING grain and pasture in the feed bin for the horses when I step into the barn, and the sight of her makes my jeans feel three sizes too small.

Hell.

I close the door, latch it, and walk over, meeting her as she walks out of the stall.

"Missed you when I woke up."

"Oh, I..." Her cheeks flush red and she averts her eyes. "We, um...we probably shouldn't have done that."

A flash of disappointment hits but dissolves just as fast when I realize she's only saying that shit because she thinks she should.

Casual hookups aren't her thing. She's more old-fashioned than damn near every girl I've ever bedded before, and honestly?

It gives my dick an appetite for everything but *doubt*.

“I woke up smiling, darlin’. Can’t remember the last time that happened. If you’re worried about any hard feelings here...they’re only below the belt. Promise.” I flash her a grin.

“But we’re pretending, remember? Aren’t you worried about complicating things even more?”

“I remember. And fuck complications.” I step closer, sliding my hands inside her open coat to grasp her around the waist. “Wish I could say I came out here to talk, but...Jess found a tracking device and a cut brake line on my truck.”

She gasps, her eyes wide, and she grabs my upper arms. “Ridge! They could have—”

“Kept me from having the best sex of my life?” I interrupt. “Yeah, tragic.”

“Will you be serious?” She rolls her eyes. “That’s bad news. Scary news.”

I pull her forward, firmly against me so she can feel how hard I’ll fight for her if any of those pricks show up where they shouldn’t.

“I know. I’ve got you. I’m not letting go.”

Smirking, I push my hips into hers, making sure she senses something else that’s hard and just as determined as my will.

“Stop it.” She’s trying not to smile. “I’m not falling for your games again. We need to focus on the bad guys.”

“We will.” I lean down, brushing a kiss on her temple. “And I recall the game being very, very mutual.”

She sucks in a sharp breath and releases it slowly.

“Fine. You win. Now can we—”

“Seems like the attraction’s pretty mutual, too,” I add. “As it should be, considering we’re engaged.”

“*Fake* engaged,” she quips, dropping her head against my chest. “You don’t hear me arguing, but we can’t just keep—”

“Why?” I interrupt. “Give me a good reason. We’re adults, we’re responsible, and we know full well what we’re doing.”

Lifting her head, she asks, “Oh? What *are* we doing? Besides ignoring thugs who were trying to set us up?”

“Fuck them. I said it’s under control.” Grabbing her ass, I press her harder against me. “All this talk when we could be doing something better.”

I grind out a sigh, pressing my forehead to hers, brushing my lips across her hot mouth like a kid with the forbidden candy.

“Ridge!” She slaps my shoulder, even while laughing. “Be serious.”

“Fine. I’m pulling together a backup with my crew. Faulk almost has his resources in place, and we’ll bring in Grady and Drake soon. The full force of the Dallas PD might not seem like much when it’s half a dozen deputies, but they’ll have our backs, and so will the Feds. Bet we’ve got more than a few agents just waiting for their chance to bust the Old Town Boys.”

She melts against me, relief already filling her. “You’d best not be playing.”

“No, Scout’s honor. I’ll tell you another secret—I’ve had a hard-on that could hit a home run since I woke up. Only one way to fix that. The same cure we had last night. What was it, *six* damn times?”

“Ridge!” She swats playfully at my arm but can’t deny it.

God, she’s good for my ego.

Then her eyes flutter and her body trembles slightly as she squeezes my shoulders, burying her face in the nook of my neck.

“Ridge, listen...”

“I am. You want it, Grace,” I whisper, grinding against her. “Just as bad as I do.”

She groans, pursing her lips until they're more like a thin, pale line rather than a decadent strawberry.

"That doesn't mean we should do it again," she whispers. "We should come to our senses. Pull back. Think about this."

"Darlin', I've done a whole lot of thinking ever since I woke up, and I've got one question for you." I slide my hands under her shirt, rubbing her back, loving the heat of her skin on my fingertips. "You don't want me inside you?" I kiss her cheek, slow and sultry as hell. "You don't want these hips trying to break you again? Faster and faster, until you come your brains out?"

"Yes," she groans. "I mean, no!"

I smile.

She's such a terrible liar it's adorable.

My cock jerks in my pants, dangerously encouraged.

"I think you mean yes," I growl, my forehead to hers, walking my fingers up the small of her back, her spine, until she shudders. "Tell me I'm not wrong."

She whimpers again. "Yes."

"Then we ought to do something about it. Now."

The look she gives me is all the answer I need.

Then those lips are on mine, sweeter than wine, begging for everything she can't bring herself to say.

One day, I'll mess her up so bad, the small-town prude burns right out of her.

I'll have her waking me up with her mouth, rewarding her dearly with hit-and-run flings when she least expects it. This woman makes me want to take her on a fuck-tour around the world, starting with this barn.

I love how honest she is, how genuine, though.

Finding the clasps on her bra, I work my fingers.

"You woke up horny, too, didn't you?"

“Maybe.” She works her hands under my coat and shirt. “That’s why I had to leave...before you woke up.”

Her scent was still in the sheets, and smelling it now, up close and personal, doubles the frantic desires I’ve been dealing with since Cornelius roared me awake.

“You should’ve stayed. Now we’ll have to give a classic roll in the hay a try.”

She laughs. “You’ve never had hay in your clothes, have you?”

“Nope,” I admit. “Today’s the day.”

“Well, I have. It feels like barbed wire when it’s stuffed inside a bra.”

I run my hands up her sides, find the hard nubs of her tits with my thumbs. The soft moan that falls out of her when I graze her nipples fucking guts me.

“We’ll make sure it doesn’t happen.”

She flashes me a skeptical look, shoving her hands under the waistband of my jeans.

Holding her as close as possible, I walk across the barn to the tack room, where I know there’s a chair.

It’ll do.

Hell, a pile of mud would do right now.

I’m about to lose my wad in my jeans if I don’t have her *now*.

I release her once we’re in the room and tear off my coat, tossing it aside. She removes hers, too.

We’re off to a frenzied race then, kicking off our boots and shedding our jeans and underwear.

Sitting down on the chair, I drink in this minx in all her naked glory, my cock up in full salute.

“Oh, wow.” Grinning, she steps closer. “I’ve never done it on a chair before.”

“You’ll love it.” I point at her shirt. “Take that off.”

“You have your shirt on, Ridge,” she says, grasping the hem of her blue sweatshirt and toying with her lip.

Fuck.

Just wait and *see* if I don’t take her over my knee if she keeps that shit up.

“Yeah, I don’t have any tits to play with,” I explain.

Laughing, she tugs off the shirt and lets her bra fall to the floor along with it.

“You want to play with my boobs that bad? Is that a promise?” Arching her back, she wiggles her shoulders, teasing me with those otherworldly tits right in front of me.

Goddamn, she’s beautiful.

Her body is perfection distilled down into a nymph I want to mark, every square inch of her. Skin like silk and a pussy like honey. My tongue rubs the roof of my mouth, hungry for her taste.

“Come find out,” I growl, reaching out with both hands to twirl the nubs of her nipples. “I’m also going to lick them and suck them and bite them while I see how wet you are. You’ll come. Then you’ll sit on my lap so I can drive my cock inside you and fuck you until you come even harder. Sound good?”

She lets out the sexiest whine I’ve ever heard, stepping between my knees.

“Can’t argue with that plan,” she whispers.

“Shame. I was hoping you’d fight me all the way to the first climax, darlin’.”

She trembles at my words.

Damn, do I love it.

I start out slow, pulling her close, sucking her nips against my teeth. I graze her with just the right roughness as she climbs on my lap.

It’s a brutal test I barely pass, avoiding fucking her then and there.

Her sweet cunt is already dripping on my thighs, on my balls, driving me out of my mind.

Then she grabs at my shoulders as her legs wobble.

I clamp down on one nipple, sucking, lashing my tongue across the tip, sliding my hand up her inner thigh.

Right to the sexiest folds on God's green earth, already sopping wet, hot, and perfect.

Grace moans again, digging her fingernails into my neck as I reach down, find her slit, and push two fingers in.

Right. Fucking. There.

Her walls tighten around my fingers instantly.

I find her clit with my thumb, snarling the whole time.

“Ridge.” She gasps, shivering. “This...this won't last long.”

Hell no, she won't.

Not if I have anything to say, and turns out, I have a fucking dissertation to write on every lithe inch of her.

I sweep my thumb across her clit several times, delaying her explosion so I can play with her longer, loving how responsive she gets.

This woman is my instrument and I want to hear her sing.

Moving to her other tit, I take her nipple hard while my fingers pump slowly, languidly, sensually.

It's getting to me as much as her.

My dick has never throbbed so hard in my life, sending a dense shock through my blood, demanding its pleasure.

Incredible. No other word fits what she does to me.

“Ridge.” She grasps my head, holding it against her breasts. “Please. I...I can't take—”

“You want me to make you come?” I release her tit only long enough to ask the question.

“God...please!”

Finding her clit, I pinch lightly, flick it, pressing it firmly into her soft flesh. Her slickness runs down my hand, and I fight not to lick it right off.

“Ridge!” she shouts. “Fuck me.”

I nearly explode on the spot, hearing her want, her need, getting her nasty.

Her body goes hard, stiff, then shudders.

I keep finger-fucking her harder, building her heat, her wetness, her insanity.

It’s so sexy it could kill.

I clench my jaw together to keep my dick under control. That’s a first for me.

I’m usually not this desperate, this fucking smitten.

It’s always been an act before.

Not with Grace Sellers.

With her, it’s real. It’s deep. It’s lethal.

She slumps slightly, pinching my shoulders, her legs twitching, gently kicking mine. “Did...did you bring condoms?”

“Of course,” I answer. “In the pocket of my jeans.”

The second I pull my hand away from between her legs, she drops to her knees, between mine, and grabs my pants. I lean back in the chair while she digs out the condom.

Have to fill my lungs just to maintain control over the pressure, the painful ache for my own release.

My blood turned to lava minutes ago.

My heart thumps in my ears like a war drum.

I reach for the package, but she shakes her head.

“I’ll put it on,” she says, a bright playfulness whirling in her eyes.

“Hurry,” I tell her, shifting in my seat, moving my legs apart so she has more room.

She grins as she opens the package and peels it apart with her teeth. Just like I did the first time we fucked. It's a sweet torture seeing the condom foil in her teeth.

“Grace,” I snarl, hating how easily she's reduced me to this starving beast.

My toes dig at the cold floor. I suck in air as she grasps the base of my cock with one hand.

Her hand glides up, all the way to the head of my dick. Then she thumbs the top, where a clear trickle of pre-come leaks out. Her hand slides back down then, and up, and—

“Enough! Grace, goddammit.” I can barely get her name out.

She pumps me a bit firmer. “Hmm? Did you need something, sweetie?”

Oh, fuck.

She didn't—did she?

“Put the condom on right fucking now,” I snarl, reaching to fist her hair.

She's smiling fit to kill, smearing my leak all over the bulging head of my dick again. “Change of plans,” she whispers.

“What?”

“I'll get to it, don't have a conniption fit. But first...”

Damn.

The instant it dawns on me I nearly leap off my seat as the heat of her mouth engulfs my cock.

I have to grab at the base of the chair to stay seated, sucking in air between my clenched teeth.

Fuck!

Her mouth is nirvana.

So hot, so syrupy sweet, I can't believe it belongs to this world.

“You murder me,” I manage to growl out. “Don’t you fucking get it?”

And of course she’s still smiling with her mouth full of me.

Of course.

Shit.

Releasing the tip of my cock with a smacking sound, she places several fiery kisses down my shaft, starting at the very tip.

“Hmm. If it’s anything like what you do to me, you should be enjoying your demise.” She goes down on me again, sucking me deep, pumping the base with her hand.

Fine, so I’m enjoying being killed.

Fucking-aye, do I love it.

I’ve never been pushed so far to the brink, edged to the point of total destruction.

I’m up for the challenge because I love how much she’s enjoying this.

Nothing quite like the moment when a man sees his naked angel become a hellion.

Her eyes glow like soft blue sapphires. She lifts those long lashes to look up at me.

My grip on the chair tightens as she gets serious, sucking and pumping, driving me right to the edge of my restraint.

The air heaves in and out of my lungs in hot rushes when she finally releases me.

“I think you enjoyed that,” she says.

My jaw stays locked tight.

“Condom. Now,” I say between clenched teeth.

She slides it on, evenly, securely, and so slowly my balls must be bluer than my eyes.

Then she stands, and one at a time, swings her legs around my hips.

My cock is so hard, so ready, it doesn't need any help to slip inside her.

My hands whip around to her ass, jerking her to me, a vicious sound ripping out of my throat.

We both gasp. My eyes roll back as my dick sinks inside her, straight to the hilt.

Paradise.

“Sweetheart, your pussy was made for my cock.”

No lie. It's too perfect.

She grips my shoulders with both hands and meets my thrusts, taking me in even deeper.

I hold her waist, keeping her pinned to me, letting us both bask in the glorious insanity rising with every stroke.

Grace leans forward and kisses me. “I almost came while sucking you.”

“I could tell,” I snarl, throwing my hips into hers so hard those tits shake just for me.

“I never knew sex could be like this.”

“Fun?” I ask, slowly moving my dick inside her tight heat, forcing a groan out of her.

Give it the fuck up.

“I meant so...so fulfilling,” she whispers, barely keeping her composure.

“Then you weren't doing it with the right man,” I whisper, taking her mouth before she's able to say anything else.

I feel the same way, brutally aware it's never been like this with any other woman, and I show her with my hips.

She leans back, using my shoulders to help with leverage, meeting my every upward thrust with a downward plunge.

Her tits bounce harder, brushing my chin, my cheeks.

It's fucking crazy. All of it. More than physical, all-consuming.

Mind, body, and soul wrapped up in a chick I've fake-engaged and decided to fuck like I truly plan on making my wife.

Where does the illusion end?

I still don't know, especially with the friction coming perfect, phenomenal, hot as sin.

I know I've reached my limit when the pressure in my seething balls heightens, like a dam breaking under a deluge.

At that exact moment, her nails dig into my shoulders, and I hear her hitch.

Her pussy squeezes me so hard my eyes ache.

"Ridge, now, please!" she whimpers. "*Coming!*"

Holy fucking shit.

The best orgasm I've ever had in my life hits right then.

The floodgate opens, coursing wild lightning through my system. I pour myself into her, wondering if I burn right through the condom, balls pumping over and over again.

She screams, clutches me, comes herself into this sultry mess that'll be burned into my brain until my dying day.

I know what that sounds like.

Ask me if I care.

We come together, so rampant, so off-the-hook, I forget what sex even means unless it involves this woman wrapped around me, drowning in pleasure, ruined the same way she's annihilated me.

And it goes on forever.

Until I'm so spent it's like I died and came back in waves of white-hot fire.

She's slumped against me, slick with sweat, breathing so hard she shakes.

"Holy hell," she mutters.

You're telling me, I think to myself, somehow moving my neck to kiss her forehead.

I draw in a deep breath and unclench my teeth, leaning back.

Kissing the top of her head, I laugh.

“Good game, woman. Can't wait for the rematch.”



I'M STILL THINKING about the hottest fuckery of my life while we're driving Jess' truck into Dallas.

After swapping vehicles, I'll be stopping at the drugstore. I have no clue how many condoms are left in the box in my bathroom, but the only acceptable answer is *not enough*.

Gravity defying sex aside, there's another weight on my chest. I turn when we're halfway there, waiting for her eyes to glance over.

“Grace, there's something I need to tell you.” Giving her hand a squeeze, I say, “It wasn't a suicide. My mother wasn't in her right mind when she did it.”

“What?”

I bite my jaw, furious at the memories flooding back.

I've never told anyone this, but I need to tell her.

Someone else needs to know besides Tobin O'Hare.

Maybe it'll help her feel protected and safe if we're equals in secrets.

“Huh? You mean she didn't—”

“Walk off the balcony?” I nod fiercely. “Yeah, she did, and there were drugs in her system. But she wasn't some depressed drug fiend by the end of her life. Someone set her up.”

“What?” Grace gasps. “You mean she was murdered?”

That's the way I look at it, anyway, even if the law doesn't agree.

The piece of shit who drove her off a balcony at a luxury resort, who caused her to snap her neck, might as well have pointed a loaded gun at her and pulled the trigger.

“Her career had its ups and downs. Her life did, too. Age is a major player in Hollywood, especially for an actress. This industry chews women up and spits them out. Some folks can handle it. They keep acting right up to the end, until they’re not being cast in lead roles reserved for younger, prettier starlets. Some have the pull to land roles that fit their age. Others just fade away gracefully.”

I sigh, knowing this is one fucked up conversation I don’t want to have.

Another part of me needs it.

“My mom wasn’t willing to go easy into that good night. She wouldn’t accept being cast as an older, side character. She had surgeries, plenty of them, trying to fight the inevitable creep of age...but she still wasn’t landing the parts she thought she deserved.” My neck muscles tense.

“You don’t have to tell me this if you’re not comfortable,” Grace says quietly while patting my arm. “But if you are...I’m here. I’m listening.”

“I want to.” For real. I want her to know the truth. “There was this guy...a studio executive. A real nasty scum-fuck. It was barely a secret he’d coerced more than one poor woman into his bed with the promise of rocketing their careers into the stratosphere. I don’t even know how my mother got mixed up with him, but she did. He swore he’d make her a star again for a price.”

She can figure out the rest.

Even after all of these years, I can’t stand picturing that hog of a man with my mom.

That rotting toad who was after a piece of the famous, beloved Judy Barnet to satisfy some demon part of his ego.

He wanted her money and her body.

I shake my head at the rage that starts foaming in my gut.

“It was a movie she was personally financing. They’d gone up to Lake Tahoe, this fancy ski lodge, to start filming.”

“Yeah, I read that’s where it happened,” she says quietly, her eyes glued to me.

“I’d read the script. She wasn’t going to be able to pull it off. The role was for a much younger woman, barely out of college. That freak knew it, too. He just needed the money, the financing, and *her*. He wanted his shit to get filmed with her backing and he also wanted...I think you know what the fuck else he was after.”

She closes her eyes for a long blink.

Can’t blame her for picturing the same horror I do every day of my life.

“Do you think he...did he push her?” Grace asks.

“Whether he physically did it or just gave her the drugs... same difference. She wasn’t in her right mind. Hell, maybe she even came to her senses and regretted everything.” I suck in a raw breath. “Of course, I couldn’t prove squat. He said she’d hurt herself, twisted her back on the ski lift. That’s why he got her the *prescription*. She’d taken too much and mixed it with wine. People had seen her in the restaurant that night. Drunk. Stoned. Whatever she’d been, she was stumbling all over the place, crashing into things. That’s why there were reports she’d fallen, that she’d jumped. Committed suicide due to the pain, the chronic depression she was in.”

“Ridge, I’m so sorry.” Her voice cracks.

I shrug. “Don’t bother. Not for me. Linus Hammond made the movie, started filming within days of Mom’s funeral with a new, younger actress. It was a minor hit. Not a blockbuster, but he made good money on it. Especially considering it hadn’t cost him anything.” I huff out a breath to finish the tale. “I ran into him not long after the movie debuted. We were in the men’s room at a large fundraiser for disaster relief after a tsunami in Indonesia. Told him I knew the truth. That I should sue him for every damn penny. He dared me. I flew off the chain, broke his nose in the bathroom, left him bleeding on the

floor. Hammond never pressed charges because he knew I would sue him for sure then...or kill him.”

I bite my tongue.

I could've killed him that night, beaten him to a pulp on the men's room floor, and been arrested.

It might've saved me the savage guilt of what came next. The last chapter of this sinister, fucked up tale I can't bring myself to say.

What would she think if she knew I planned a murder?

“Weird, I didn't see anything about that in those articles,” she says softly.

“You wouldn't. It was kept hush-hush, salvaging his pride,” I tell her, my eyes locked on the road, burning me from the inside out.

“What happened then? Where is he now? Still making movies?” she asks softly.

“I left Hollywood a few years later. Bought the ranch and decided to never look back. As for Hammond...he's dead. Someone shot him in his penthouse when he was already practically a vegetable. A father of one of the underage girls he'd coerced into sleeping with him to become a star.”

“Wow.” Grace lowers her eyes, swiping a hand over her face. “Maybe he deserved it?”

“Maybe,” I agree.

She's quiet for a moment, this frigid silence between us before she speaks again. “Is that why you're so willing to help us? Does this remind you of that?”

When I saw Jackknife Pete touch her that first night, it was definitely a trigger, but it's changed since then. It's become more than angry instinct.

And helping Grace can't fully rub away the blackness on my soul.

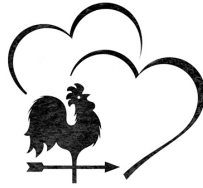
Not after what I did to that fuck, even if I can't say I regret it.

I shake my head, answering her question.

“No? Then why?” She’s looking at me like I hung the moon and the stars, even if she doesn’t understand why.

“Because I like you, Grace. And I like your old man. I’d like to believe everybody deserves a second chance, whatever their mistakes.”

NO DREAMS TOO SMALL (GRACE)



I sit quietly as Ridge signs the paperwork for the new pickup he's just purchased.

A royal-blue one, four-wheel drive, but not a dually.

Jess said because today is Saturday, his mechanic isn't in, and won't be able to have the brake lines replaced on the other one until early next week. He'd told Ridge that he could just keep his pickup as a loaner, but Ridge said no.

He'd just buy another one, a backup.

I'm floored by how easily he picks up a brand-new vehicle. Though I realize fifty grand must be like change under the sofa for a billionaire.

I don't even know if he'll keep it long term. He's clearly doing this to avoid getting Jess sucked in deeper.

My mind isn't focused on Ridge's new truck, or his shiny black Centurion credit card that I thought I'd only ever see in movies.

I'm stuck on everything he told me on the way to town. About his mother and that hideous man. And about how much him relaying all of that tells me about him.

His life has been complicated, yet despite his woes, he's grounded, so sure of himself.

Unlike me.

I've never been totally confident in anything, living on thin ice with a group of killers haunting me for my whole adult life.

“Do you use Alicia Mills for insurance?” Jess asks.

“I do,” Ridge says, handing over the papers he’d signed.

“I’ll let her know you bought a new truck, to add it to your insurance,” Jess says, glancing at me. “She’s my sister-in-law. I’ll be seeing her at my house for lunch real soon.” He glances at the clock.

I nod.

“Have you two had a bite yet?” he asks.

“No,” Ridge answers, taking my hand. “Or breakfast for that matter. We’re heading to the café now.”

“Come to my house instead.” Grinning, he continues. “Please? My wife was jealous that she wasn’t at the bar to see the show you put on. I’d earn more in brownie points by bringing you two home for lunch than I ever made in commission off selling you the new truck.”

Ridge laughs and glances at me.

I smile, nodding. I think I’m starting to see the benefits of small-town living.

Everyone treats you like you’re family, extended branches spiraling out of the same big tree.

“You sure we wouldn’t be imposing?” Ridge asks, tilting his head.

“Absolutely not. Amy is gonna be thrilled!” Jess stands. “Follow me. It’s only a few blocks.”

“It’s okay with you, isn’t it?” Ridge asks once we’re in his new truck.

I take a deep whiff of new car smell, basking in the fresh, pure scent.

“I’m cool with it if you are.”

“We don’t have to go if you’re worried it’ll—”

“It’s fine, Ridge. Seriously.” I smile, reaching over to thread my fingers through his.

This is all part of his grand plan.

Become part of the community ASAP so if Clay's men show up, we'll hear about it, and they'll have to hear about us being happily engaged. Ridge claims extra eyes and ears are nothing but an asset in this situation.

I'm trusting he's right.

Besides, from what I've gathered about what went down in Dallas between North Earhart Oil and its old rival, the people here have developed a hawkish sense for freaky, suspicious people.

If it hadn't been for Jess spotting those goons and speaking up...

I shudder to think how it might've turned out. Far less happy than our night actually did.

He may very well have saved our lives.



WE ARRIVE at the Berland home a few minutes later.

It's a cute pastel-blue two-story home that looks well taken care of, right down to the freshly painted porch and the little wooden raccoon statue giving a welcoming wave. Amy, Jess' wife, is a brunette with an infectious smile, and definitely in the hostess-with-the-mostest category.

So is Alicia Mills, her sister. Alicia's husband, Tyler, is there, too. A bearded man who I remember seeing at the bar last night.

I grin at Ridge when lunch consists of a heaping pan of tater tot hotdish, pasta salad, bread, and apple pie with vanilla ice cream and caramel drizzled on the top for dessert.

Growing up in Wisconsin, I'm no stranger to Midwestern fare and its carb overload, but I can't even remember the last time I had a good home-cooked meal.

"I would've stepped it up a notch if I knew we were having company," Amy says, eyeballing Ridge. "I mean, the famous kind."

“Lady, you did all right. Can’t say I miss the food back home that much outside the occasional California burrito craving.” Ridge winks at her and she almost dies.

“Smells amazing,” I say. “I love hotdish.”

“It grows on a man,” Ridge says. “I’ve had it at the diner a few times now.”

“Amy’s is ten times better,” Jess tells us, smiling as he takes a seat.

“I’m excited you could join us. Honestly, you seem so... normal. Uh, sorry!” Amy swallows loudly, her brown eyes sparkling. “I’ve just never met a real live actor before. Jess said somebody famous moved to Dallas, but he wouldn’t tell me who. When he came home last night and told me what happened at the bar, I nearly beat him to a pulp with the pillow!”

“Sure did,” Jess says, wrapping an arm around his wife. “And I didn’t call because you were having a girls’ night out, sipping wine and binge-watching that Queen Elizabeth show.”

“We could’ve watched that later if we knew!” Amy and Alicia both say at the same time.

Everyone laughs, then Amy explains, “Our son and daughter are at the in-laws’ house for the weekend. The new season just came out this week.” Looking at me, she asks, “So I hear you’re a fancy-schmancy interior designer? You must’ve worked on some jaw-dropping homes.”

“Oh, I just got started, actually. And I’m from Milwaukee, not L.A. It’s what I went to school for,” I say, nervously downplaying my skills. Definitely not wanting anyone to think I’m the savant Ridge made me sound like last night.

“I love this old house,” Amy says, glancing around her kitchen. “That’s one thing about small towns, everybody’s place is just a little unique, whether it’s a fifty-year-old ranch or a brand-new duplex.”

“I love variety, too,” I tell her, trying not to gush over piping hot bites of cheesy potato goodness. “The repurposing,

turning odds and ends into reusables or decorative items. It gives a place character.”

“Me, too, but I’m terrible at it.” Amy points at the kitchen through the open archway separating the dining room. “See that old desk? I’d love to make that spot into a real coffee bar.”

There’s a drip machine and cups sitting on it. As usual, I can instantly visualize something grander.

A rustic touch and a few additions like new cups, a grinder, and a French Press could make it come alive without much work.

“It’s a cute spot,” I tell her. “Tons of potential.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “It’s been like that for a year. I’ve tried, but nothing works.”

“She also has a tailgate sitting on the back porch that she wants to turn into a bench, and a steering wheel and hub caps, and—”

“Shhh,” Amy tells Jess teasingly, her eyes wide as she presses a finger to her lips. “You’re making me sound like a junk collector, honey.”

“Then you’re talking to the right person,” Ridge says, nodding toward me. “Grace turns junk into gold. I’ve seen what she does with a few random boxes of farm stuff from storage.”

I smile politely at him, but my mind is still on the coffee bar.

Oof.

That’s what happens when I get a vision. It won’t go away until I do something about it.

“What kind of tailgate?” I ask Amy.

“Oh, it’s an old one off my dad’s old pickup. Same vehicle I learned to drive a gazillion years ago. So did Alicia here. When Dad was parting it out, I took the tailgate, steering wheel, and hubcaps. Figured I’d make a little memory out of them someday.”

“You and me both! I got the license plates, the hood, and the front grill,” Alicia chimes in with a cheery smile. “Sisters to the end.”

More friendly, easy laughter, and the conversation rolls along as we eat, Ridge already reaching for seconds. But even as I listen, my eyes keep glancing back toward that old desk.

When the meal is over and I’m so full I might need Ridge to carry me home, Jess asks him if he has time for a quick beer, saying the dealership is only open until noon on Saturdays.

Ridge looks at me.

“Sure, we’re in no hurry to get back,” I say. “I’ll help with the dishes.”

“No, you won’t.” Amy gives me a dead-serious look. “Company doesn’t lift a finger in this house.”

“Company you just fed,” I remind her. “Where I come from, it’s only fair to pitch in. Please, it’s the least I can do, and honestly? I’d love a closer look at your coffee bar.”

Amy opens her mouth, ready to protest again, but then just smiles.

The guys head for the garage, and it takes us no time to clear the table and load the dishwasher. Then we’re both gliding over to that desk like bees on honey.

It’s a handsome old piece, solid oak with two narrow cupboards, all painted white.

Hanging above it between the cupboards, there’s a cute hand-painted sign on the wall that says *I like my sugar with a splash of coffee*.

“Could I see the tailgate, too?” I ask.

“Sure!” Amy waves, leading me along. “It’s in the laundry room, leaning against the wall so it doesn’t get dirty. It took hours to scrub it clean when I saved it from Dad.”

The moment I see the old, faded red tailgate, my heart races with excitement. It’s too perfect. “Have you thought

about using it for your coffee bar?”

“Can’t say I have. How?”

“Can we carry it in there? I’ll show you,” I say, already reaching for it.

Amy grabs the other end and we haul it into the kitchen, clear off the desk and wipe it down, then lift the tailgate onto the top of the desk. It hangs over a small amount on the edges but looks solid enough.

“Hmm. Ya know, I think I like it,” she tells me after studying it for a moment.

“It’s special,” Alicia says, looking over it from behind us. “Never would’ve thought to use something like that in the kitchen, but I’m starting to see it...”

Good because now that I’m on a roll, we’re just getting started.

“You ladies like wine, right? How about a coffee *and* wine bar? Some homes in Milwaukee mix and match. It’s all the rage right now.” I glance at the small wine rack on top of the fridge.

“My favorites!” Amy chirps. “Tell me more.”

“Do you have a piece of paper?” I ask.

She pulls open a drawer on the desk, then hands me a notebook and pen.

I rapid-fire sketch out the desk with the tailgate on top of it and the two cupboards. Then, as I’m drawing, I poke a finger at each part and start to explain.

“If you remove the fronts of the drawers, we can go online and order the stuff for a mini barn door. Instead of doors on the cupboards, use a couple floor mats from Jess’ dealership cut to fit, then, up here, between the cupboards, we can paint the wall with chalkboard paint. They have some really cute chalk pens in florescent colors. We could write ‘How To Tell Time.’”

I sketch that in.

“On this cupboard with the coffee, you can get some black vinyl stickers and put AM. On this one, do PM. Under the AM one, you can store your coffee maker and supplies, maybe throw in a good grinder and a French press. Under PM, install the wine rack that’s on top of the fridge. Then it’s just a few hangers going up on the undersides of the cupboards to hang cups on one side and wine glasses on the other.”

“Oh my God, is there anything you didn’t think of?” Amy squeals, holding up her fists and giving them a shake. “And the floor mats from the dealership, Jess will even approve!”

“It’s perfect,” Alicia agrees. “When can you start on my place?”

She slaps my shoulder and I grin.

“I’ll check my schedule!” Another thought strikes me then. “And where are the hubcaps, Amy?”

“I’ll go grab them,” she says, heading back to the laundry room off the kitchen.

“I’m serious about a paying gig,” Alicia says. “I mean, I know you’re probably not that hard up for money, but you’re a ninja, lady. I’d love to see what you can do, if it won’t break the bank.”

“It won’t.” I give her a grateful smile. “I’d love all the practice I can get. I’m still working on that black belt. I just...I really love making old stuff functional again. Especially when it means something like this tailgate.”

I pat the big red metal slab.

“I only have two!” Amy calls, returning with two baby moon hubcaps with faded red writing, plus an old steering wheel.

“You just need one,” I say happily. “Again, go online and order a clock kit. Drill a hole in the center, set the clock inside, and hang it up between the cupboards. Boom, there’s your wine and coffee jam.”

“Adorable!” Amy slips a hand over her mouth and giggles. “Oh, what about the steering wheel?”

It, too, is a cool old all-metal wheel.

“Well...you could mount it under the cupboard and get some S-hooks to hang the coffee cups off of. Or you could use it as a divider. Put it on top of a metal tray whenever you want something interesting to show your guests.”

“Love, love, love it,” she muses again. “You’re *sure* you didn’t learn this stuff in California?”

“Nope. All Wisconsin, born and raised. Give me a little time to play around with that last idea,” I say, flipping the wheel in different directions. “Maybe something else will come to me.”

Amy hugs me. And when I say hug, I mean *Hug* with a capital H.

Apparently, Dallas people mean it when they express their gratitude.

Sure, it’s a little harder to breathe, but I’m not complaining.

It’s rare to encounter folks who are this open and real with their emotions.

“I’ll order everything this afternoon and call you to come see it when it’s done!” Amy tells me, giddy at the thought.

“Got any ideas for an old, faded red truck hood?” Alicia says.

I shrug. “Without seeing it, I’m just throwing out ideas, but how about a headboard?”

Alicia’s eyes grow wide. “Oh, my God! My son would love that, too. I promised we’d get rid of the teddy bears in his room. He’s nine now, and far too old for them.”

“Make him a clock, too, sis,” Amy says. “I only need one hub cap.”

“For sure. Let’s see how things will look,” I say, picking up the coffee maker we’d moved earlier.

We spend roughly the next hour setting things in place and laughing, talking about other areas in the house Amy wants to

change.

“Can I get your number, Grace?” Amy asks at the end. “I won’t bombard you, but I might have questions when I get everything ordered and start working on things.”

“Me, too?” Alicia asks.

“No problem.” I can’t believe how happy I am right now.

Could I ever make this work?

If Ridge helps me deal with Clay, I get Dad settled, and I line up enough work in this area through word of mouth... could I actually make a life here?

The thought of having another place to call home hasn’t entered my head since we left the farm.

But now, I wonder...

The guys return as we’re swapping numbers. Amy instantly pulls Jess over to the drawing and starts explaining everything to him.

“Whoa,” Jess muses, slowly glancing my way. “You hit the nail on the head with this. My wife would be dead to the world without coffee and wine.”

Amy elbows him playfully and they both laugh.

With the Berlands and Mills chattering away excitedly, Ridge grabs my hand and gives it a firm squeeze.

The look he gives me says it all.

His proud blue eyes instantly catapult me to cloud nine.



WE LEAVE A SHORT TIME LATER.

As we’re driving away from the house, he says, “You really enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, it’s been a long time.”

“You just decorated my house and did a damn fine job,” he tells me.

I laugh. “I meant hanging out with people. Women. I didn’t realize how much I’d missed that.”

“You didn’t have lady friends back home to visit?”

My eyes sink to the road. He doesn’t realize how hard it was to keep friends. Not when Dad and his situation with Clay has eaten so much of my life since college.

“I knew people, sure, had a few friends, but the way things were...” I swallow the harsh lump building in my throat.

It really wasn’t safe for anyone to get close for long. Especially the last year, living on pins and needles.

“No, I never got to visit with them much,” I say glumly.

“Won’t happen here. You made two new friends today, woman,” he says, flashing me a million-dollar grin.

I smile back because I can’t resist, even knowing friends aren’t really something I can have here, either. Hard to plan a life when there’s no telling where we’ll wind up, after all of this is said and done.

“I still don’t quite follow the plan, Ridge. Not everything.”

“My plan right now is to make that stop at the drug store,” he tells me.

I try my best not to flush and fail miserably.

Of course he’s after those condoms.

My cheeks burn, my heart races, and common sense tells me that I really shouldn’t keep having sex with him. Even if every screaming bit of me wants to.

“I meant the plan with Clay...” I look at him carefully. “Calling his bluff. We’ve done that. We’ve got people with their eyes peeled, so now what?”

“Bebe’s working on gauging the reaction to the press releases confirming our engagement, which will piss him off. He’ll be hard-pressed to try anything too major with the town spotlight glaring, eyes out everywhere for those media jackals I warned them about. Chances are, this shit just makes him angrier.”

“Angrier?” Ice runs through my blood. “Why are we trying to piss him off again?”

“Assholes like him hate backing down from a fight. Especially if he’s been thwarted before, blocked from snatching what he thinks he’s entitled to. Clay won’t give up easy. Eventually, he’ll make his way here to take care of business himself. We’ll be ready.”

What he said could be true.

Clay *will* show up when his men don’t deliver what he wants.

Namely, me.

“I mean...a few cameras and townspeople on the lookout for bad behavior won’t keep him away.” I scratch my head, fighting the sensation of ants crawling all over me when I picture that maniac coming here. “I know you mentioned friends helping you go after him, but—”

“But nothing. Just like I told Nelson, my guys are good, and so am I. Unless you want to hear war stories, where I tell you about the time Faulk and I took down fifty guys with spoiled MREs...let’s save the details for later. Okay, darlin’?”

He parks the truck in front of the drugstore.

We lock eyes. Whatever else this thing is between us, I trust him. I have to.

Gripping his hand, I nod firmly.

“Want to come inside or wait here?” he asks.

“I’ll wait. Doors locked, of course.”

He lifts an eyebrow and smiles as he opens his door. “Be right back.”

A thrill zips through me and I shake my head.

This time at myself.

I’m hopeless, and I push those thoughts aside as I question what, besides cameras, Ridge has lined up. I can’t imagine what he’s referring to with his buddies, but I try to imagine it’s

enough to stop Clay and save us from the black depths we've fallen into.

When Ridge returns, I try not to think about what's in the bag he stows in the back seat, what it means for us tonight.

"How much do you know about the Old Town Boys?" he whispers, starting the engine.

He checks the screen on the console, focused on backing up. I can't help but admire how his profile looks as handsome as the rest of him.

No wonder he was such a star. All chiseled lines, features that are flawless, yet human. He has the kind of looks people fret over. Either because they're as smitten as I am, or they're jealous they don't have it.

He glances my way, and I suddenly remember his question.

"Old Town Boys? I've barely heard of them. Dad hardly ever said the name."

"You know it's what Clay Grendal calls his group of *men*." He glances at me darkly. "You know they're dangerous. What I'm asking is, do you know what they do?"

My skin crawls, a shiver of pure dread turning my stomach. "Dad never told me much, and to be honest, I never wanted to know more than I had to. I guess I just...I always thought if I didn't know, it wasn't fully real. Or maybe I could pretend it wasn't as bad as it really is. Stupid, I know. But part of me never wanted to believe Dad was part of the mob."

"Not the mob," he says. "An insider crime syndicate based in your own backyard. They've been operating for years, a couple decades, barely ever showing up on anyone's radar."

"What's the difference?" I ask, wrinkling my nose. "A gangster thug by any definition is still bad."

"Not my point." He glances my way again, those eyes flashing with energy. "Who protects *them*, Grace?"

Not following, I shake my head. "What do you mean?"

“Clay Grendal’s uncle is a former Congressman. Runs a huge lobbying firm in D.C. now. His cousin is a Milwaukee police lieutenant. Narcotics division.”

“He’s a drug runner?”

“Grendal isn’t running the whole show. He’s just the biggest gear in the machine, the overseer of a major operation based out of Milwaukee. His family keeps his shit under the radar and collects their cut.”

Jesus.

I always felt like something bigger was going on, but never would’ve guessed it was this. Goosebumps pepper my arms as my mind races. “That’s why Dad could never go to the police...”

I run a hand through my hair, trying to wrap my head around how deep this goes.

“How do you know all this?”

“Faulkner helped me dig it up. I’ve had him checking into it, and he’s gone a hundred feet down. On the outside, Grendal seems like an upstanding citizen. An angel investor who funnels money into several Milwaukee auto shops, food places, and other small businesses. He even sits on the coalition to address the opioid crisis in Milwaukee.”

“Holy crap...that *animal*?” I want to vomit. “All those connections, friends in high places...it must be how he’s laundering his dirty money.”

I’ve seen enough crime shows to know that’s key to any successful black-market business.

“Damn right.”

I wish I could thank him for the information, but it’s more like I’ve been whacked on the head with a brick.

Sure, I always knew Clay was evil and powerful, but...

I never imagined it went to this level.

Never wanted to believe my father was a part of something so sinister.

“Does Dad know about all of this?” I ask, holding my breath, dreading the answer.

“Haven’t asked him yet, considering his recovery and all, but I believe he knows most of it.” Ridge looks at me. “He never told you?”

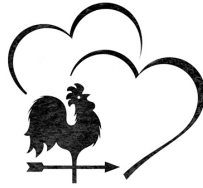
“Never.” I shake my head, feeling this heatwave pulsing through me, pushing the fear aside.

I’m not just scared for my life anymore.

Now?

I’m pissed.

NO COLD FEET (RIDGE)



I close Faulk's latest email attachments and lean back in my chair.

Had I known how deep, dark, and dangerous Grace and Nelson's situation was when I first met them, would I have gotten involved? There was no way I could've known. Grace doesn't even know everything. Still doesn't.

My answer hasn't changed over the past few days we've been lying low, time passing by the melting snow under a sudden warmth with a whiff of spring.

Fuck yes, I would've gotten involved.

It's becoming harder by the hour to imagine my life without this chapter, and without this woman.

Of course it's insane.

Of course I know how it sounds.

Of course I might be absolutely goddamn punch-drunk on the hottest wall-climbing sex of my life.

And, yeah, of course it's so reckless I'll probably earn a lifetime of dirty looks from Tobin if he ever figures out what's brewing in my head.

I don't care.

Right now, I'm fixing to shred Grendal and his henchmen with my bare hands to give Grace a second chance—one where she stays in Dallas, if that's what she decides.

Huffing out a breath, I stand, then walk out of my office.

Our conversation from the drive home the other day sticks in my head, how little she knew about everything I told her. I still don't know everything I need to, and it's high time I do.

Grace went over to see her father this morning, and as far as I know, she's still there.

I don't want to set Nelson's health back, but I need to know more, so I can pull Faulk together with the rest of the guys. Get a solid plan in place. End this fuckery once and for all.

I've told Grace and Nelson that I already have a plan.

I haven't lied, I have contingencies for defending the ranch.

Still, they're a far cry from a real tactical blueprint involving the right crew when there's so little to go on.

Not yet.

Grace is sitting in the bedroom, talking with her dad when I enter the cabin.

"How's he doing this afternoon?" I ask Jackie.

"Considering how much he fussed over lunch, I'd say pretty well. He's making a wonderful recovery, but, as I have to keep reminding him...Nelson still has a ways to go. He needs to take it easy so there aren't any setbacks."

I've never really wondered before, but ask, "Are you a nurse at the hospital when you aren't doing this home care thing?"

"No. I only do these jobs to keep my license active and save up for vacations. I retired a few years ago so I could take care of my grandson when my daughter-in-law—well, *former* daughter-in-law—ran off to become a model." She shakes her head. "That didn't work out too well. However, my son did find himself a lovely new woman and married her. My grandson is now in school, so they don't need me as much as they used to." Smiling, she continues. "I live with them. That's why I was ready to rock and roll, as long as you need me."

“Glad it’s working for you.” There’s another reason why I’m damn glad she’s here, besides taking care of Nelson. Jackie’s presence moved Grace into the house. “What do you think, then? Maybe two, three more weeks before he’s able to get around freely again?” I ask.

“That was Dr. Abrams’ assessment when she checked in on him last night. I agree with her; Nelson should be doing very well by then.” She covers the side of her face closest to Nelson’s room and leans in, whispering, “Don’t let him off the leash too soon if you can help it, Ridge. He’s a grumpy old man, and he’s already making big plans for Montana, dreaming about fishing trips.”

I smile. “Will do, Jackie. Let’s plan on you sticking around a little while longer.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean he’d even need me that long,” she says. “Not every single day, I mean.”

“Are you needed elsewhere?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind staying, but...I don’t want you thinking I was trying to stretch out this job for money. I know who you are, I heard all the fuss in town about your big wedding plans. Even if your bank account looks nice and plump, you’ve got enough on your plate. No need to worry about an old nurse bilking you out of a few dollars. He won’t need a babysitter for three more full weeks, I assure you.”

“Jackie...”

I’m actually at a loss for words. I’m genuinely shocked nobody’s *tried* to take advantage of me even once since landing in North Dakota.

Hell, it was a near monthly occurrence back in L.A.

Tobin spent a few hours every week sorting my mail to filter out the obvious grifters and investment inquiries from half-baked entrepreneurs down in Silicon Valley, plus outright scammers.

When you’re rich, everybody wants a piece of you.

Except for in little Dallas, apparently.

“But you won’t mind staying to help keep Nelson in line?” I ask, raising a brow. “I’ve got a bit of a situation with Grace, some unruly guests. Tobin and I will do our damndest to make sure he doesn’t try to leave Dallas again, but somehow, I think having you around might help keep him settled for a few more weeks. With pay, of course, double what you’re making now.”

She opens her mouth to protest, but I sharpen my look. My acting powers are still a little like a magician’s trick—a soft change in tone, a certain tilt of the head, a bossy eye goes a long way in the art of persuasion.

“Good, then it’s settled,” I tell her, breaking into a massive grin. “I’ll tell Nelson the good news.”

Her green eyes twinkle. “Thank you for that and the bonus pay, Ridge.”

I give her a nod and walk over, knocking on the bedroom door.

“Come in,” Grace calls softly from inside.

Opening the door, I ask Nelson, “How you feeling today?”

He glances at Grace. “Good.”

There’s worry on Grace’s face, letting me know what they’ve been discussing.

“Tobin’s making a list to go shopping,” I tell Grace. “He’s wondering if you need anything over here.”

She stands up.

“Great timing. I’ll ask Jackie and let him know.” On her way to the door, she pats Nelson’s leg. “I’ll see you later, Dad.”

Nelson waves her off, but his eyes follow her. I recognize the longing, the regret that’s reflected in them. He looks old and frail now, but that’s the pneumonia and age to some extent.

There’s no doubt he was once a strong, able-bodied man like me whose highest focus was taking care of his family. It

poisons his heart to know the trouble he's caused.

I close the door and sit down in the empty chair next to him.

"You asked her about The Old Town Boys?" His eyes remain on the door. "I thought—"

"I asked because I've got next to nothing on the logistics, even with my FBI-trained buddy doing research. Turns out, Grendal has friends in high places, and they've done a shockingly good job of doctoring police reports. They're practically a big fat question mark in FBI crime catalogs." I lean back, resting one ankle on my opposite knee. "And Grace deserves to know, Nelson. If our plan's going to work, we're cluing her in on everything."

He nods, then shakes his head with a sigh. "I suppose it's only right. I hardly ever gave her details, as few as I could."

"I'm sure you did. You thought you were protecting your daughter."

The air he sucks in sounds broken.

He blinks several times. "I have my regrets. Plenty of 'em. But I'll never regret not letting Clay Grendal get his hands on my Grace. He'll have to kill me first."

Anger roils my gut.

"What do you mean? I thought this was about money, witnesses, the fact that you're both loose ends in an operation he needs to keep quiet?"

"Loose ends. Right. That's what he wants so bad, Ridge. Not just me. *Her*." The words leave his mouth like a dry rattle. "He...he thinks I've told her everything. But I haven't."

"What haven't you told her, Nelson?" My hands form fists I hide under the chair.

He shoots me a quick glance before bowing his head. "I was working at the railyards, loading and unloading trains, when a cable broke and wrapped around my leg. They said not to worry, that I had insurance, workman's comp. I was out of

work for six months. Workman's comp paid for the surgeries, but nothing more. My wife, Eleanor..."

I wait for him to catch his breath as he closes his eyes.

"God rest her soul." Opening his eyes, he shakes his head. "Grace looks so much like her ma. Grace was little, barely more than a baby, and Eleanor worked, took as many shifts at the laundromat as she could, but the bills piled up. By the time I went back to work, we were three months behind on our rent and borrowed all we could. We were neck-deep in debt, and it went on for years, barely scrimping by. I lived like a shadow of a man, never able to give his wife, his family, what they truly wanted..."

His pain is real.

My heart swells with empathy, even if it's abstract to me.

I've never lived without, not counting my time in the service. Not the way he's describing. But I knew plenty of guys in the Army who have.

"This new guy on our crew started telling me that he'd set up a deal for making some money on the side." He rubs a hand through his grey hair. "He warned me it was illegal, yet I listened. Then I did more than just listen. I agreed to help him so he'd cut me in. After the yard shut down for the night, I'd stay, let in a truck or two. We'd load up the goods, mark the railcar so the people on the other end could push it out before the manifests were checked, then lock up and leave. I knew it was drugs, pills and powders and God knows what else. Once a week, the driver would give me an envelope for the last delivery stuffed with cash."

He looks at me, sorrow weighing heavy in his eyes.

"I told myself I was only gonna do it until we were caught up on our bills and paid off our loans. Then I said until we bought a new car. Then until Eleanor got a new job, her farm, and then..." With another rolling sigh, he lifts up the glass of water on the table and takes a drink. "There was always another reason."

"That how you bought your place and the horses?" I ask.

“Eventually, yes, but before then...there was a train derailment, not far outside of Milwaukee. The drugs were found when the Feds sent guys to investigate. I thought I was gonna get busted, locked up for sure. But this young guy shows up. Clay. He was in his late twenties back then. Told me he had connections that could make sure those drugs disappeared, were forgotten about, but I’d have to step up my game. Bigger shipments. More cargo. It was all going to the West Coast, and those were my trains, so I agreed. I did everything his men asked for several years and the payments got bigger. Never saw him again until I had to quit.”

“Quit the railroad?” I ask, putting it all together in my head.

“That, too. Everything was going digital, automated, even the gates. I couldn’t stay late, couldn’t let trucks in and out with the sensors and cameras improving. All the cargo was being coded, too, tracked by computers and weight. Too much risk. The money I made hadn’t made me rich. It was just always enough to make us want more. We still lived in the same apartment, but we managed to save enough for a down payment on the farm. Grace was still young and Eleanor wanted to get her out of the city. So did I. Our neighborhood was getting rougher by the day. I asked the truck driver to send a message to the boss. I didn’t even know that was Clay for sure. I’d only seen him that one time and figured he might be some kind of shady lawyer helping out the Boys or something.”

Fuck, did this guy get in over his head.

I can’t stop thinking about it.

Nelson stares off into space, and I wait a few seconds before asking, “What happened then? Tell me the rest.”

“Clay came to our apartment. I’d be lying if I said he didn’t scare me. But I didn’t know they knew as much about me as they did. Stupid, I know, but I just wasn’t thinking deep into how all this worked. He said he appreciated all I’d done for them and his family was mine—Old Town Boys for life. My damn heart sank. He gave me a duffel bag full of cash.

Said there'd always be more if I needed it, all I had to do was let him know. Eleanor didn't want me to take the money, but I was afraid not to."

I say nothing until he looks up, those pale eyes of his like phantoms.

"Now you know. I was a fool and a coward," he whispers.

Not quite.

Grendal had him over a barrel and wanted to keep him there.

"You still took their money? That last big payment?"

He nods. "I had to. The message was clear to me. It was take it or else..." He shrugs. "He was buying my silence. If I didn't agree, he'd do it another way. Permanently. And it wouldn't just be me...he made sure he waited until Eleanor and Grace were in the room. The money was enough to buy the farm outright, fix it up, get pumpkins planted, buy the horses."

His gaze goes wistful for a second, like he's seeing the life he always wanted.

"I thought maybe it was all over. Maybe we'd heard the last of them. Gracie graduated, top of her class, and I had the money to pay her tuition. I was so proud. So was her mother. Eleanor got sick while Grace was wrapping up her schooling. Cancer. We didn't tell Grace until she graduated. Eleanor fought it the whole time, but the crap kept spreading. Insurance maxed out. Wouldn't pay for more, but she was still eaten up with cancer and forced into an early retirement. I used up our reserves taking her to the best doctor I could buy, borrowed all I could, but...goddammit, it wasn't enough."

His hands are shaking now.

The horror of his situation makes my guts churn.

Leaning over, I lay a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, Nelson. You tried to do right. For you, your wife, for Grace. Nothing's completely black and white in hard times."

“No, it was crystal clear,” he says. “I don’t know how Clay found out about our situation, but he did. He offered me more money. Free and clear of interest for services rendered. I hadn’t heard from him for years, so I believed what he said. I paid off the medical bills, paid off the equity loans against the farm, and Grace and I went on after Eleanor died. Then the troubles started. Vandalism, fires, crops destroyed. I reported it, but the cops acted like I’d done it on purpose. So did insurance. About a year ago, Clay shows up. Said I’d missed payments on that last big loan he’d so generously offered. I apologized, promised I’d start making them right away. And I did, as much as I could. He bled us fucking dry.”

“And it wasn’t enough,” I say after he’s quiet a long time, lost in his own head again.

“No.” He turns, stares at me with sad, hopeless eyes. “He wanted Grace, too. I *saw* the way he looked at her.”

His lips peel back, hot rage coming alive in his eyes.

Shit.

I’m not far behind him in the hellfire and brimstone department. Imagining the demon who’s been torturing them for years getting his hands on her gives me the urge to hire a whole hit team and end this now.

“I swore to him Grace didn’t know anything about his gig. I barely ever said the name Old Town Boys. She didn’t know who he really was, but he said he couldn’t take that chance. He needed to talk to her.” His jaw tightens. “He...he offered to give her a better life than what she had with me.”

He’s sick at the memory.

Pure revulsion shows on his face.

So does the blame for what he’d put his daughter through, the horror. Because Nelson knows exactly what men like Clay Glendal do to women when they’re through with them.

After they get what they want.

I do, too, no thanks to Linus Hammond.

They dispose of them, drug them, and push them off balconies.

I shove my hands together on my lap, careful not to let him see them twitch. It takes every morsel of discipline I've got to control my short fuse, this urge to start beating holes in the wall.

"When did this happen?" I ask through clenched teeth.

"A few years ago. The day I was shot. He would've killed me that day, but just wounded me instead. A neighbor driving by heard the shots and slowed down at the edge of our driveway. Clay saw the guy coming and left. I hid in the barn until the neighbor disappeared, hobbled in the house, then Grace got home and forced me to the hospital. They kept me there overnight. When I got home, I started selling whatever we had left, gave it to his goons whenever they'd show up. Usually it was Jackknife Pete playing collector. The last thing I left them was the title to the farm..." His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows thickly. "Some escape. This is as far as we made it."

"He's not going to get to Grace here," I say, anger boiling over inside me. "I guarantee it, Nelson. You're both in good hands."

"If you can't stop him...it's gonna be real ugly. Clay warned me not to go anywhere. Not to the police. He has connections and I'll be the one serving time for drug trafficking. Hell, maybe I deserve to die in jail—"

"Bullshit. That's not going to happen," I snap.

"They ransacked our house a couple months ago." His voice is soft. Sorrowful. "They...they broke Eleanor's urn. Spread her ashes all over." A tear slips out the corner of his eye. "Grace had to clean that up. Her own mother's ashes."

I'm fucking speechless.

And now I get why she reacted the way she did the first day she flipped over my mom's memorial.

My throat burns at the agony this asshole caused.

I'm going to need Faulk, Grady, Tobin, somebody to help me cool off before I do something wild.

"He's not going to win, Nelson," I manage to grind out. "Not this fucking time. Not ever again."

~

GRACE ISN'T in the cabin when I leave Nelson's room, but as I step outside, I see her through the window in the sunroom.

She's been working on some of the other old—*antique*—junk she'd found in storage with Tobin's help.

I want to go to her, hold her, tell her that madman will have to get through me if he ever wants a piece of her.

I'm a giant safety net, her shield, her rock.

Only thing that riles my nerves is whether or not I'm good enough, knowing I fucking have to be.

So I head for the front of the house and walk straight into my office, hating the fact that I'm the best she's got.

Who the fuck am I to be her protector, really?

Money, fame, and military experience aside, I've never finished anything.

I quit acting as a kid because I hated it, so I said I wanted to go to school.

I almost quit school because it bored me, so I went through the motions with Tobin's help and then right back to acting.

Only to quit again because I *still* hated it and went into the Army. I blamed my decision to discharge on my mother and a random injury, but bottom line?

I was the one who chose to quit that, too.

Nobody else.

Uncle Sam held me more accountable than I'd ever been in my life.

I went back to acting and produced hit after hit until Mom's death and the trouble with Hammond started.

Then I tried producing a couple films, mangled it, quit again, left L.A. for Dallas, and truth be told...that night at the Purple Bobcat, I was considering giving this up. Moving somewhere else because I was sick of Old Man Winter.

Boredom and crisis have been the only two constants in my life.

Now? I'm done with all that.

Now, I can't fathom ever being bored of Grace Sellers.

Now, it's time to make a stand.

That thought hangs heavy in my mind as I bring up my email and fire off a message to Faulk. He couldn't find an obvious link between Nelson and Grendal himself. Maybe now, with the railyard connection and a better idea of their logistics, we'll have enough meat to build a solid plan.

Faulk can bring in the Feds, and I've already got the police at my back with Drake and Sheriff Wallace.

Grady, he's a natural brawler, extra muscle, and did time in the service like the rest of us.

I'm still rolling it around in my head when I sense someone behind me. Smirking, I turn, armed with another quip about putting a goddamn bell on his neck one of these days.

Only, the look on Tobin's face stops me in my tracks.

"What?" I snap. "What's wrong?"

"Forgive me. I couldn't help but notice how hard you've been working lately, desperately searching for answers, a way to take down this gang responsible for so much misery." He steps into my office, adjusting the perfectly starched cuffs of his shirt, his eyes flashing as he closes the door. "Ridge... perhaps the answer was always right in front of you."

"What're you getting at?" I wonder, though deep down, I already think I know.

He can't mean...

"Why not give Clay Grendal the same treatment Linus Hammond enjoyed?"

Fuck, there it is.

His eyes are like green torches, burning me alive, the very same eyes that begged me not to go that night and deliver that monster to death's door.

“You're serious?” I snort, shaking my head. “Am I dreaming? Hearing this shit...from you of all people?”

“It was a different time,” he snaps. “You know it's in my nature to always prefer the lawful option. Order over chaos. However, I never told you, after it was said and done with that wretched man...you were right, Ridge. I was wrong. There wasn't another way. No court in the world would convict him. I was a fool to try and stop you from the only justice anyone could've given Judy Barnet.”

I bolt up, step across the room, lay my hands on his shoulders.

It's a hell of a thing to see a man as mild mannered as Tobin admit something like this.

“You're sure? Tobin, I...”

I can't fucking speak.

He nods firmly. “If you'd like, I believe I can track down more of the noxious agent you used in Hammond's drink. I assume that's where you placed it, anyway, knowing the affinity he had for his wines...”

“Yeah,” I growl, pinching my teeth. “How could I forget?”

I hate remembering a fucking thing about that night, but it all comes flying back.

It wasn't long after I chewed him out and roughed him up at the charity fundraiser. I found him at this upscale bar, muscled my way in, and got him alone.

I played the perfect gentleman. Apologized for being so rash, so upset about my mother's death at that ski lodge...for ever accusing him of what he did.

He was Mr. Fucking Congeniality.

Hammond pushed me to share a bottle of nine-thousand-dollar top-shelf Bordeaux. I even let the pig toast to Judy Barnet. We clinked glasses.

The second his back was turned, by the third glass, I slipped it into his drink.

The dose was slow-acting, enough meant to kill.

Somehow, I kept it together for hours, long after we'd parted ways and he'd gone home for the night.

I heard it through Bebe the next day, how he'd been hospitalized and barely had any function in his central nervous system left to call for help.

The dosage was off.

He didn't die. Not that night. But the oxygen was cut off to his brain just long enough to leave him paralyzed.

I didn't have the balls to kill a vampire in broad daylight, but I damn sure wounded him, fatally, and left him toothless to prey on more women until his violent end at the barrel of a gun and another angry man he'd destroyed.

"Do it," I tell Tobin finally. "If you can get the shit without raising any red flags...it's an option. Maybe our best option."

He nods again, pivots out of my grasp, and turns toward the door.

"Tobin, wait," I say, standing my ground until he turns. "I need you to know I'm sleeping with Grace."

He barely raises his brows. "As ever, your romantic escapades are none of my professional or personal business. The news is no surprise, considering the racket you two make in your nightly passions. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"I'm not trying to kiss and tell. My point is, it's your business when I think I...fuck." I have to stop and collect myself, rubbing my eyes. "I think, after all this is over, I want Grace to join us here. I want to help get her on her feet, see if she wants to stay in Dallas, or find a stable footing to go off to wherever else she chooses."

His head tilts ever so slightly.

“I see...”

We share an awkward glance before I think I detect a hint of a sly smile tugging at his lips.

“Whatever you decide, I’m always at your service to assist everyone in this household.”

Shit, I knew I was hoping for too much, getting a human response from him.

Though the fact that he raises no ‘concern?’

It’s basically his approval.

“You’re excused,” I tell him, turning away to push my chair in.

Tobin stops with my door open, looking back, and then says, “On a purely personal note, I believe Miss Sellers compliments you rather nicely. Please let me know when you’d like dinner tonight.”

With that, he’s gone, and I feel my jaw dragging on the floor at the fact that Tobin—stuffy, cautious, stick-up-his-ass Tobin—actually might approve of Grace.

Okay, now I *have* to get moving.

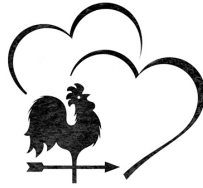
It’s not just a workable plan to snare Clay and his merry band of fucksticks I need.

I’ll need a plan for the epilogue, too, after we take down this prick.

What does it look like if I’m not just living alone, living for myself, and suffering?

What the fuck happens if I ask my fake fiancée to *stay* when our troubles are through?

NO WAKING UP (GRACE)



There are times when I wonder if I'm dreaming.
Life can't be this good.

I'm afraid to pinch myself because I might wake up, and *then* where will I be?

Not here.

Not in this beautiful house, spending every night in the arms of a dark beast who takes me to bed some nights with all the fervor of a flipping sex god, and others, makes love to me slowly, tenderly.

Just like I'm as fragile and delicate as blown glass.

I love it all.

Especially the anticipation, the buildup, wondering which way he'll take me every time he leads me to his bedroom. But I think the mornings might be my new favorite.

Like this one, where I'm draped across his naked slab of a body, legs open, one breast in his hand as he plunges into me. His other hand grips my ass, delivering a demanding pinch that reminds me to keep the pace he's set.

"Harder, sweetheart," he growls into my ear. "Reverse cowgirl means you shake that ass for me. Let me hear you sing."

Holy hell.

My body obeys as his thrusts quicken. The dawn's golden light spills in through the blinds, adding this sparkly beauty to every movement: his rough hands roaming my body, his muscular legs sprawled out beneath mine, his cock rending me in two every time I look down.

With a low, guttural sound, he raises me up with his hips, every punishing stroke equally divine and devilish. Just like how I fall back into him, into his friction, into how effing good it is to be filled by this man.

My core vibrates with a fireball threatening to engulf me. I flop back against his wall of a body, his hips still power crashing into mine.

A loud moan slips out of my throat and I whimper.

“Ridge!”

“Not yet, a little longer,” he whispers in my ear, his voice hot with lust as his dick strokes deeper. “We’re gonna come together this time, woman.”

He’s insane.

I don’t think I can take another minute of this, and his stamina is legend.

I try, though, biting back my screams, working my hips harder against his frantic tempo. I swing down on his shaft in perfect sync, the friction on my clit killing me, the throaty growls and soft curses spilling out of him each time he crashes into me again.

“Ridge.” His name sighs out of me again, my legs quaking.

I swear to God, if he asks me again, I can’t. I can’t hold on.

Not when he’s got me on the edge, each thrust a ruthless threat to push me over.

“Ridge!” My jaw clenches.

“Now, darlin’!” he grunts, primal excitement in his voice, all loving thunder breaking the sky. “Let it fucking go for me—I’m coming.”

Oh, do we ever.

My O hits like an angry wave as he buries himself in my depths and explodes.

If I can't actually feel the heat of his release even through the condom, then I definitely feel it in his body flexing, convulsing, growling. Ridge hugs me against him with his hand against my throat and *just the right* pressure to add sweet insanity to my finish.

Toes tangled in the sheets, I glide down on his pulsing cock, screaming so loud it puts Cornelius to shame.

We fold into each other, lost in our release, two heaving bodies slick with sweat and drunk on passion.


And when I'm finally coming down, a boneless heap on his body, his hand sweeps my thigh, caressing me so dearly. His lips graze my neck from behind with a wicked nip of teeth.

Soon, I find the energy to tilt my head, where he meets me halfway, bringing his raider lips home.

Good morning to you, too.

This is life waking up under his roof. I reach up to run my hand over his coarse jaw, hoping it's the only waking I'll ever do.

Lord, if I'm asleep, keep me dreaming.

A WICKED LITTLE  part of me kinda loves how Tobin knows about us and seems to approve.

He's warmed to me ever since we started working on the antiques together. There's a kinder man behind his frosty exterior. And also a man who cares deeply about Ridge's life and his happiness.

Jackie knows, too, I think. I see the way she looks at Ridge and me.

She hides her smile well, but the knowing twinkle in her eye gives her away every time.

Dad might be the only one we're fooling, though I wonder for how long.

He's getting better every day, his senses coming back, and the sudden thaw helps.

It's warm enough for him to sit outside a few minutes on sunny days now. He takes short walks around the farm and visits the barn. There, he catches up with the horses and curses out Cornelius for bursting his eardrums.

There's even better news from Dr. Abrams. She says that while she can't be certain until he goes into town for X-rays and sees a cardiologist, she highly doubts he has congestive heart failure.

She thinks the ER doctor made a snap judgment that was wrong, and his issues were just a bad case of pneumonia all along.

I hope to God she's right.

I also wonder if Dad is nursing his recovery to keep Jackie Owens around longer.

He's found a friend in her, and vice versa, I think.

The nurse is in no hurry to return to town. Her son and daughter-in-law both work, her grandson is in school, and Jackie sits home watching game shows and baking cookies—which only she eats because the rest of her family went on a vegan kick. She swears you can't make a good cookie without eggs.

The lady does make some fabulous cookies.

Tobin agrees and welcomes her baked treats in the kitchen.

We all do.

Yeah.

When you add it all up, there are too many reasons why I'm constantly scared I'm dreaming. The weird, peaceful limbo we've fallen into with everything so eerily quiet and the warmer weather adds to the surreal sense.

It's been several weeks since the media leak and our big announcement at Libations.

After the incident with Ridge's truck, there haven't been any signs of Clay or his goons.

We're just waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's inevitable, and every little noise at night makes me jump, thinking this is it.

So far, I'm wrong.

But for how long?

Heaving out a sigh, I pick up the last tea cup candle I'd made for Amy's daughter, Josie, and set it in the crate with the others. Josie just turned six, and she's having an elegant tea party for her birthday.

I'd offered to make a few favors for all of her guests.

So I'd found a box of old china in the shed—white with pink flowers. Many of the plates and bowls were in freakishly good condition, not even chipped. I'd found ten perfect cups with matching saucers.

Since then, I've secured triple wicks to the bottoms and filled them with layers of colorful wax.

I've also poured the leftover wax into some mason jars for more candles.

On impulse, I pick up a match, light one of the candles, and then stare at the soft, flicking flame as Mom's words float back to me.

If you've got a light, you've still got a wish.

Do I dare?

Maybe, today, I do.

I just wish...I don't even know what to wish for when it's such a heavy, scary thing to put into words.

I want this to last—living here, with Ridge—but I know it can't.

The flame has fizzled out, so it's too late anyway.

I set down the match and look at the candle, its flame still lashing away.

Shaking my head, I lean down and blow it out.

Even if I'm ready to start wishing again, this isn't the day to give it the respect it deserves.

"Ready, darlin'?"

I turn, smiling at Ridge because I can't *not* smile at this man.

"Yes, we're all set," I tell him, turning to the boxes on the table.

It's insane how little it takes to lose control when it comes to him, especially when it comes to my heart.

Right now, I see his smiling face, blue eyes beaming like lanterns, a brown jacket that hugs his shoulders so tight I can see right through it. God, I can *feel* those arms around me, strong enough to engulf me in the sweetest kiss or fling me around like a toy.

You'd better believe I'm a sucker for both.

He stirs me up without even trying.

And that scares me almost as bad as Clay Grendal finding us.

He walks over and picks up the box, then looks at the contents and flashes his slayer-grin. "These are sweet. I think she'll love them...not that I'm an authority on kids."

I put on my coat but don't zip up because it's warm and sunny, probably in the fifties today.

"Thank you. I hope little Josie and her friends agree."

"I've never been to a six-year-old's birthday bash," he says as we walk to the front door. "Maybe when I was that age, but not since then."

Laughing, I bump his shoulder with mine. "Good news, you're not invited to the party. You'll be hanging out in the garage with Jess and Tyler while the girls have tea."

"What about Jess' boy?"

He opens the door for me and ushers me outside.

“Cody? Oh, I’m sure he’ll be there, too. So will Jace, Alicia and Tyler’s son.”

“Cody’s a good kid,” Ridge says, flashing a grin.

“Why, because he’s a little terror? Now I know what you were like as a kid.” We’ve been to the Berland’s house a few times so I could help Amy with her coffee bar, which turned out fantastic. “Amy said she caught him trying to climb out the upstairs window with a rope the other day, playing freaking Tarzan.”

Ridge laughs. “Now that’s a kid’s birthday party I want to go to. When is it?”

“July for him. He told his parents he wants a pool party.”

Frowning, Ridge says, “They don’t have a pool.”

“That’s what Amy keeps telling him,” I say, laughing.

It’s fun how easy it is to slide into Dallas life. I’m enjoying the friends I’ve made here so much.

One more reason why it’s going to be brutally hard to leave. Harder than leaving the farm, maybe.

“This place could use a pool. Hell, maybe an indoor one so we can use it more than four months a year,” Ridge says. “Right off the sunroom. We can have the kids over and let them go nuts.”

I can’t believe this guy.

Not what he says, especially now, but his generosity leaves me spinning.

“Pretty big decision for a pool party.” I open the truck door. “You must be a softie for kids.”

His smile says it all, and my heart wobbles.

It’s no surprise, I guess, when his own childhood was taken up with films, adult-like pressures always stewing in the background.

“Hey, I might use it too.” He sets the box in the back seat. Casting me one of those smoldering looks that make my knees

weak, he asks, “Ever gone skinny-dipping, Grace?”

Here comes the uh-oh...

...but there’s no denying the excitement arcing through me.

Leaning closer, I whisper in his ear, “Until we did it in the bathroom last weekend...no.”

It’s happened more than once the past week. My pulse quickens at the memories, how the warm water just enhanced the sensation of Ridge in all his sexiness.

“Doesn’t count if it’s not taboo. Everybody gets naked in bathtubs.” He slides a hand inside my coat, cupping one breast. “Think how much more room we’d have in a pool.”

Holy hell!

My body reacts to his touch, and knowing where that leads, I lay my hands on his chest and push. “Save it for later, cowboy. We can’t be late.”

“Still plenty of time,” he whispers, finding my nipple through my clothes and giving it a soft pinch that destroys me.

Did the Greeks know sirens weren’t all female?

I’m convinced they could also be drop-dead gorgeous men with filthy minds.

Fighting the urge to give in to him is a special hell.

Nothing but full satisfaction from Ridge Barnet ever totally stops the sizzle he ignites.

I manage to step back, out of his reach.

“Get in the truck,” I growl, hiding the moan of disappointment in my throat.

“Don’t fret.” He laughs and winks. “We’ll leave early.”

God.

It’s not until we’re on the highway that I can actually breathe normally again.

“Amy called earlier,” he says.

“Why? Does she need us to stop and pick something up? I told her we could.”

“No. She wanted me to make sure you tell her how much she owes you for the candles.” He gives me a sly side-eye.

I shake my head. “Nothing for the candles. The practice is payment enough for now.”

“Yeah? Just like you didn’t want her to pay you for the coffee bar? Which, let me say again, is cool as hell. Word’s gonna spread like wildfire in town, knowing how Amy and Alicia love to gab. Just wait until you get a call from Granny Coffey—that old woman’s a certified ballbuster. She’s got a soft spot for crafts and spends like the devil. Let Amy pay you, Grace.”

“Well, maybe so. But I’m just barely getting back into this. I really don’t mind a few free practice runs.”

Honestly, I feel guilty charging for such little jobs, even though I could use the money. I’m hardly a seasoned pro. There’s also this imaginary tally in my head that keeps adding up how much I’m going to owe Ridge by the time this is over.

Sure, he’s a freaking gazillionaire. I couldn’t repay him for Dad’s care even if I tried...but I feel like I owe him something. A token payment for pride more than anything else.

“Would you have expected Jess to give me this truck without buying it?”

“Apples and oranges,” I answer. “That’s not even close to the same thing.”

“Your skills are valuable, darlin’. You’ve got ninja shit no one else in this town has, and they’re willing to pay you like they should.”

His eyes stay glued to the road, but there’s no missing the excitement, the determination in his gaze.

“They’re candles, Ridge. And I just told her how to toss around a few things she already had,” I tell him matter-of-factly.

“It’s more than that. *You’re* a hell of a lot more than that. Don’t keep thinking you aren’t worth anything because you are. Hell, people write books telling others how to wipe their asses, and they charge for it.”

Okay, that gets a giggle. It may be crude but it’s true.

“I’m not trying to play comedian,” he says. “Although I do love to hear you laugh.” He reaches over, taking my hand. “Seriously, Grace. You’re talented. You’re smart. You’re beautiful. You deserve to be paid for that in spades. Never sell yourself short, sweetheart.”

I’m so not worthy.

“I know I owe you a lot, Ridge. The cost of us staying here —”

“Hold up, Grace. This has nothing to do with me. Nothing to do with you living with us. I can spend my money any damn way I please, and right now, I want to spend it on you. And Nelson. It’s mine. I earned a good portion off my talent, just like you should.”

I know he means well, and don’t point out the fact that our ‘talents’ are leagues apart.

“I know the VA isn’t paying for Jackie, Ridge, like you told Dad. They don’t pay for home care.”

He’s silent for a moment before asking, “Would it make you feel better if they did? If I gave them a donation to match the cost? I donate to veterans groups all the time, nothing out of the ordinary for me to—”

“We’re already big enough charity cases for you.”

“Bull. That’s not what I mean, and you know it.” His grip on my hand tightens. “I want you here, Grace. You and your old man both, as long as it takes. I like you and I like helping Nelson. And damn it, this isn’t about me for once. It’s about you finding your lady-balls and telling Amy how much those frigging candles cost.”

“I know. I just...”

“You just don’t want to believe your work’s good enough. Too bad, woman. I’m proud of you, and I’m going to make you proud of yourself, even if it takes all summer.”

I get what he’s saying. His persistence pulls a smile out of me.

“It’s like a dozen candles, Ridge. Hardly enough to shake a stick at.”

“It’s a start,” he says firmly. “We all start somewhere with any venture. Make a wish and get paid.”

The dreaded *W* word again.

A shiver ripples down my shoulders. Mom’s words echo in my head again.

If you’ve got a light, you’ve still got a wish.

He’s saying exactly what she’d meant. That light, wherever it is, can mark the way to better things.

“My big start was a diaper commercial,” he says. “Now that’s groundbreaking shit right there.”

I bite my bottom lip at the smile forming.

Unbuckling my seat belt, I stretch across the console and kiss his cheek. “Thanks. I could use a fresh start.”

For the thousandth time, he melts me with that perfect grin.

“You’re welcome, darlin’.” Then he plants a quick kiss on my lips. “Remind me later to show you how much I’ve grown up since I starred in baby commercials.”



WE AREN’T LATE to the party after all.

The candles are a hit, the hyper little girls love racing each other to blow them out, and later they chatter among themselves, helping scoop wax out of the cups so they can take them home for their own tea parties.

While parents are picking up their children, I bag up the trash and carry it out the back door. As I’m dropping the bag

in the trash, something on the ground catches my attention.

Bile burns my throat.

A half-smoked cigar, probably something left by one of the guys, but it's the smell that gets me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, memories already hitting like a current pulling me under.

The smell when I entered the house. The pain of him grabbing me. The ashes.

A sob has me gasping, fighting, trying to breathe.

I just—

Hands clap my shoulders, and my body jolts to get them off.

A scream tears out of me.

“Hey! Hey, I didn't mean to scare you.”

Ridge's voice penetrates the darkness.

I gasp for air, shaking, panic coiled tight around my throat like an angry snake.

He turns me around to stare into his gentle blue eyes. “Grace? Goddammit it, what's wrong? What happened?”

I grab his waist and bury my face in his chest, blocking out everything but him.

“You're all right, sweetheart.” His voice resonates with deep command, strong enough to break through the adrenaline storm in my blood.

Slowly, my breathing eases, and I lift my head.

“I...I'm fine,” I strangle out.

“Like hell you are.” He cups my face with both hands, his eyes locked with mine. “You're as white as a sheet and trembling. Tell me what happened. A panic attack?”

I glance at the ground, the cigar, and jerk my face away.

The whole world is just spinning.

“The cigar?” He forces me to look at him again, bending over for a better look at the ground. “Tyler’s dad came out here to smoke so it wouldn’t stink up the garage.”

I nod. Swallow. Close my eyes to ground myself.

“Come on,” he says, wrapping an arm around me. “We’re leaving.”

“No, I’m okay. Really.”

He kisses me slowly, softly, tenderly.

He drowns me in those lips that are too good at saying so much without words.

“Darlin’, the party’s over,” he whispers as his lips leave mine. “Time for us to go home. Amy insisted on handing me a check with your name on it.”

After another firmer passionate kiss, he leads me inside.

I don’t even have it in me to argue.

I’m thankful for Ridge, thankful for his kiss, knowing it helps put color back in my face, making me look like a functioning human being again as we say our goodbyes.

With a few more quick words and a thanks for Amy, we head home. He talks about the party, the cute little things Cody did that I missed.

I listen quietly, knowing he’s trying to make me feel better, get my mind off the unmentionable.


It does, but...

I can’t.

Just can’t get the smell of that cigar out of my mind and how much it reminds me of that freak, the day he did the unspeakable.

And the bitter realization sets.

As long as Clay Grendal lives and breathes as a free man, I’ll always have his hellish memories holding me down.

AT THE HOUSE, I see Dad  sitting on the front porch of the cabin, and the reality of what I did hits.

Actually, what I *didn't* do.

I tell Ridge I'm going to go lie down in my room for a bit to clear my head.

In my room, I go to the window and see Ridge talking to Dad.

My stomach sinks into a black pit.

Dad doesn't know what happened that night, a couple months ago, while it was just me at the house. I think he'd gone to a nearby farm to buy hay and alfalfa for Rosie and Stern.

I turn away from the window as the tears come, fast and furious.

If only I'd been stronger that night, if I'd used Dad's gun to...

No. It wouldn't have changed anything, really, minus getting me killed.

But sometimes, I'd rather be dead than have to *live* with what that wolverine of a man did.

Somehow, I stumble to bed, curl into a ball, trying harder to keep everything locked inside.

If I don't, I'll hate myself even more.

Hate myself for not putting an end to it all when I had the chance.

Instead, I made it worse.

When the door opens, I close my eyes, feigning sleep. Not that it'll do anything to stop a very concerned Ridge.

And let's be real—part of me doesn't want him to stop.

I want his arms around me.

I want his comfort.

I want his magic lips to take me to another time and place where Clay Grendal doesn't exist.

I just don't want to tell him the truth.

The one thing I know he wants and, frankly, deserves.

Ridge's heavy weight sinks down beside me. He slides an arm gently under my neck. I curl up beside him, laying my head on his shoulder.

Breathing in his fortifying, manly, *everything's-gonna-be-okay* scent works wonders.

"You ready to tell me?" he asks softly, kissing the top of my head. "It's okay if you're not, Grace. Take your time."

Sweet Jesus.

I don't think I'll ever be ready to tell anyone, but after smelling that cigar, I know...

Like it or not, I have to.

Two Months Ago

I REALIZE I'm not alone in the house a second after I put the groceries on the counter.

My throat tightens.

I hadn't seen a vehicle out front, and with Dad gone, picking up the hay...I'm alone with them.

Steeling myself, I stomp out of the kitchen, wondering just how many goons there'll be and what the crap they want this time.

I'm actually surprised to see it's just him sitting in Dad's favorite stuffed recliner.

Clay Grendal looks up with those frigid bear-brown eyes. His smile cuts me like a knife.

"Finally. I've been waiting around here for almost an hour with you standing me up." He sits up in the chair, decked out

in his usual. “C’mon, Gracie. Smile. Aren’t you a little happy to see me?”

That’s a big *hell no*.

My eyes crawl up black slacks and an immaculate white button-down shirt that makes him look like he’s just come from a hard day at the office. That damn leather jacket is slung over the sofa.

I can smell his half-burned cigar from here, a glass of some amber-gold liquid at his side on the end table. Scotch, I think.

His other hand holds something I don’t process at first.

My graduation picture?

“W-what are you doing here, Clay?” I stammer out, dreading the answer.

“How many boys did you date at that fancy college, Gracie?” he says, dead serious as he is drunk. “Did any of them ever tell you what sweet fucking sugar you are? Did you let any of those little boys get up your skirt?”

I’m so stunned and disgusted I don’t know what hits me faster.

Hot fury that this sicko, this intruder, invaded our living room to ask these kinds of questions...or the absolute *horror* that his pants are undone. And it isn’t hard to tell what he’s been doing with my picture.

“Whatsamatter?” he slurs, blowing a long line of smoke. “Cat got your tongue? Must run in the family, girl, let me help you out.”

Before I know what’s happening, he flies out of the chair and whips around it with shocking speed, grabbing me and pushing me onto the sofa.

It’s the stench that bothers me more than his weight. We’re face-to-face and he reeks.

Too much cologne, scotch thick on his breath, but more than anything, that sickly tobacco smoke. It flows up my

nostrils and burns from the inside out.

“Don’t act surprised. You *know* how long I’ve waited for this day, Gracie. Ever since I saw you standing around your place in Milwaukee, watching me real wide-eyed, a slice of cherry pie ripe for the picking...”

I let out a muffled scream. He shoves his hand across my mouth, pushing it back in.

“You come with me, we’ll call it even, your daddy’s debt paid in full. I’ll call off my men. Hell, I’ll even have them help fix this place up—it ain’t like it used to be, considering recent misfortunes.”

“Never!” I spit out the second I work my mouth away from his hand.

It’s horribly tempting to bite him, but not when I’m crushed under him like this.

Incredibly, my harsh response leaves him stunned.

I’m able to slide out from under him, dart across the room, and stop near the stairs.

“Don’t be stupid. I’m offering you a golden opportunity to put your shitty luck behind you. All you’ve got to do is come with me back to Milwaukee. I’ll set you up in the place of your dreams, anything and everything you want on demand. I’ll—”

“No. If that’s what you’re here for, I’m giving you my answer. I’ll die before I’m a prisoner, especially *yours*.”

The nasty haze in his eyes fades, gives way to this fierce glow. He rakes a hand through his dark hair, greying at the temples. It’s sickening how normal—how distinguished, even—this man would look in some other time and place where he isn’t impersonating Satan.

“I don’t think you follow, Gracie,” he bites off, focused rage coming into his clipped tone. “You shrugging me off like I’m one of those dickless little college kids you dated...not how this works. Maybe you need a proper lesson.”

“Clay, wait, I...”

I don't know what to say, what to do, what to even think as he marches across the room. He knows the house too well, heading straight for the little cabinet that belonged to my grandmother.

All I know is I'm utterly frozen as he tears the glass door open, reaches inside, and holds up the urn.

Oh my God.

Not that.

Not Mom.

“Clay...”

“Last chance, Gracie. I'm being kind. So how about you be a good girl and reciprocate, hmm?” Snarling, he holds it up high over his head, flashing a cruel grin. “I'll ask you one more time, sweetie—will you come with me? Give up your shitty little farm and join the living. Don't let your daddy wind up like Mama, a pile of ash I can hold in my hand. Not a hard choice.”

I fight with everything I have not to tremble, gazing into those brown eyes so dark they're nearly black.

“Well? What do you say? Speak!” he snaps.

I say nothing.

Not with words.

I try to ignore the sickening *crash* as the urn impacts the wall behind me. I take off, racing up the stairs, straight for Dad's room through a cloud of ash.

He's got the gun on his nightstand.

I wish to everything holy I'd gone to the range just a few more times. I'm not the worst shot, but now, facing the prospect of having to fire a gun to save my life or to end this monster's?

Crud.

It feels like hours pass, but it can't be more than a minute or two.

By the time I hear Clay's heavy footsteps thudding slowly up the stairs, smell his stinking cigar smoke from a freshly lit smoke, see his gnarled shadow on the wall...

I'm a broken mess, but I've got Dad's gun in front of me, safety off, pointed and ready.

"Very funny, Gracie," he says, stopping inside the door, his body filling it. "Put that fucking toy down and talk to me."

I fire, once, and the bullet flies right over his shoulder and buries itself in the wall.

Jesus.

It's enough to make him flinch.

Enough to make him drop that wretched cigar.

Enough to smell the rug underneath his feet burning a few seconds later as he gives me the vicious look I've seen again and again in my nightmares.

"You can't be fucking serious, you—"

"Try it. Go right ahead, you bastard, take another step and I'll shoot you in the balls. That first shot was fair warning. Next time, I swear to God, Clay, I won't miss." I'm stunned at how harsh I sound when it feels like my lungs are full of cement.

I'll never know what makes him turn, retreating slowly away from the soulless carnage he's left downstairs.

Maybe he's genuinely afraid I'll make good on my word.

Maybe he realizes he needs backup.

Maybe he means to finish this when he's sure I'll be easy prey.

Oh, he definitely intends to fight another day, and make me *pay* for daring to threaten him.

Whatever it is, I don't relax until I hear the screen door banging shut and the slow, angry growl of an engine fading in the distance.


Present

“YOU WERE BRAVE, beautiful. So very fucking brave.”

Ridge’s voice is all thunder as he kisses the top of my head and hugs me tighter.

“Clay...he left then,” I whisper, finishing my story. “I locked the doors and hid behind the basement stairs for over an hour until Dad came home. He found me, clutching the gun, and was on the verge of calling 9-1-1 before I snapped out of my trance.”

“A perfectly normal reaction to that level of psycho shit,” he growls.

I push off his chest and sit up.

“Maybe, Ridge. But...but brave? No, I wasn’t. No way. I was a coward.” Regret sickens me again. “It was total self-preservation. I could’ve ended it if I’d just shot him. He wasn’t even armed, I don’t think. But I didn’t. Because I was afraid. Scared of what he might do when he’d already ripped out my effing heart!”

Ridge sits up. “Of course you were afraid, Grace. You were smart, not cowardly, to show the restraint you did. That fuck would’ve hurt you. He could’ve—”

“So what? I should’ve killed him!” I belt out, pulling at a loose strand of my hair with one hand. “I had the chance. I should’ve chased him down and kept shooting until I ran out of bullets. Who knows, maybe I would’ve gone to jail or gotten Dad in hot water but...we wouldn’t have to run for our lives. We wouldn’t have dragged you into this. I wasn’t thinking about others. I was just thinking of myself.”

“Thank God you were.” Ridge grabs my shoulders, digging his thumbs in softly. “You could’ve gone to jail. His uncle and his spiderweb of connections would’ve made damn sure of it to protect his own ass. The Old Town Boys are an

entire machine, and even if you tore off the head, there's no telling how it might keep going."

"But I could've ended it for Dad. He could've lived in peace. I made it worse."

"How? He came back that soon?"

"No, his goons did. We kept the gate locked, but that didn't stop them. We had to board up our windows the last few months we lived there...we never knew when they'd come to throw things at them or fire a few shots just to shake us up. I expected them to break in, come after me, but they made it a game. Clay kept backing off to drive us *insane*."

"You were under siege," Ridge growls, more to himself than me.

But the white-hot anger I see clouding his gorgeous features is entirely mine.

"Even the neighbors called the police a few times...but the police acted like it was our fault. Didn't do anything to stop it, especially when Dad always tried to downplay things. I think I knew then, even before his cough took a turn for the worse, that we had to leave."

If I'd just killed Clay that night, so many things might've been different.

And I wish I had, even if I can't say with any confidence whether it would've turned out better or worse.

At least the psycho, the scum, the would-be kidnapper who doused me in my own mom's ashes would be in hell, where he belongs.

"There's another way, darlin'. Don't think he's gotten off the hook," Ridge tells me, his voice as cool as the calm before a storm.

I peel back, my eyes shifting back and forth, studying his face which catches the shadows in the room like gunmetal.

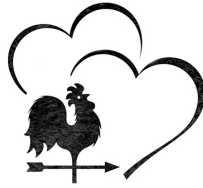
"That plan I mentioned before...we're awfully close to finalized. Leave ending Clay Grendal and his machine to me."

Oh, the things I want to say, to protest, to beg him not to do when this isn't his fight.

Not even when he's staked a clear, unmoving claim to it.

But one more look at his face tells me I'd have more success talking a mountain into moving than pulling Ridge Barnet back from the brink of all-out war.

NO CALM BEFORE STORMS (RIDGE)



The fury boiling inside me flares to a level I haven't felt since I poisoned Linus Hammond.

Hammond was a selfish, murdering piece of shit, but Clay Grendal?

A warped little pissant who deserves to die.

If I knew where he was right now...I might not wait for Faulk and the guys.

I glance up the stairway where I left Grace in her room to rest.

She blames herself for everything.

I'm not sure I convinced her otherwise.

Everything that's happened isn't her fault. It's not Nelson's either, despite his mistakes.

Grendal, the inquisitor fuck who's tortured them a hundred different ways, is the only one responsible.

We've waited weeks for him to make his move. Yet no one's contacted Bebe with new threats. No one sketchy has shown up, riling up the townspeople.

There's nothing.

I'm sick of this waiting game.

Storming into my office, I close the door. Rather than emailing Faulkner, I call him.

"Ridge, what's the word?" he answers.

“This motherfucker needs to go down. Right now. We’re not wasting more time on the logistics.”

“I agree. The more I’ve dug into him, the dirtier he is, but here’s the problem: he doesn’t get his hands dirty. The man hires everything out to his army of goons. However, I think we’ve found his lab. Turns out, the Old Town Boys directly manufacture some of their drugs. It’s a smaller pharma company based in downtown Milwaukee, not too far from the railyards. They make several run-of-the-mill prescription fillers during the day and illegal substances by night. Get this—the company claims research grants every year from the city and the State of Wisconsin. Grendal himself even sits on the board.”

“Piece of shit,” I snarl into the phone. “So he’s a boring suit to the rest of the world, making money off every angle.”

“Sure does, and he sells plenty of street drugs, too.” Faulk clears his throat, dialing back the hint of Oklahoma twang in his voice. “Grendal’s uncle has his hand in tons of federal drug cases, making sure his own investments keep safe.”

“The entire family is pure scum.”

Stating the obvious doesn’t make me feel better.

“They’re embedded in the local drug scene in Milwaukee, Madison, even as far as Chicago...the designer drugs they manufacture are top of their class, sad to say. The kind rich kids and famous people order up for wild raves. It keeps the specialty nightclubs in business, too, slinging shit on their end under the table. They’ve been on the radar for years, no doubt, but Grendal doesn’t slip up, and if his uncle and the local authorities they’ve compromised don’t shut leakers up, they disappear mighty fast.”

Fuck.

Growing up in Hollywood, I know plenty about flashy nightclubs and decadent parties, where the drugs come easier than young bodies chasing fun.

I’d been invited to plenty.

I’d participated in none.

Not when I knew the reputation behind that shit.

“We have to take him down,” I say, wondering if I’m truly ready to lay out the ace in my hole, no thanks to Tobin.

“Then we have to get him off his home turf,” Faulk says, the same thing we’d decided weeks ago. Too bad it’s been moving at a tortoise’s pace. “Make no mistake, he has plenty of hands on deck. Grendal has runners, mules, mercs, and cleaners. Every last one of them are expendable. Same with his street soldiers. They know if they mess up, they’re dead men walking. Grendal has so many layers protecting him, it’d take a real twist of fate to drag his ass out here, I reckon. We have to find his Achilles’ heel.”

I know what he’s getting at.

Grace.

The one thing he’s been after this whole time.

Obviously, I can’t put her in harm’s way just to flush his demon-ass out. Can’t and won’t.

“We’ll figure it out. I have a damn good idea how it ends,” I snarl. “Let me get my hands on him.”

“Even if you could...he won’t be alone. That’s what I’m trying to assess. We get Clay out here, he’ll be coming with a swarm of hired thugs. Sure, we’ll have our own backup, but —”

“Faulk,” I cut him off. “Listen. There’s a strategy I want to run by you, but it also involves something I need to come clean about to you and the guys. Can you meet me at the Bobcat tonight after Grady closes up? I’ll call Drake in, too.”

“I’ll be there. Have to remind you, though, Nelson and Grace are a key part of this any way you slice it,” he tells me, sharpness in his voice.

“I told you before, after the way her old man was involved...Nelson Sellers can’t get wrapped up in a bust. Not directly. They might send him to jail.”

“Full exoneration is on the table, Ridge,” Faulk throws out, not a hint of surprise in his voice.

I'm floored.

I also hate to ask my next question.

“You talked to the FBI about busting the Grendal machine, didn't you?” I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Faulk, what do you have in mind?”

GRADY FLIPS the sign to  CLOSED and hangs it on the Purple Bobcat's purple-tinted glass door, turning the lock.

I wait for him to join us before I say a word, folding my hands together on the bartop. Sweat beads on my brow.

I've barely said a word to Faulk and Drake since they showed up.

I don't have a clue how this will go down, admitting I poisoned a man, and I'm fully open to illegal shit again in a worst-case scenario.

Grady tops off everyone's beers, filling his own glass from a tap of some pitch-black ale infused with coffee, then hunkers down behind the bar, scratching his dark beard.

“I'm ready. What's this all about? Faulk said you had something on your mind?” he asks.

“I...fuck it, guys. Here goes.” My eyes flit over them, lingering an extra second on Drake's Dallas PD badge, gleaming gold in the light. He's still in uniform. “I've told you guys what happened to my mom. Some of you may have gone looking deeper, wondering what's really up with me. Can't blame you if you did.”

“You've only left your ass hanging out with the boring Hollywood stuff, Barnet. Not to mention way too many leaked pictures of your junk online—I *hope* they're all fake. Believe me, I've checked into you and seen some things I wish I hadn't.” Faulk looks at me over his glass, taking a long pull off his amber beer. “Fella's gotta do something to keep his record hunting sharp, though.”

“This about that Hammond guy again?” Drake asks, looking up from swirling his beer, a can of some North Dakota

local brew. “You told me it was over after you busted his nose, I thought? Aren’t we talking about the new threat?”

“Yes...and no.” I pause, this heavy blackness in my heart making me too sick to sip my beer. “Basically, I fucking killed him.” I pause. “You heard me.” I pause again, inhaling sorely needed breath. “No, I wasn’t the guy who pulled the trigger, and I didn’t know him. But I met Linus Hammond in a bar one night. I slipped this stuff in his drink and made him a vegetable. Tobin tried to stop me, and he’s the only one who knows. I didn’t listen.”

It’s a true record scratch freeze-frame moment.

Everybody’s glasses stop where they are.

All eyes are on me, saying the same thing. *Holy shit.*

I swallow loudly, wishing I had some water.

“Well...that’s...fuck,” Grady grunts, pounding back his beer in one bearish gulp. “You had your reasons. He murdered your ma. Can’t say I wouldn’t do the same in your shoes.”

His glass comes down hard on the countertop like a gavel.

Verdict served.

I hope.

Faulk and Drake look his way. At least Drake hasn’t slapped me in handcuffs yet, I guess, but I’m not sure it’s a good sign.

“You went looking for justice,” Faulk says, shifting in his seat, his eyes softening to darker forest green, looking somewhere far off. “You’ll never catch me saying it on record, but...sometimes it’s the cleaner, neater option than an FBI case file. I’m guessing you were short on evidence, proving what that fucker did?”

I nod slowly. “If I’d had anything solid, I would’ve hired every law firm I could to nail his dick to the wall. What I did was the only way. Truth be told, I *meant* to kill him, but the dose I gave him was off, or something didn’t mix right with the wine...whatever the case, it wasn’t meant to be.”

My gaze shifts to Drake, who's glaring, gripping his beer. His sharp blue eyes are like trying to decipher a glacier.

"Man, you're lucky you didn't fuck your own ass," he says finally, sliding a hand through his dark-blond hair. "But if you think I'm gonna sit here cussing you out for going outside the law...I did the same thing for Bella. For Winnie. For Jonah Reed. Just because I've got a badge now doesn't mean I don't remember what it was like without one when trouble came calling."

"So you won't tell Sheriff Wallace?" I smile, tilting my head.

"Never," he growls, sucking down his beer angrily. "Bigger question: what do you need? Since you mentioned poison, don't tell me you're thinking about going that route again? Doesn't work when you're up against a crew of brawlers with guns."

"It shouldn't come to that," I say. "What we need is something big to draw them in. Bust their asses. Lure Clay and his boys here with cargo that'd make him a slam-dunk case for the cops, the FBI, the DEA."

"You've got the muscle," Grady rumbles, his big hands clenched together in front of him. "I've still got the right guns and a good eye to cover you."

"Trouble is, the man's not stupid. We'll need more than raw force." Faulk leans back in his chair, stroking his chin dusted in a sandy five o'clock shadow. "Clay Grendal is experienced, highly intelligent, and dangerous. And if you're thinking about placing an order for his goods to set him up, think again. If it comes from you or Tobin or some hired proxy out of left field, you'll never make him do squat."

"I know," I tell them, taking a slug of my beer, the cool glass sharpening my focus. "Luckily, there's one more person I think I can count on to have my back. She's not here to talk details, but I think she'll be persuaded to help."

"Just tell us what you need," Drake whispers, his eyes glowing with an excited fury I'm sure he thought was behind

him.

With friends like these, this might just work.



AN HOUR LATER, my last nerve wants to snap.

“Just do it, Bebe,” I say. “Please. How many times do I have to—”

“You’re crazy!” she snaps. “No way, buster. What you’re asking could ruin your career forever—could even damage mine. Have you lost it out there in the sticks? Has North Dakota and more oil pumps than people just scrambled your brain? Ridge, what you’re asking isn’t just illegal, it’s...”

I hold the phone away from my ear as she rattles on about my terrible, unreasonable request for another minute.

Let her vent.

Because it’s true. I’m putting her between a rock and a hard place.

If word gets out that she’s soliciting designer drugs for *my* engagement party, it could blow back on her a dozen ugly ways.

I don’t care what happens to me, but I have some sympathy for her.

Bebe was there when I needed her, but dammit, I need her more now.

I want Grendal to hear about my phony needs.

I want to play his greed.

Make him fly into such a snarling roid rage he tries delivering those drugs himself.

“Find someone who will,” I tell her. “I need this party, and it has to go off without a hitch.”

She’s silent for so long I wonder if she hung up, except for the fact that I can hear the music in the background. Classical. It’s always playing in her office.

“On one condition,” she finally says.

My muscles tighten even more. If she starts in on a woman—Grace—not being worth it again, I’ll lose it.

“What?” I ask, bracing for whatever bullet comes out of her mouth next.

“Three more movies,” she says firmly. “Start with the Western—the good one—the script I sent over last week.”

I hadn’t even opened her package. Hadn’t planned on it.

The air in my lungs burns hot as I heave it out.

“All right. Fuck. I’ll do it. Help me with this, and I’ll make you a rich woman. Richer, I mean.” I click off and drop the phone on my desk, hoping Faulk knows what he’s doing.

Hell, I hope I know what *I’m* doing.

I just keep digging myself deeper, and even if I line up a small army to help, there’s no guarantee any of this works.

But does it matter in the end? Does it make me think for a hot second about pulling back?

No.

~

THE NEXT COUPLE weeks are heaven and hell.

Spring arrives in full force, banishing the last of the snow and beginning to paint the sprawling acreage around my place green. We take Rosie and Stern out for rides together.

They give me a special peace I’ve never enjoyed.

And the sex we have in the barn, in the bedrooms, bathrooms, and anywhere else we can be sure of not getting caught?

Fucking mind-boggling.

It never gets old. She’s so enticing, so eager.

Every glance as she transitions into lighter clothes with the changing weather destroys what little resistance and focus I’ve got during the day.

If Grace Sellers even hints at being naked, I'm hard, instantly ready to go.

Like right now.

I'm hard just thinking of her in the bedroom, where she's busy trying on dresses for the big party this weekend. Bebe had half a dozen different knockout outfits sent to the house from the best designers in L.A., along with shoes that made her squeal and a whole mess of other packages.

Grace insisted she's never looked at, let alone worn a three-thousand-dollar dress.

Exactly why I had Bebe send half a dozen more.

"Knock, knock," I say, opening the door to her room.

She turns around, looks over her shoulder, and shakes her head, sending wisps of pretty blonde hair everywhere.

I hold my breath as my dick throbs without mercy.

Goddamn. Somebody stop me.

She's wearing all black, a floor-length dress with a slit up one side. The V neckline plunges almost to her belly button, and the reflection in the mirror behind her shows the back of the dress has the same deep V-cut right down to her waist.

"Darlin', you look—"

"Sad? Um, yeah. I don't have the boobs to wear something like this," she says, fidgeting with her hands. "Every time I lift my arms...my nipples get exposed."

I push the door shut, lean against it, and snap the lock in place.

"Better show me. For science or whatever the fuck."

She smirks and her cheeks light up in fuckable red.

Slowly, though, she humors me, lifting her arm over her head. One sweet peak of her right tit is barely visible, a half circle of dark areola, just a hint of the nipple painting my balls blue.

My inner caveman wants to fling her against the bed and see how much punishment the entire frame can take.

“See?” she asks, looking down and tugging on the black material, covering up her tit. “I couldn’t go out in public wearing this.”

I’m so fucking hard I can barely walk. Crossing the room, I grasp her wrists, lifting her arms up.

“Didn’t get a good enough look,” I growl. “Show me again.”

“Oh, Ridge, you’re just...oh. You’re serious, huh?”

Damn right.

I help lift her arms, exposing the nipple again, loving how her soft blue eyes heat with something wicked.

Releasing her wrists, I act like I’m going to stretch the material over her tit, but instead, I flip it aside, fully exposing her, then the other one, and thumb at both nipples.

Shit, they’re perked, fully puckered at my touch, ready to leave me delirious.

“I’m trying to be serious.” She drops her arms. “Stop that!”

“Why?”

“Because I have to figure out a dress to wear.” She shoots me a look and rolls those beautiful eyes.

Oh, hell. A man could fall in love with that shit.

“Not this one,” I tell her, pushing the black material off her shoulders. “Your tits are for my eyes only. Nobody else gets a peek.”

That gets another flushed smile out of her before the dress pools around her feet, exposing every sweet inch of what’s mine.

“Bossy much?” she whines, still looking at me with eyes that invite me to do whatever I want.

“You know you love it.” Sliding a hand between her legs, I lean in and whisper, “About as much as I love this pussy.”

“Oh?” She shifts her stance, spreading her legs to give my hand ample room. “How much is that?”

We’re really gonna do this? I wonder.

Not that I’m complaining.

I’m game to show her any waking second.

Her head tips back slightly and a moan slips out of her, my fingers already in her, working pleasure out of her silk.

I kiss her neck, grazing my stubble across her skin.

Her shoulder gets my teeth, a quick little nip that makes her shudder.

Then I move to her tit, strumming my fingers deeper inside her, searching for the spot that’s sure to bring her down at the knees.

“You really want me to show you, Grace? Be careful what you’re asking.”

“I’m not asking.” A devilish moan slips out of her. “And you already are.”

Guilty as charged.

Nudging her to the nearby chair, I grab the back of her neck softly and pull those hot, wet lips to mine.

Fuck.

If I keel right over, I want *Died Heroically Taming Grace Sellers* on my fucking epitaph.

The only thing hotter than her mouth has to be her slick heat tightening on my hand. I love how she moves, how she twitches, how she gives herself away so sweetly.

These hands have all the encouragement they need to take the hell over, and they do.

A shrill noise pushes out of her just as my thumb rakes over her clit. She falls back against me, skin even hotter than her breath, so sultry I swear she’ll ignite my clothes.

“You starting to understand, darlin’? To see how much I love show and tell?”

Her pussy tightens again as my fingers slow to a teasing rhythm.

She shakes her head fiercely, reaching down to grab my wrist, digging her little nails in. She wants me to finish her bad.

“Not yet. Still a lot to show you...like how bad I’ve been dying to eat you up all day,” I snarl, batting her hand away and hoisting her up.

Her legs tremble.

She gasps.

And then I lead her right to the bed.

“Sit down and open your legs.”

The instant she’s planted, legs draped over the bed, I kneel down with a picture-perfect view of her pink.

“Relax,” I say, pulling her hips forward so those sweet folds catch my breath.

She shudders as my nostrils flare, breathing her in, intoxicating myself on Grace’s scent of sex, want, need.

I barely feel human. The beast inside me wakes up, pushes a growl up my throat, and then I’m face-deep in her divine cunt, taking her hard with my tongue.

She loses it in barely a minute.

It’s a fight to hold her legs apart, urging her on with deep, hungry strokes, moving her hips against my face. I make her ride me, make her work for it, but she’s so spooled up and responsive her body gives it up to me in record time.

I tongue-lash her pussy right through the first release and start on her second, sparing no time, no mercy.

Her nails dig at the back of my neck. If she wants to scratch me up raw, I’ll let her.

Because I'm so damn deep in beast-mode that I don't think a striking meteor could pull me away from making her come again, biting down on her fist as she does.

It's cute that she still tries to muffle the sound.

I amp up her volume, pulling it out of her, sucking her clit in mad circles that leave her thighs twitching around my face. Greedy, I keep at it, sucking through every spasm, every tremor until she's limp, red-faced and panting.

Fuck.

My cock rages against my jeans, loving and hating every red second I go down on her because it's jealous that it doesn't get to do the job.

I'm drunk on her, delving my tongue deep inside her, so ready to sink down inside her I feel like I'm about to split down the middle.

Call it what it is: pure fuck-hot insanity.

I've never been this tuned to any woman, to her body, her needs.

When she's thoroughly whipped by my tongue, I trail kisses up her stomach, spending a moment on each tit, and then kiss her lips.

"How'd I do, lady?"

"Better than perfect," she groans.

God, she's gorgeous.

Her skin is flushed, her face glowing, her eyes flooded with this balmy warmth.

Every time I look at her, it does something wild to my heart. To me.

Every day we're together, I'm amazed that she's somehow more beautiful than the day before. My balls churn fire, aching with this crazy fantasy, this sense that I could keep her, maybe even put a kid in her someday.

The gossip rags would go ballistic over the baby we'd make. Their looks would be pure Athena or Apollo.

Snarling, I kiss her again, amused that no matter how often I take those lips, it's never enough.

She smiles slowly, her eyes dancing to mine. "Give me a minute, then it's your turn."

We trade places on the bed, her still slick with sweat and painfully sexy, dropping to her knees in front of me.

The moment her lips clamp down around my cock, I'm gone.

Not a chance in hell I'm going to last long.

I damn near came with her when she blew the second time.

But who the hell am I to deny a woman her fun?

My body goes rigid, my mouth dry, making her name sound hoarser than thunder because all I can do is whisper.

"Grace, fuck..."

Her hand pumps the base of my cock harder, faster as she sucks me, pulling me closer and closer. The hellfire pressure in my balls increases, bringing me to the brink several times before I reach for her hair, pulling her away.

"On me, woman. I know you're on the pill. I want you raw, and I want it *right now*."

Her eyes go wide, lit like the moon.

For a second, I wonder if I've gone too far, asked for too much.

Then she stands, slowly draping her hands around my shoulders. I guide her down on my cock like a bull in mating rut.

It takes everything I have to hold back while her pussy engulfs my cock, our eyes locked, my hands sweeping to her ass and grabbing her cheeks.

We both go hard, our bodies frantic for their first taste with nothing between us, the condoms a distant memory—if I have

my way, *forever*.

Our hips collide, drawing my dick in to the hilt, and we're two feral creatures just clutching, tearing, gasping in a race to see who's the first to fall.

Incredibly, I hold it together...about two seconds longer than her.

The instant she tenses, drags her nails down my back, and bites at my shoulder to muffle her scream, I've left the planet.

My dick fucks a few more rabid strokes into her slick, tight heat before I bury myself with a growl and let go.

We're coming so hard it's no exaggeration to call it apocalyptic.

Heat rips out of me and floods her, my dick pulsing with a hot growl spilling from my throat. I sear my mouth on hers, digging my teeth into her bottom lip, marking her with my mouth as my seed brands her within.

Holy fuck.

She told me the other week she's never had any man raw.

And now that she chose me to break her in, skin on skin, I can't imagine anyone else having her again.

"Ridge?"

I look up into her soft, curious eyes after I'm spent, wondering where I've been for the last...fuck, how long has it been?

Laughing, she uncouples with a parting kiss and smiles up at me, eyes shimmering.

"That's my show for the day. I love it. Sucking you dry," she whispers. "Maybe next time you'll let me finish you with my mouth."

I grasp her face, running my fingers through her gold hair.

"And miss a chance to fill you up again? It's like you're trying to give me the biggest dilemma ever known to man."

She giggles, falling against my shoulder.

“We’re hopeless, aren’t we?” Sighing, she stands. “And I still don’t know what dress I’m wearing.”

Dress?

Oh, right.

Thoughts of round two are already swallowing my brain.

“Still plenty of time to figure that out,” I say, cupping her breasts.

Excitement flickers in her eyes as she nods, glancing down at my cock. It’s standing as tall and proud as when she’d first taken it into her mouth.

She touches the tip. “I guess if we take an extended break...”

“Under me. Ass up. You need a pillow?” I ask as she saunters to the bed and obeys.

“I’ve got the headboard to claw. Just try not to ram me through it headfirst,” she says, more than half serious.

I grin.

Turns out, I’m the one who needs something to hold on to as I mount her from behind, pushing balls deep.

I’ve been falling all damn month.

Falling hard, falling fast, falling madly in love with this woman who’s become my total obsession.

She moans real sweet for me as I take her, pushing her on to her next release, animalistic grunts ripping out of me as I take her to the brink.

Nothing about sex ever disappoints with her, except for one thing—it has to end.

And it does, ten minutes later, when we’re both soaked in sweat and I have her pinned down, emptying myself inside her, grinding my seed, loving how her pussy sucks off every inch of me when she comes so hard it shatters her.

“What’s wrong?” she asks after we’re both flopped down on our backs and almost breathing like human beings again.

“Nothing.” I shake my head. “Just soaking you up, darlin’.
Sometimes, I can’t believe it.”

“You’re the gorgeous one, remember?” she whispers.
“There are days when I can’t believe I’m having sex with a
movie star. Ridge Barnet. The most handsome man in the
world.”

“Hey, I won a lot of awards, but I was never voted that,” I
say with a wink, rolling between her legs, positioning myself
over her again.

The more we talk, the more I’m ready to go again.

“But you were.” She arches her hips up, taking the tip of
me inside her. “I took a vote. You won. The end.”

Shit!

There’s no time to even laugh, considering she wants it as
bad as I do.

Grace pulls me down, pushing her legs against mine so my
length sinks deep inside her.

I’ve won something, all right.

Raging need surges through me.

Grabbing her shoulders, I slam her against the mattress as
her legs push harder on mine, urging me on. My mouth buries
hers in a blinding kiss.

Then it’s all instinct, fast, out of control, and absolutely
carnal.

You already know I don’t just mean the sex.



THE WEEKEND COMES in no time and I glance at the clock.

Six hours until the party starts.

It seems like everyone’s on edge around here, from Jackie
telling us Nelson’s ornerier than ever, to Corny screaming at
one a.m., to the horses snorting and staring off into the
distance this morning.

I'm determined, but nervous as hell.

We still don't have direct confirmation it's Grendal himself delivering the drugs.

Faulk thinks for sure it'll be him. He says his FBI spooks told him Clay left Milwaukee with half a dozen guys, three vehicles, but only two of the vehicles arrived in Dallas a couple hours ago.

All the big guests Bebe invited are filing into the hotel in town where it's due to take place.

She's there, too, helping coordinate and relay info. I might owe her a fourth damn movie just for dragging her back out to Dallas one more time.

The drugs are total decoys. They'll never make it to anyone. Hard evidence due to be handed over to an undercover FBI informant with ties to the DEA, posing as an event planner.

Bebe went along with the scheme, as promised, insisting she wanted the crap delivered straight from the manufacturer to make sure they haven't been cut or altered before delivery. She worked her L.A. sources over until they put her in touch with a place that could do it, conveniently just a few hours away in Fargo.

Apparently, the Old Town Boys are active there, too, using it as one of their depots before the shit flows farther west or north into Canada.

She told them they'd get seven figures for a successful execution.

As much as it annoys me, I'm glad she played it up, letting it be known far and wide in the underground that I only settle for the best of the best, and pay a king's ransom.

One of the club owners came through, touching base with Clay's main distributor.

The bastard couldn't have had any doubt about the source of the request here in little old Dallas.

Faulk's also at the hotel, helping Drake put up additional surveillance. Even Grady has someone watching his kids so he can be ready at a moment's notice.

I'm touched but also afraid for these men who are risking their asses to help save mine.

One thing's for sure: we'll have every base covered.

Lost in my thoughts over prep, it dawns on me that I hear a horn blaring outside. It's distant yet getting louder.

I glance out the window as Jackie Owens' car comes flying up the driveway.

She mentioned taking Nelson into town for new shoes or something, I can't say I was fully listening with everything else on my mind.

Tobin went to Dallas earlier, too. Starch for my tuxedo. He'd been fussing that I hadn't dug it out sooner so he could have it sent out to be pressed.

I exit my office, walk to the front door, and open it just as the car comes to a screaming halt near the garage.

What the hell?

"Help me get him inside, Ridge!" Nelson roars, throwing open the passenger door.

I jog down the steps, concerned and confused, until I get a look at what's behind the door hanging open.

Tobin is a tangled mess in the back seat, holding a bloody rag to his head. His glasses are bent, one lens completely blown out, his green eyes so empty it scares the shit out of me.

"What the fuck happened?" I grind out, elbowing Nelson aside and reaching in to help Tobin out.

"Broken ribs. Possible concussion, I think," Jackie says, "but we need to get the bleeding stopped right now. Help him inside."

"They...they ran me off the road," Tobin says, his voice this dry, faint rattle. "I...I saw them coming. Tried to veer b-but...the truck. It rolled."

“Who?” I snap my mouth shut.

Dumb question. I already know.

And I feel like the world’s biggest jackass for underestimating them, thinking they’d just walk right into our trap.

He’s got more than a few broken ribs. One glance at Tobin’s busted face tells me they aimed to kill him, running him off the road.

My heart shoots lightning through my chest.

It’s pure hell, seeing him like this.

The man who’s always been a rock through every storm of my life.

The man who practically raised me, an unbreakable soul.

The man who protested with his heart and soul when I went off to destroy Linus Hammond, but who sees so much ruthlessness in Clay Grendal, he helped me with the poison.

And it’s looking a hell of a lot more likely that we’ll have to use it.

It isn’t fucking fair.

Tobin deserves better than winding up the sacrificial lamb.

Swallowing the fire in my throat, I grab under Tobin’s arm and help him as he limps pitifully toward the house.

Holy shit.

So much for having all my bases covered.

The flaw in our plan was assuming that maniac would play ball just long enough to wander into a swarm of cops and federal agents.

Now, it looks like we’re the ones who were baited.

“They’d have killed me. They slowed down, threw open their doors...I saw guns,” Tobin whispers, trying to ground himself in his storytelling. “But traffic came...people stopped. Then Nelson and Jackie arrived with these kids...”

“You just rest, buddy,” I say, putting him gently on the couch, giving his shoulder a firm squeeze. “You’re safe now. I’m going to get you a doctor.”

“Ridge!” His eyes bulge, suddenly full of energy. He grabs at my shirt. “You...you have to finish them. Be smart. Be devious. The toast...”

I know exactly what he means.

Leaning near his ear, I whisper, “I won’t let you down.”

Jackie comes up then, barking orders at everyone, including me to get out of the way so she can do her thing.

While she takes over, I pull out my phone and send a message to the guys.

Change of plans. I need cover here. Everybody come over, pronto, I text.

When I look up, I catch the look on Grace’s face as she hurries into the room with a bowl of water and towels.

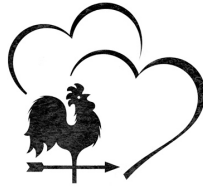
She’s ashen, shaking her head at me, the guilt already eating her up inside.

Dammit all.

I reach for her arm, but she flinches and pulls away.

Setting the bowl on the coffee table, she starts taking off Tobin’s bloodied shoes and gives me one more reason why I’m going to annihilate the entire Grendal syndicate.

NO TRUST UNDONE (GRACE)



Appalling guilt churns in my belly like a washing machine flushed with acid as I remove Tobin's shoes and cut slits up his trouser legs to expose his shins.

Oh, God.

His bleeding shins.

They look like they've gone through a shredder, a spinning walkway of knives that slashed up his skin without tearing deep into muscle. Small comfort.

"You're both fussing too much," Tobin says in his staunch, righteous way, despite his voice being no louder than a rustling leaf.

I'm slightly relieved he still has some fight left in him after the brutal beatdown he took from the accident.

"Hush. Let me see if we need a doctor or not," Jackie tells him sternly.

"No, no doctor. The airbags went off," Tobin says. "They kept me from...from truly getting hurt."

"They saved you from *dying*," Jackie throws back, shaking her head so fast her hair ripples. "Make no mistake, you're plenty hurt. I was there to pull you out of it. Your legs were trapped under that dash. If it wasn't for those farm boys who stopped, we wouldn't have gotten you out. Don't be ridiculous."

My insides curdle, knowing if those local boys hadn't come along when they had, Clay's men might've easily just mowed down Tobin, and then Jackie and Nelson a little ways behind him on the road.

God, I knew this wasn't going to work, but I'd gotten so caught up in my own life, in being Ridge's fiancée—fake fiancée—that I'd forgotten how nothing stops Clay.

He's a slow-moving brute force of nature.

I don't care what Ridge says.

I should've shot that bastard in the head when I had the chance.

But now people are going to die.

Die because of me.

All because I'd gotten swept up in a fantasy with a man who takes me on a detour from hell. That's all it can ever be, an escape.

Not a permanent solution.

"Those farm boys wanted to call the cops," Dad says. "I told them no. I know the game, and I said you'd have your friend come tow the truck."

"I'll call Jess now," Ridge growls.

He hasn't put his phone down since helping Tobin into the house.

I bite my teeth together hard to keep from screaming. Pissed at the growing list of people sucked into my problem and now suffering just like poor Tobin.

"Dad, I need another bowl of clean water," I snap.

The water in the bowl I'd carried in is already coppery red, full of the blood I've been wiping off of Tobin's legs.

Ridge sets his phone on the table. "I'll get more towels."

I don't respond, just keep washing, adrift in my own pain, listening for whatever else Jackie tells me to do.

No surprise, she's as thorough with Tobin's care as she was with Dad's.

She assesses every scratch, scrape, cut, and bruise.

She bandages them and forces Tobin to take some pain meds.

She doesn't even take a breath.

I'm right by her side, frantically working, wondering every second if she'll run into some complication that'll force her to call a doctor—exactly the thing I know Dad, Ridge, and his entire crew want to avoid.

If Clay hoped to hit us with a diversion so monstrous we can't tell up from down, let alone go after him...then mission accomplished.

“Okay,” Jackie finally says, standing up and looking Tobin over. “He'll be sore for several days, but he's going to be fine. I'd still like Dr. Abrams to look at those ribs.”

I heave out a huge sigh of relief.

Not for me, but for Tobin.

I just wish—God, how I wish!—there could be a reason to breathe easy, but it's beyond impossible right now. Whatever faint flicker of hope I had inside me winks out.

“I'll help him to his room,” Ridge says, moving to his friend and valet. “You'll be more comfortable in your bed.”

Tobin agrees without complaint this time.

Poor guy.

Poor Ridge.

There's a bitter sadness in his starry blue eyes that sends a dagger through my heart. But I saw something else, too. A violent urge, the eyes of a god driven to obliterate everyone who tried to murder his friend and demolish his household.

Talk about scary.

I hurry ahead of them, through the kitchen and down the hall to where Tobin's room is located not far from the

sunroom. After turning down the bed, I leave the room, giving Tobin his privacy as Ridge and Jackie lay him down and help remove what's left of his black trousers and hunter-green shirt.

So much blood, just like the towels.

They're bound to be permanently stained.

I tear myself away from the awful scene before wretched, panicked sobs make it impossible to do anything.

I'M IN THE KITCHEN, washing the bowls, when Ridge grabs my shoulders.

Of course I try shrugging off his hold, but it's too strong.

"He's going to be fine, Grace," Ridge says, no hint of doubt in his fierce voice. "You heard Jackie."

I'm already lost for words, so I shake my head, brushing his arm with my hair.

"Darlin', listen," he whispers. "I've got this covered."

That breath I'd been holding hisses out.

I can't even look at him, knowing if I do I'm dead.

"No, Ridge, you really don't. This is...it isn't some movie script! You're not living this neat story where the bad guy gets caught and the good guy wins the girl and they all live happily ever—" I pinch my lips together.

I know.

I know I'm being ridiculous and mouthing off like I shouldn't.

But I know, more than anything, how petrified with fear I am, deep down.

I'm terrified he's about to get himself killed.

There's no victory, not for anyone, and I'm most certainly not the girl a man like him deserves to win. Ridge, on the other hand...

He's the type of thief who steals hearts without knowing it.

I couldn't even pinpoint when he stole mine, but he did, and I'll never get it back.

"No time to back down now. Not when it's getting real," he says, his voice like low thunder, midnight-blue lightning flashing in his eyes. "Chin up, girl. I'm pulling my guys together, and this evening we'll—"

"Excuse me." Jackie's voice rings out as she steps into the room. "I hate to interrupt but...have either of you two seen Nelson?"

My spine quivers as I do a slow turn and see her standing in the doorway, wearing a worried look.

"He's not in the house or the cabin. I wanted to check up on him now that Tobin's stable, but I couldn't find him any—"

I don't need to hear more. I just take off running.

I'm racing through the house, out the front, barely grabbing hold of the railing on the front porch when I see the overhead door on the shed hanging open, our old Ford gone.

Everything—and I mean *everything*—goes to pieces inside me.

"Jesus, no," I whisper.

I hardly realize Ridge's tall blur running past me, down the steps. He doesn't stop until he stands near the shed. *The empty effing shed.*

"Got this covered, do you?" I shout, tears bursting from my eyes. "I knew this wasn't going to work! I told you."

The worst part is, I don't even know how long Dad's been gone.

I last remember seeing him when he brought me more water for Tobin.

Ridge arrives on the steps in front of me, his brows low, fury etched on his face of stone.

"Darlin', it has to, just—"

“Don’t. Don’t *darlin’* me. I’m not your darlin’ or your fiancée! That was all a freaking act that’s gone up in flames. But this—this?” I point at the empty shed. “That’s real life and there’s no happy ending.”

“I’ve got backup on the way,” Ridge says, ice-faced and eerily calm, staring down my freakout. “They’ll intercept Nelson.”

“Not before Clay does,” I mutter, my voice breaking.

“Grace.” He reaches for me.

I’m done.

At some point, if we live through this, I swear I’ll calm down.

But right now there’s a better chance of convincing a thunderstorm to pass over without a grumble than getting me to dial it back.

I push off the rail, spin around, and press my hand against my pounding head.

“Get inside, Grace,” Jackie says, standing in the doorway. “Come sit down. We’re in this together. It’ll all work itself out.”

No.

Chaos doesn’t bow to wishes, however well-meaning.

Still, my sour, jerky movements don’t deter Jackie Owens.

She swings her arm around my shoulders and forces me to walk with her.

“I know it’s scary, hon.”

I shake my head. She has no idea how scary, how frightening, how entirely my fault.

“I’m worried for him, too,” she whispers. “He told me all about it, you know. The trouble he’s in with that group, how you lost everything...”

Stunned, I stumble and face her again, blinking back hot tears.

“He...he did?”

“Everything,” she says. “He trusted Ridge with his plan, though, and I believe he still does. You should, too.”

If only it were so simple.

I don't see how I can trust in a scheme that's already ruined, that might've done us *more* damage.

Right now, my instinct screams *don't trust anyone*.

“Dad trusted Clay Grendal once, too,” I say bitterly.

“True, but he learned from that fast, didn't he?” Jackie pushes me into the living room, gently but firmly making me well aware she's done with my pity party.

I wish I could believe her, zip it, and trust.

Trouble is, I'm not convinced she's right.

If Dad trusted the plan, where is he? Looking for Clay?

A sickness knots my stomach. I know that's where he's gone.

Sighing, I sit down, plant my elbows on my knees, and bury my face in my hands.

What's he even thinking?

If there's anyone who's horribly conscious of what Clay can do, it's Dad.

He has absolutely nothing to gain by chasing down that man.

And if he's thinking about surrender, throwing himself on a madman's altar, trying to save me...then he doesn't get it. There's one prize he wants, and one prize only that'll ever satisfy him.

Me.

The cell phone in my back pocket buzzes then, just as it has since morning.

Amy and Alicia are excited about the shindig, all the famous people who'll be there.

I'd foolishly gotten caught up in that, too. The party planning. And in their friendship...

Maybe this is what I get for accepting a little normalcy in my life.

Dreading what's on the screen, I force myself to wake the phone and tap the text messenger icon.

It's an attachment from a number I don't recognize.

I consider not opening it, but bite my lip and do it anyway.

My heart stops.

My only instinct is to scream.

"Ridge!"

He's at my side a second later, grabbing the phone from my numb hands, staring at the picture.

Our old Ford, half-sunken in the ditch, rolled over, its window shattered like busted teeth.

I'm too mortified to even shudder.

The Ford probably didn't even have functioning airbags. No updated safety features whatsoever.

Nothing like the new truck Tobin was in when they ran him off the road.

Ridge makes a dash for his phone, rips it off the table, and starts thumb-punching at the screen.

I don't know why he bothers. It's too late. There's no one to help Dad now.

"Here, look at this," he says, holding his phone in front of my face.

A short video starts up, two pickup trucks, one red and one green, both waiting just off to the side at the end of the driveway as Dad sped by. Of course they pursued.

Ridge clicks on another button.

Bile rises in my throat.

It's another short clip, Dad being pulled out of our Ford—alive, thank God—and shoved in the back of the red truck. Then another video plays with the green truck ramming the side of the Ford, spinning it across the highway and into the ditch, where it bows up on one side.

I look at him, nostrils flaring, unsure why he thinks these nightmare clips will bring any comfort.

“Those kids who helped Tobin weren't farm boys. They're undercover agents Faulk brought in, shaved clean and dressed like townies.” Ridge sits down beside me. “They're still out there, Grace. They'll be keeping an eye out for Nelson and those damn trucks.” He puts an arm around me.

I shake my head, trying to make sense of what he's saying. “The FBI? I thought you said Faulk was working independently?”

“He also owns his own PI company and still works closely with the Feds.”

My throat burns.

“Awesome. So even if Dad survives, he'll be arrested on the spot.” I shake my head, thoroughly disgusted. “If Clay doesn't kill him first.”

“No. Faulk told me they can set him up with a plea deal. No jail time. Full exoneration for cooperating in the case. No ill-gotten assets left to seize in his case, either. They've had flashes of the Old Town Boys on their radar for years, but nothing definitive like we've dredged up. Grendal, his uncle, and his cousin have been working designer drugs for years, but they could never get anyone to talk. Faulk wouldn't let us down. Trust me.”

My skin crawls as I shake my head, blinking back tears.

I'm so flipping *done* with crying.

Tears won't do anything to end this.

Still, I let Ridge wrap his arms around me, folding me up in the shelter of his body. I bury my face in solid muscle,

howling inwardly to get my crap together, to regain the self-control to slog through this.

To help him help me.

Jackie's right.

Trust in Ridge—isn't it all that's left?

And when I'm deep in his arms with his chin tucked against the top of my head so sweetly, so tight...that's where I find my answer.

The same strength I found in our farmhouse that night, after shooting at Clay. I had to clean up the house, including Mom's ashes, because Dad was a teary-eyed mess after he saw the carnage.

I was strong for him, for Rosie, for Stern, for Mom's memory, for *me*.

And I think I can be stronger now for Ridge.

Fake or not, there's nothing fabricated about the way he's stepped into my life and fought to give me a second chance. And even a man with his acting prowess couldn't fake the passion he gives me around the clock.

It finally happens—a little more hits in every breath—probably because Ridge is so powerful that some of his courage slips into me by osmosis.

I lift my head and breathe.

Hold it.

Release.

“There's more I don't know, isn't there?” I whisper, not even a real question. “Tell me everything.”

His eyes shine down with this kindness as he takes my hand, laying everything out.

He tells me about Bebe ordering drugs for the party, hard evidence the FBI can use to nail their operation.

He gives me the latest on Faulkner's informants, FBI men who've tracked Clay ever since he'd left Milwaukee. And

how, right now, those men are coming here on horses borrowed from Drake and Bella Larkin, riding across open country to the ranch, under Clay's radar so that when he shows, no doubt bringing Dad along as ransom, we won't be alone.

We won't be surprised again.

He also mentions Grady, the huge bearded bartender, who'd taken up position across from the hotel with a sniper rifle and the sheriff's approval. But he's on his way here now, where he'll find a new spot to regroup and make sure we're covered if Clay can't be captured fast.

"So, wait. All this, Dad leaving, was part of your plan?" I ask, wondering if I've missed something.

"No, Nelson bolting was his own doing," he says, giving me a look that says he hopes there's some thought behind it. "Seeing Tobin injured was a gut-punch, I bet. I don't know what he's thinking, honestly, but whatever it is, he's not out there alone."

I nod, praying he's right.

Undaunted, Ridge kisses my forehead. "Neither are you, Grace. We didn't know if they'd actually show up at the hotel, so we had several alternate choke points in place. Judging by where they hit your old man, odds are they're coming here, and we'll be ready."

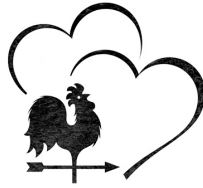
"Here?" My heart climbs into my throat, vibrating like a hummingbird.

"Not ideal, but we'll manage. They'll never make it inside. It's just a waiting game until Grendal shows his hand. Can you be patient a little while longer and follow my lead?" he whispers, his eyes so dark and fierce. "Can you pretend for me one more time?"

I nod, purse my lips, and put on my bravest face.

For him, I mean it, even though I'm still sick to my stomach.

NO COUNTING CHICKENS (RIDGE)



An hour later, my phone pings constantly with texts, confirming men are in place at several locations across my ranch.

I see a tree bending outside, a shadow through the window, and tense until I see a burly fist come out and give me a thumbs-up.

Grady.

Thank fuck. He's ahead of schedule and heading for the roof, ready to give his sniper rifle a VIP spot at this party. I hope like hell we won't need it.

All this fucking around, waiting for Grendal, feels downright torturous.

I'm utilizing my acting skills and putting on my bravest face for Grace, but I'm concerned, very concerned, about Nelson going AWOL.

Dammit. I bet he panicked.

I should've told him more about the backup options if the big bash at the hotel fell through, but part of me feared he'd convince Grace to run now that he's on his feet and feeling better.

I'm sure it was the FBI rumblings that scared him off. I'd hinted at full exoneration, but in his stubborn way, he swore up and down it would never be possible.

Can't blame a man for believing he's being set up after he's been in the trenches, suffering Grendal's shit for over a decade.

It's been almost two hours since they took him so something *better* happen soon.

Patience has never been my virtue.

I'm stewing when a new text hits my phone, and then a louder chiming sound for a camera notification goes off right behind it. I look down at the screen.

Raven's here. Got him in sight. Look alive.

I fire back a text to Grady, relieved he's in position.

Wait for my mark. No fireworks unless he's getting stupid, I send back. Or anyone makes a move on Grace. Shoot first. No hesitation.

He sends back an elephant emoji.

Christ.

I'm gonna trust that means yes with his gruff *locked and loaded* attitude. The cutesy crap never was his specialty, and neither was carrying on a conversation by text.

I open the camera app and replay the latest alert, a video showing a bright-red truck beginning its long crawl up my winding driveway, followed closely by a green vehicle behind it.

Goddamn. I didn't expect them to show up in the same vehicles they used to capture Nelson.

I figured Grendal would only wheel around in the back of a sleek black SUV.

Apparently not.

I turn to Grace, who's stopped pacing the floor, clutching at a strand of hair hanging over her shoulder. "It's him, isn't it?"

"Whatever happens outside, you stay in here," I tell her firmly. "The rest is up to us."

Of course she starts shaking her head.

“I mean it, Grace. Don’t argue.” I look at Jackie desperately. “Keep her inside. Lock the doors if you have to!”

Jackie nods, and fighting the raging desire to shut Grace up with a kiss that pulls the breath from her lungs, I jog to the door.

I don’t need to touch base with Faulk to know he’s on top of his people.

It’ll probably take a few minutes for the furthest agents to close in on the house, the barn. Even on horseback, they’re plodding over rough, uneven ground left scarred by winter.

No doubt whatsoever the recent rains have left the fields washed out with sinkholes of mud that can swallow a horse’s leg like quicksand.

Slamming the door, I head for the barn with my game face on. Those engines are growling closer by the second.

I never thought I’d see the day when my acting skills might save my life, but ready or not, it’s here.

Another thing I never expected: ruining a fifty-thousand-dollar bottle of scotch to pull my balls out of a vise.

Fuck.

I flash back to last night when Tobin helped me put the finishing touches on our big surprise. He had that fancy bottle of Macallan scotch I’d ordered looking like a virgin, never touched, its potent liquid swirling like molten gold behind the glass every time it caught the light.

It’s in my hand now as I pull it from the small crate of expensive bourbons I’d intended to have Tobin load up last if we were still heading into town as planned. Glad I kept it handy.

Truck tires crunch over pavement now.

I wait, raking a hand over my face one more time, willing myself to be someone else as the truck grinds to a stop.

Setting the bottle down on a small table behind me, I turn and face destiny.

Stepping outside with a glare for the men in the trucks, I look like a man who's just walked through a messy dog park with brand-new shoes.

"Private property, you idiots!" I shout. "Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying. Buzz off."

Grendal, wearing a black suit and chewing on a cigar, climbs out of the red truck.

He scowls at me and then at the house, head up, neck tense, every bit the vampire mobster Grace made him out to be. Those eyes are like whorls of dark ink, portals to some scary, ruthless place.

His stance, the way he holds his arms out, tells me he works out.

I keep my shoulders slouched, my knees slightly bent, hoping he'll think my good looks come from stylists and yoga classes. Not hard muscle earned in rivers of sweat.

Jackknife Pete climbs out of the green truck behind him. He's wearing a suit jacket, too, leering at me instantly with that piggish tattooed face of his.

Interesting. Seems I'm not the only actor here.

They're playing their parts well, I'll give them that. Trying to flex on my turf like real high rollers.

"You again?" I point to Jackknife. "What the fuck are you doing here? I thought I kicked your ass at the Bobcat back in the winter."

"Watch your tone, Hollywood," Grendal says coldly. His voice is charred but smooth, every word clipped, pointed, and fired with intent. "Nobody disrespects my men. I don't care how famous you are, pretty boy. That's one reason I came all the way here today."

"Do I know you?" I grumble with a shrug.

Facing me again, he flips open his jacket, showing a gun holstered near his belt. “A friend of a friend. I wish we’d met sooner. This could’ve all been much simpler.”

“Hell of an introduction, showing up at my place, flashing your toys.” Ignoring the gun, I nod at Pete and smile. “You some kind of real live terminator or do you just play one? Who put you up to this shit? I bet it was Bebe, this is just the kind of thing she’d pull at my own engagement party to—”

“Enough,” he barks, and the other three men at his sides draw their guns.

Now we’re having fun.

I glance up at the highest point of my roof where Grady hunkers down underneath a silvery grey cloak that matches the shingles, the long nose of his gun shifting.

He’s got Clay right in his sights.

I shift my weight and stiffen, acting like I’m intimidated, giving him a false sense of control.

“You’re not playing, are you? What’s this all about? We... we were supposed to meet at the hotel.” I throw my pitch a little higher, panic entering my voice.

Clay just nods, motions with two fingers, and three more hulking thugs step out of the green truck, guns drawn.

No sign of Nelson, which also means there’s more to his crew than these freaks here. He probably left one or two guys behind, guarding him elsewhere.

“What is it you want?” I ask again, staring back into his dead-eyed gaze.

But Clay looks past me then, toward the house, and gives me the words that ice my blood.

“About damn time. Hello, Gracie,” he snarls.

Grace?

Shit.

I spin toward the house and stifle a curse hanging in my throat.

I should've known she wouldn't stay put. Jackie couldn't hold her. Not when it's Satan himself on our doorstep.

Think, dammit.

I'm desperate for ideas. Every hot second counts. I can't let her get in the thick of it.

So I take a long deep breath and let go. Losing it comes all too naturally.

"Hey, Godfather man, what's going on here?" I shout, then whistle so loud their ears twitch. "How do you know her?"

Grendal stares at me for a moment, dumbfounded, and shakes his head as a smile that's too wide for his mouth stretches across his face.

So much for acting.

I don't have to fake looking freaked. For Grace's sake, I am.

"You really think you're something, don't you, Hollywood?" He looks back at Grace. "Looking for your daddy, Gracie? Come on over, let's have a chat. It's up to this playboy if you want to see Nelson alive again."

I take a step forward, needing to work my way to Grace, but stop as half the men point a gun at her, and the rest turn on me.

Shit, shit. I wasn't expecting this type of firepower.

I'm sure somewhere up there, Grady is just as confused, weighing his options. He's only one man. He can't shoot them all simultaneously. He might blast three or four guys at best before the others react.

If he has to pull the trigger on Clay, it might scatter them, but also might not buy us more than thirty seconds to run.

I can't even count on his sniper skills.

There's no more safety net.

I have to fucking act.

“You blowhards mind putting your guns down for a second? Christ. You’re not careful, you’ll put somebody’s eye out. And we have a party to get to, so hurry up,” I say, throwing the subject off Nelson.

For a second, Grendal looks at me, his head cocked and his nose wrinkled.

“You’ve either got balls of steel or you’re mentally deficient,” he says with a bitter chuckle. “I should’ve known you were missing a few marbles with the stuff you ordered. It’s true what they say—a man’s got a better chance at spotting a unicorn than one of your kind sober. You’re fucked up right now, aren’t you?”

He thinks I’m on drugs.

I flash him an empty smile, raising my hands, giving them a nervous shake.

“I don’t know what your deal is, bro...I just want to party. You’re holding up a *sick* bash. Or did you come to drop off the goods? Is that what this is about, you worried I won’t make good on the money? Shit, I’ve got it in the barn. Let me just head over and grab it so we can—”

Everybody’s guns pivot toward me, thankfully off Grace.

She’s looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

Inwardly, I smile.

If it looks real to her, then these boys are almost where I want them.

“Not so fast,” Grendal mutters, his salt-and-pepper hair catching the sun, lighting him up like an evil shadow in broad daylight. “We have more important matters to discuss than money.”

“What? Ohhh. Oh, hell.” I whack my hands against my thighs loudly. “I get it. You’re pissed because you didn’t get an invite?”

“What?” he clips off, a disgusted look on his face. “That’s not even remotely true, you idiot fuck of a—”

“Talk to my manager,” I say, giving him the idiot he wants. “Actually, don’t. Tell you what, if you make good on the candy, if it’s truly as mind-blowing as they say...you guys can join in. I know keeping a low profile is probably your jam—I’m not in your business—but if you don’t mind doing lines off the tits of the most expensive stripper in the country, we can—”

Clay doesn’t answer, not with words.

He raises his gun in the air and fires several times, thoroughly done with my shit.

I hold my breath, waiting for total chaos.

By some miracle, Grady holds his fire, probably begging me to give him the signal.

Not yet.

Because I just saw several men dressed in black tactical gear creeping around the storage shed, and Faulk himself dropping down behind their vehicles. He’s probably planting trackers in case they make a run for it.

“Enough of this fucking nonsense!” Grendal barks, hot fury smoldering in his eyes.

He whips his attention back to Grace, but before he can say anything, I walk toward her, careful to keep a healthy distance while their guns follow me.

“Baby, you know these guys? I thought...you *told* me that ugly weasel-rat from the bar was a fluke. Some idiot who wanted in your pants and wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

A knowing glimmer lights up her eyes.

She’s still confused, sure, but she remembers what I told her, what I asked her to do, back in the house.

Pretend for me one more time.

“Grace?” Grendal eyes her up and down. “Is that true? You didn’t tell this jackass about us?”

She makes a soft, choked sound.

“There was nothing much to tell,” she says, stepping closer. “I’m done with what happened back home, Clay. Just give him what he ordered and let it go...he’s paying you a fortune.”

For a second, I can see the maniac torn.

Unsure whether to forfeit the biggest payment of his life for his trash drugs, all for this angel who still has him climbing the walls in his own fucked up head.

He’ll never have her.

But I need a damn diversion. Some way to get them in the barn so I can deliver the kill shot.

“You’re not cute, girl,” he growls. “Did you tell him about your other boyfriends? The one in high school who took you to your senior prom? The one whose mother made him break up with you after she found a dead rat stuffed in her mailbox with a Post-It wrapped around its tail? Or the one in college who suddenly decided he needed to go to a new school in another state? I told that twit I’d feed him his own balls.”

Shit, she’s turning pale.

I only see red.

This bastard has been warping every part of her life, even new ones she never knew about.

“That’s right. All me. Do you have any—*any damn clue*—just how long I’ve waited for this?” He turns back to me, hot death in his gaze. “If there’s any reason left in your drug-addled brain, you’ll listen, Hollywood, and listen good.”

I stare him down, relieved that I can finally let the hatred boiling me alive pour out.

“You’ve put me in quite the fucking pickle. See, I don’t want to give her up...but I *would* very, very much like my eight million dollars,” Grendal snaps. “I could just try to kill you and take it...but you’re too high-profile to sweep under the rug. Such a shame. Gracie, your little engagement here was exactly what I needed. Imagine my surprise when I learned

you'd convinced him to go along with my media leak, living with this washed-up idiot...it should've ended there. But you've always been a selfish bitch, haven't you? Now, you've put Hollywood in real danger."

I see how he looks at her.

It makes me want to rip his throat out with my teeth.

He's trying to push our buttons, though, so I might as well play along.

"Whoa, wait, it was you? Asshole, I'm taking a break from L.A.! Your dumb-ass stunt could've trashed my whole career." I turn to Grace, my eyes on fire. "Why didn't you tell me? Why'd you have to go and sweep it all—"

His deep, cruel laugh cuts me off. The sicko sounds truly pleased this time.

"Do you even want to marry her?" he asks softly. "I think I see what this is really all about. You invited everyone here, all your friends, promising them some *candy* to get back in their good graces. Well, Hollywood, I'm your candy man." He winks at me.

I stop my hands from balling into fists and act shocked, stunned, confused.

"I just...stop fucking around. Show me the goods. We'll see if they're worth this trouble."

He puffs out his chest. "You think I'm offering some second-rate raver garbage from California? I'm bringing you the finest. Crafted by scientists with degrees in a real lab."

"Yeah?" I step closer, and I can almost feel Grady on the roof just begging to pull the trigger. "Show me, and I'll show you the money. Then we'll sort out whatever shit she's gotten me into."

I cast a mock-angry look at Grace, who throws up her hands and glares right back.

I hate like hell that she's out there, but since she's so good at playing along...

I don't completely lose it when Clay lifts his hand a second later and motions to the barn.

“Grab her, you idiots. Find the money. Let's make a deal.”



It's a minor miracle I get away without sampling any of the crap in those bags.

He's brought a junkie's dream of high-grade amphetamine in small round pills, white powder meant to make people fly like kites, and other crap only the DEA could fully classify.

The last ten minutes feels like an entire year, with Grace at my side, and I can't even hold her hand.

Not if we want to keep up appearances.

I just hope to God the wire I'm wearing is still working and Faulk's team hears everything. They can't come storming in while these goons can shoot back.

“It's settled, then,” I say, throwing two black leather bags bulging with cash down in front of them. “Eight million even. Another two million I'll wire to you as soon as we're done here for Nelson's life. And your word that you'll fuck off out of their lives, and mine.”

Clay Grendal's eyes light up—as much as two demon-dark black holes in a man's face can, anyway.

He grips my hand like a tiger tearing at some slab of meat. The pump of his arm alone leaves zero doubt he plans to stab a dagger in my back the minute it's turned. He'd still come back for Grace and probably kill Nelson in cold blood if I were making a real truce.

Bad news for him: I'm so fucking not.

“Hell of a shake,” I say, already moving to the small table a few steps away. “Former military?”

“I never had the honor. But I've seen more gun battles than the average bonehead grunt,” he says, gross pride in his voice. “I once thought about—hey! What do you think you're doing?”

I freeze, already lifting the bottle, doing a slow turn as their guns rise again.

“Relax. I wanted to polish off the fine print right with a toast.” I give them a goofy grin, holding up the Macallan bottle. “If this goes well, I think I’ll be buying from you boys again. You’re pretty reasonable when you’re not trying to blow my brains out.”

A couple of his guys gasp when they see the bottle and lower their guns.

Grace just stares, worry etched in her pearl-blue eyes.

“Boss, that stuff’s the shit...if it’s real,” Jackknife grunts, the spark in his beady eyes saying *it’d better be*.

“Will you let me get some cups? I’ve got a few right over here. Go ahead, Grendal, take a sniff.” I struggle for a few seconds with the cap, tearing off its foil layer, working off the top, and then passing it over.

Tobin’s ruse with the seal worked. The bottle looks and feels as good as new.

Dammit, and now for the one part I forgot...I grab the only cups in the barn, the cheap red plastic ones we’d kept around for quick drinks of water after bringing in the horses, and walk back over to the group.

Grendal looks at me like I just pissed all over his expensive polished shoes.

“You can’t be serious? You...you expect us to enjoy a scotch like this out of these fucking frat house cups?”

“I’m sorry for the bad presentation. If you’d like to head on over to the house for some real glasses, we can. I’d ask my man, Tobin, but after the way you fucked him up earlier—”

“No. That was a mistake. We didn’t think you’d come to your senses so easily.” Grendal doesn’t wait as I pass out the cups, and then begin filling their glasses, saving one for me.

I give Grace a look. “Ladies last. This is a man’s drink, baby.”

Fuck, do I hate saying those words.

But the raw look of disgust she gives me—which I'm praying is still her playing along—makes the wolf and a few of his pack mates smile.

“To new friends and old acquaintances,” he says, lifting his cup, waiting.

I look down at the gold liquid swirling in my glass. None of the goons move, they're all waiting.

Waiting for me.

Nothing's gone according to plan today.

Slowly, I look at Grace. She doesn't have a clue what's happening, but she's watching me with huge glassy eyes, pleading against what I'm about to do.

That's the problem, though.

If it means saving her, keeping her safe, giving her back a life...I'd do a hell of a lot worse than drink poison.

“Bottoms up,” I say, throwing my shot back in one go.

Shit.

No sooner than I swallow, they tip their own cups, greedily sucking down the expensive booze.

Supposedly, the stuff is fast-acting. I loaded a smaller dose than what I gave Linus Hammond that night, knowing we just need to bring these fucks to their knees, not kill them outright.

It didn't hit Hammond for several hours after he'd left the bar, though, so Tobin combined it with another chemical. It should hit the bloodstream faster.

Clay Grendal and his crew only have minutes.

And so do I.

What worries me is if it doesn't hit them simultaneously. If several men see the others dropping...we'll be in for a world of hurt.

I need a diversion.

After pouring them another shot and setting the bottle down, I glance around. The horses are backed up in their stalls, nervously, like they can feel the tension.

The only thing moving around is Cornelius. He'd walked back inside the barn a minute ago, but now he's strutting around my feet in careless circles.

Damn this bird and his terrible timing.

Unless...

I take a messy step forward, pretending I'm a lightweight, totally unable to hold my liquor. Cornelius squawks and leaps in front of me.

Grendal laughs, and so do his men, slinging back their second shots.

They're cringing a second later when the rooster belts out an earsplitting call, telling my idiot feet to watch where they're going.

I make a show of almost tripping over him again and glare at Grace, telling her not to move.

They're roaring at my stupidity now, and I'm picking a fight with my own angry cock—words I never imagined in *this* context. Or any, really.

It's even more ridiculous that it's working.

I'm herding the chicken away from them, step by pissed off, screeching step.

Now, I just have to let Faulk know.

“Get over here already, you goddamned bird!” I shout, stumbling around like a buffoon, hitting the ground as I run him out of the barn, arms out to catch him.

Several of the goons follow, standing over me thrashing around in the dirt while Corny lets off a final warning screech. He's several inches away, circling me like an angry wrestler.

“I'll give you till the count of three!” I roar, flinging my fists in his direction, then pulling them back.

Corny flaps his wings furiously, stabbing the air with his beak.

Grendal follows a minute later, the scotch bottle in hand, fully glued to the shitshow circus act I'm putting on.

"One." I swing my arms at Cornelius just as I see a silhouette peeking around the corner of the storage shed.

Faulkner.

"Two!" I swoop my arms again, scooping up Cornelius this time, trying like hell not to get scratched to bloody pieces.

"I'll make it up to you later. Do your worst, buddy," I whisper to the rooster before shouting, "Three!"

I don't even have to toss him, just turn him around.

Cornelius goes flying at Grendal like a bat out of hell, screaming so loud they're holding their ears.

Or is it something more than damaged hearing they're worried about?

I get my answer a few seconds later when three of the men go down, dropping their guns, clutching their stomachs in agony.

"Grace!" I scream, but she's already taking cover, rushing to the other side of the barn.

Just in time.

Cornelius brings down hell, landing on Grendal's head with his spurs extended. The crime boss bellows like a bear covered in bees, at the full mercy of Corny's feet and a beak that won't quit.

Suddenly, I can hear my own heartbeat in my ears.

Time slows down and my vision fogs up.

I hear the FBI guys charging in, shouts, screams, grunts, and gunshots. They overwhelm the crippled, falling force of goons easily, but Grendal is still on his feet, fighting back somehow.

He's mine.

I don't know how I fight through the fog in my brain, and something that feels like a hot knife jabbing me in the gut, but I do.

My first strike is a kick to his right hand, knocking away the gun he's struggling to pull.

My second is a hard right punch to his throat, followed by a left-hook to the nose.

My final blow takes him down, a knee to the nads so hard it drives his balls into his stomach and hopefully gives him helium voice for life.

Normally, I wouldn't fight dirty, but this isn't a man I'm dealing with.

This is a fucking snake.

The full load of poison hits him then.

He rolls into a tangled ball, groaning like a sixth-grade bully who just got whipped on the playground. Faulk's men swarm us. Cornelius stands on the side of Grendal's head, jabbing him in the forehead with lightning-like needle-pecks.

"Surprise, Candy Man. Not all acting happens in Hollywood." I pick up his gun and point the barrel at his nose. "I'd *love* to blow your brains out right now for what you've done to Grace and her family, but you aren't worth the bullet. Get used to how your little balls feel right now. In prison, you'll be living with men who swing nuts far bigger than any you'll ever have. I hope you rot."

Grendal rasps like the dead and goes limp.

As if he knows he's the victor, Cornelius throws his head back and lets out an ear-piercing crow. Then he hops off the bastard's head, leaving a nice warm puddle of white bird crap in the demon's hair.

I wish I could laugh, celebrate, but everything goes fuzzy.

Like my eyes just won't focus right.

I'm not even sure whose huge arms are pulling me back, a rough familiar voice yelling in my ear. "Ridge? You gotta let it

out, man, you hear me? Ridge!”

I look up and see Grace in the barn. She’s still plenty terrified, confused, but I know she’s alive.

She’s safe.

Damn, I did it.

There’s barely a second to smile before the full force of Grady’s hands plow into my gut. He knows what’s wrong with me. By the second thrust of his knuckles under my ribs, right into my gag reflex, I’m dropping out of his arms, barfing.

It hurts like hell.

I get as much of the venom out as I can, too screwed up to even pay attention to the commotion as the Old Town Boys are quickly cuffed and led away.

Faulk makes his way over and drops to my side, helping Grady lift me up, and then I’m staring at Drake’s Dallas Police badge, struggling to stand on my own two feet.

I can’t do it without them.

“Ridge? You still with us, buddy?” Drake’s voice drawls in my ear.

I wish I could answer.

Hell, I can’t even speak. My lips won’t move.

“Call Abrams!” Faulk belts out. “It has to be that crap in his system, tell her it’s...”

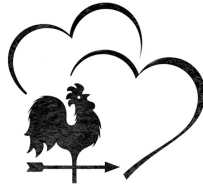
Right now, I’m not going to say I regret my friends scrambling to save my life.

But damn, if this is how it ends, I wish I’d kissed Grace just a little longer the last time.

I wish I’d told her I wanted to marry her for real.

The last thing I hear is Cornelius crowing like a gladiator, and then everything goes black.

NO FAKING IT (GRACE)



I've lived in fear for so long that I can't fully believe what I'm seeing as I watch them load Clay and his men, handcuffed, into guarded ambulances.

Half of them are on stretchers. They'll be kept under the gun with a huge FBI and police presence until whatever they've been tainted with works itself out of their systems. Then they'll be sent straight to jail.

A hundred questions scramble my brain.

I still don't know where the SWAT team came from. I hadn't seen them before, but the moment Ridge let Cornelius fly, they appeared like ants bursting out of a rotten log.

They literally swarmed the entire place, taking down Clay's men in one swift, well-coordinated swoop.

The only one who staggered away was Jackknife Pete. Someone attacked him from behind. The bullet hit the red truck, taking out the back window.

I know what happened now—Dad, who'd been tied up in the back of that truck, managed to get free and somehow still had his gun—but at the time...my eyes were one hundred percent glued to Ridge.

The way he took out Clay in seconds.

The way he said those horrible things so intensely. It was hard not to believe them, even though I knew deep down he was lying to save me.

The way he smiled just before he went crashing down with the goons, stricken by what was in that bottle.

At least the bird crap in Clay's manicured hair is hilarious and totally fitting.

But the rest is no laughing matter.

I look over and see Dad hugging Jackie Owens like a war just ended.

Maybe it has, but mine isn't over. Not until I see Ridge and hear Dr. Abrams say he'll be fine.

She insisted she'd know in roughly half an hour whether or not he needs an ambulance and the hospital. But it's going on an hour now.

She's still up there in his room, working, watching his vitals, making sure he's stable. "It's like a terrible case of food poisoning," she'd hinted.

God, I hope so.

Faulkner walks up the steps to the porch where we're gathered, his emerald-green eyes bright and guarded.

"Great work today, everybody. If I know Ridge, he'll be happy as hell when he wakes up," Faulk says, scrubbing a hand through his cropped hair. "And that was some damn good acting you did with him, Grace. Still can't believe how it ended with the chicken. It kept their attention, that's for sure."

If only we'd planned that far ahead.

"What now?" Dad says, turning back to Faulkner and another blue-eyed man with dark-blond hair and wild ink on his arms. I recognize Drake in his police uniform. "If you boys need me to come down to the station now, it's only fair."

"That won't be necessary. They'll be booked into the county jail as soon as they've got that crap out of their systems." Faulk's thin smile grows. "That's the best part. The trial should be in North Dakota, where Grendal's uncle doesn't have the same pull he does back in Wisconsin. And he won't have much for long."

Drake nods slowly, glancing at the vehicles. “Sheriff’s already back at the station, working on how to hit them at home. This is just the beginning. The Old Town Boys will be as good as gone in less than a week.”

“Hard to believe. Look, I know I flew off the handle earlier,” Dad says, wringing his hands.

“You took ten years off my life worrying about you!” Jackie chimes in, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Sorry for the scare. I couldn’t chance one more person getting hurt from this crap, so I took action. I knew Ridge had backup. But after what happened to Tobin, things got messy. I thought I’d do what I could to help lure Clay out here. Get it over with. It was high time.” He draws in a deep breath. “And if that means I’ve gotta face the music, so be it.”

“While I ain’t with the Feds officially anymore and can’t promise anything, several guys who are still on active duty promised me an exoneration for your cooperation, Mr. Sellers. Believe me, you’ll get it. There’ll be plenty of time tomorrow for a full statement,” Faulk says, glancing between Dad and me. “Plus, we need somebody to keep Ridge company. I know Tobin’s out of commission, too, a damn shame...”

I’m not sure why he went quiet until I turn around.

Dr. Abrams steps out on the porch, her face grim.

My chest tightens.

I can’t even breathe, afraid to speak the question searing the air.

“He’ll be fine,” she says, pausing so we can exhale our relief. “A little shaky overnight, certainly, and he’ll need that IV drip for a few more hours, however—”

No more words.

I don’t have the patience, the time, or the restraint.

I nearly bowl over the good doctor, launching myself at her in a big fat bear hug. And as soon as she’s regained her balance, I’m gone, sprinting through the house, upstairs,

straight to the half-open door of his room, which I fling against the wall.

“Shit, darlin’, where’s the fire?” Ridge blinks at me, his eyes gentle blue stars, sexier than ever and lazily half lidded. I’m not sure if it’s the bad stuff wearing off or something else Abrams gave him.

I don’t care.

Not as I jump on the bed, throw my arms around his neck, and bury my mouth against his.

We *definitely* break a few new records in speed kissing.

It’s hard remembering I have to pull back and let him rest.

He needs space to breathe.

Jesus, if it wasn’t for the IV in his arm, I think I’d be straddling him this instant with far fewer clothes.

“Holy hell. Ridge, I can’t believe you...that we...”

“Slow down, sweetheart. We did it, didn’t we?” He gives me a slow look.

I nod so fast I think my head might fall off, and keep nodding as I say, “You were amazing! They’re all busted. Faulkner said they’re off to the hospital and then straight to jail. I suppose somebody should check on Cornelius, but... God. What was in that drink?”

Even through the haze of sickness, his gaze drops. His huge body lets out a low melancholy sigh, and then I feel his big, thick hand folding around mine.

“I hope you won’t hate me for this, Grace...”

“Hate you?” I blink at him.

“There’s one more thing I have to come clean about. And it can’t leave this room. Tobin and the boys who helped us today—Grady, Faulk, Drake—they’re the only ones who know. I only told my friends recently so they’d know exactly how to help us.”

“Ridge.” His name falls out of me and I grab his hand. “Tell me. Anything.”

“That fuck who killed my mother, Linus Hammond...he’s the reason I knew how to think on my feet and save your life.”


One Week Later

I’M STILL REELING.

Witnessing firsthand everything this gorgeous man did for me was a shock.

Finding out he was afraid I’d run off after learning he’d poisoned a monster who could compete with Clay Grendal for Satan’s finest?

After he told me, I buried my face in his chest and cried.

It’s a heavy thing when a man trusts you with his secrets, his life, his *all*.

And after everything I’ve done, everything Dad went through, right or wrong...I’m in no position to judge him for taking justice into his own hands.

If he hadn’t done it again, if he hadn’t conquered his own trauma with Hammond long enough to face down Clay, I wouldn’t be standing here in this fabulous dress worthy of a fairy tale.

He’s only ever asked for one thing—for me to *live*—and tonight, I won’t let him down.

I glance at Ridge, shaking my head. “You’re sure about this? The party—”

Nodding, he grins. “Hell yeah, it’s still on. Bebe wrangled most of our guests into coming back after the meltdown last week. We have a whole town full of people waiting to hobnob with the rich and famous. I can’t let Dallas down or the folks from back home. The show must go on.”

I roll my eyes, laughing.

He sounds like Dad, who insisted they get on with it after days of being down at the station, racking his brain for every detail about the Old Town Boys. It's amazing how my father was reborn, and legally, he's almost home free.

"Um, about that. Even with the focus on you being Mr. Bigshot Hero Man, don't you think people will remember the real reason we invited them out here?"

I can't bring myself to say the E-word.

It has to end, this acting, our sham engagement.

"And? So what if they do?" Ridge asks, mischief sparking in his eyes as he adjusts his tie in the mirror.

I'm so lost.

There's no reason to continue the charade, besides this party, which the entire town is looking forward to. It's a social obligation for him, I get it.

The air feels shaky as it enters my lungs.

"Maybe you're right. The engagement stuff won't be earth-shattering for most people when they're sharing the same room with superstars." I smile, fixing a few loose strands of hair with my fingers.

What's one more evening out? I've been pretend engaged to Ridge for weeks now.

And even if most of the town knows what happened out here last week, they probably haven't pieced together the pretend part of our relationship.

I shouldn't worry.

But it just feels different now.

Heck, *I* feel different, and so does our beautiful little sham.

I have no earthly clue what happens next. Dad and I are free to go anywhere, without looking over our shoulders. With the big bust in Milwaukee a couple days ago, and former Congressman Grendal in custody, the network has to be close to done like Dad insists.

We're free to chart our own course, free to go anytime.

But that's just the problem—I don't want to go anywhere.

I'm dangerously happy here, living a lie so beautiful I never want it to end.

I keep smiling at my reflection in the mirror, full of *if-onyls*.

If only Ridge loved me.

If only I wasn't...well, me.

I'm so not the kinda catch a movie star *marries*. He's Prince Charming in lethally sexy flesh. I'm a freaking peasant.

Ridge slides so easily into being Mr. Normal that it's easy to forget. Sure, a wickedly handsome and very loaded kind of normal but...

Normal in his laughter. Normal in his dreams. Everything except normal when he kisses me so hard I start believing in wishes again.

Seeing the show he put on for Clay and his goons reminded me just how good of an actor he is.

Fortunately, I look the part of a princess tonight.

The dress I've chosen is royal blue, strapless, and there's no chance of my boobs falling out.

Yay.

A shudder ripples through me, though, remembering that time Ridge walked in while I'd been trying on dresses not so long ago.

I shouldn't even dare to want a rerun.

No way.

After tonight, this last big shindig, I have a feeling I'm destined to turn into a pumpkin as far as he's concerned.

Not that he'd throw me out on the street or anything—though maybe that'd be easier—rather, he has to turn me loose soon.

“Need some help, darlin’? Here.” He crosses the room, and I try not to tremble when I feel his hands on my back.

He zips me up, the one thing I hadn’t done yet. His chiseled face behind me completes the look, like I’ve morphed into someone else.

If only it was that easy.

I put my hair up using the gold filigree barrette clasp Bebe sent with the dresses. It leaves a few loose waves around my face. The high-end makeup does its job, too.

Glancing at myself in the mirror as I step into the black heels, another special delivery, I’m surprised by the image staring back at me.

It’s me, obviously, but the reflection is a woman who’s actually pretty. Sophisticated. Halfway *worthy* of a man like Ridge Barnet.

Amazing what an outfit worth more than any vehicle I’ve ever owned can do for a girl.

“You know, you haven’t looked at me once,” he whispers, tucking his chin against my shoulder, pushing soft, warm breath to my throat. “What’s the matter, Grace? Figured out how fucking knockout sexy you are and now this boy isn’t good enough? Look at me, darlin’.”

Slowly, tenderly, and yes, seductively, he turns me around to face him.

He’s wearing the tux. The same one Tobin resumed fussing over as soon as he could walk again, and *oh my God*.

Pure electric desire rushes through my system, threatening to short-circuit every inch of me.

My body heats like fire at the points where his hands linger on my waist.

“Holy hell,” I whisper. “You look—”

“Fuckable? I hope that’s the next word you planned on coming out of your mouth.” His grin makes it hard to stay conscious. “Because I’m all healed up from my dustup, and

later, Miss Sellers...I'd love to pick up right where we left off."

There's no doubt whatsoever what he means.

Not with his finger grazing down my back, tracing my spine, languidly running across my ass.

"Almost forgot. I also have this for you," he says, breathing into my ear while this small shiny thread materializes from nowhere.

A necklace. And he does the honors, draping it over my neck.

Glancing down, I see a string of pearls. Very expensive ones.

"The pearls belonged to my mom a long time ago. She never wore them since she was young," he whispers. "Beautiful things deserve to be seen on beautiful people, not locked up in a box. And, Grace, tonight you're fucking dynamite."

"Oh, Ridge. I can't. This was hers..it's too special," I say, stunned that he's giving me the honor.

"Exactly. *Was* hers. Now it's yours." He kisses my shoulder before twisting me around, showing off my look of shock in the mirror. "It's too perfect with that dress. Don't make me drag Tobin in here for a second opinion."

I smile, knowing I should protest, but it's only one night.

So I nod and step away, moving to the closet to grab this stylish white velour cape. "Is everyone else ready?"

"They're waiting on us," he says, taking the cape. He drapes it over my shoulders and ties the silk strings under my chin. "As much as I'd love to linger and unwrap you right damn now, best not to keep the people waiting."

I want to loop my arms around him, kiss him like mad, but I resist the urge.

If there was ever a time to start weaning myself off him, it's now.

Ridge and I take his dually pickup, while Tobin, using a cane I'd found in the antiques a few weeks ago, rides with Dad and Jackie in her car. It's easier for him to get in and out.

"No reason to be nervous," Ridge says as we're driving along the highway. "You're about to shock and awe everybody in the room. I don't care how rich they are or how many film credits they've got."

I pinch my lips together, continuing to look out the side window. "There's also no reason to keep up this game, Ridge. Clay's in jail. Dad and I are safe. We can go anytime."

"Sure you can. Once the trial's over and your Ford gets repaired."

Oh, Jesus.

The truck. It's probably totaled.

Jess had it towed to town along with the new truck Tobin was in when they ran him off the road. With everything else going on the past week, it totally skipped my mind.

"Where do you think you'll end up? Back in Wisconsin? I'm sure a judge would give you the farm back."

I shrug. "It's up to Dad. Mostly."

"Don't you have a say?"

It hardly matters. The only thing I know is I'm going to need time to heal from all of this.

"I'm sure we'll discuss it at some point," I say glumly.

"Just as long as you're happy wherever you end up," he says, a sharpness in his eyes. "Whether that's Wisconsin or Wyoming or right here in little Dallas."

I nod, glance his way briefly, and then stare out the windshield. "He always wanted to see Montana. That's where we were headed that first night, to my cousin Noelle's farm." Tears sting my eyes, hot emotion ambushing me, but I need to tell him. "We can't stay with you forever, Ridge. Dad wants a fresh start and so do I. The sooner the better."

His silence scares me, this quiet storm building.

But it also tells me I'm doing the right thing, getting everything out in the open.

I mean, if he had, by some freakish miracle, fallen in love with me, he'd have said so...right?

And I can't say boo about it either way because he's already done far too much for us.

I can't stand putting more on his shoulders.

I know what that's like thanks to Dad, carrying someone else.

"We'll talk about it tonight. After we get home," he says firmly but not angrily. "Right now, we've got a hotel full of people looking for a rush of fun. Let's give them what they expect."

"You're right. Sorry. I'm not trying to ruin anything. We'll knock 'em dead."

I smile, reach across the console, and take his hand.

If this is my last night as Ridge's bride-to-be, let's go out with fireworks.



THE HOTEL LOOKS BIGGER and fancier than I thought.

It's this place from the fifties by the interstate with a grand banquet hall. A natural backdrop for the rich and famous, an elegant small-town gem.

I find out later it's been renovated recently with a community grant from North Earhart Oil, Drake and Bella Larkin putting the old Reed fortune to good use, making Dallas shine.

There's a huge buffet set out, tables, a dance floor, a live band, and an open bar—thank God.

A stiff drink sounds nice right about now. Liquid courage never hurt a girl.

The room is already swarming with people when we arrive, and there must be ten cameras for every guest.

Ridge introduces me to so many familiar faces of people I've never met. All well-known stars, reporters, businessmen, and badass ladies showering us with wishes as this happy new couple.

Like I need even more reminders I don't belong in his life.

They're all very nice and surprisingly grounded, though, and Ridge is his usual cocky, fun-loving self.

He leads me through the crowd, the introductions, making it feel just a little more effortless.

Bonus: he's deliciously encouraging with his hands.

Every time he touches me, I melt a little more inside.

Which, let's be real, is *all the freaking time* when his arm rests snug around me or his hand is in mine if it's not on the small of my back.

My ears burn as an actor tells Ridge he can't wait to see him on the screen again.

"It's a decent script. Another Western thriller, they want me to be Mr. Tortured Outlaw Man. Considering recent events, I'm up for the job." Ridge chuckles. "Guess filming starts in a few months."

Ridge's words echo in my head.

I thought he was done with film?

They go back and forth, bantering about working together again, all the things that happened during their last film.

Bebe joins our small group a minute later. She's ecstatic as she mentions how Hollywood is already buzzing over the new film, and then starts talking about schedules, producers, directors, writers, and plenty more that makes my head spin.

I spot Alicia and Amy near the bar and excuse myself from the group, but I only take a few steps when Bebe grasps my elbow.

"That dress looks amazing on you, doll," she says, flashing this smile that could eat up the entire world.

“Thanks for sending it, plus the other stuff. I’d be a lot less impressive if I had to go digging in my own wardrobe.”

“All part of the deal! Which, I need to thank you for again,” she rushes out beneath her breath. “My God, the magic you worked on that man...”

“Me?”

“Yes, you! Who else? Ridge agreed to do more movies because of you.” She elbows me with surprising strength for being such a pint-sized woman. “I think someone’s in love. Honey, keep a leash on him, whatever you’re doing...it’s working beautifully for you both.”

I...

Just when I didn’t think anything else could shock me tonight, here comes an atom bomb.

My insides sink.

Because of me, she said.

I’ve chased him out of his home.

Out of retirement.

Back into everything he hates.

“Excuse me,” I force out. “I just...I need to speak to someone.”

“Of course,” Bebe chirps. “Enjoy the night, and thank you again. Lord knows I tried everything to woo him back to the screen for years, and you did it in weeks. The Prince is back, and I don’t think anyone cares about the why!”

I nod, swallowing the bitter taste in the back of my throat.

God.

I’m overwhelmed. The terrifying, exhilarating possibility that Ridge feels something deeper makes my heart pound.

It’s insane even considering it when we’re worlds apart.

Still...he cut a deal for more films, the very thing he hates, all so he could slay my dragon.

All for little old me.

Eep.

“Hey, Grace! Over here!” Amy calls out, seeing me blundering around like a lost gazelle. “Who’d you kill for *that* dress?”

She gives me a hug, and so does Alicia.

“It does the job. You two look fantastic.”

Honestly, they do. Amy has her long hair curled and pinned up, while Alicia’s hangs long and straight.

“You have no idea. It’s a relief to get out of mom attire for once!” Amy lifts her dress. “Heels even. No yoga pants, t-shirts, and Crocs tonight.”

“No ponytails either,” Alicia says, flicking her hair with a smile. “I haven’t worn a formal since high school. I swear, the entire town is here. Look, Bella Larkin brought the big guns!”

I look over and see a curvy, elegant-looking woman with piercing eyes and styled brunette waves. She’s in a long flowing baby-blue dress, Drake Larkin hanging on her arm.

“Damn,” Amy hisses, watching them float through the crowd. “I wonder if they feel upstaged, having folks even richer and more famous than they are here tonight? Then again, with Ridge moving here, that’s kinda already happened. They’re rich and famous but not like...movie star famous.”

“Amy, hush!” Alicia jabs her sister playfully in the side. “They’re good people. If only they’d brought Edison to the party. Did you hear what that crazy horse did last week?”

I shake my head.

“While the ruckus with the cops and those thugs was going down at your place, Edison chased down this punk kid who thought it’d be cute to steal fireworks from the Dallas Days festival coming up next month.” Alicia smiles, shaking her head. “I guess Bella took Edna into town for a stroll, and Edison went looking for his mare. It’s true what they say, he’s part bloodhound. And I guess he’s an honorable deputy of the Dallas Police now, too.”

“Only thing I wonder is which one’s luckier,” Amy says, her eyes following the happy couple. “Him for marrying a girl that rich, or her for marrying a dude that hot.”

I smile and shake my head. Of course, I’ve heard the story of Bella, Drake, and Edison a dozen times. Bella seems so normal making the rounds. It’s easy to forget she inherited her grandfather’s massive wealth and an oil company.

Drake didn’t come from money. He was a salt of the earth security type from what Ridge told me. And yet somehow the stars decided they were meant to be.

They met.

They fell in love.

They’re clearly making it work.

Could that be my ever after with Ridge?

“Uh-oh, watch out!” Amy claps her hands against her cheeks, leaning toward me. “See over there? Miss Marcellus, our old gym teacher. She’s never seen in public.” She nods at an older woman with short grey hair and what looks like a permanent scowl glued to her face.

“She looks scary,” I say.

“She is!” they both yell simultaneously.

“What’s wrong tonight, Grace?” Amy asks. “You look down.”

Amy Berland’s keen insight is one of many reasons why I enjoy our friendship.

“I’m just a little overwhelmed.” Glancing around the crowded room, I nod at their wine glasses when my gaze makes it back to them. “I need another drink.”

They look at each other, then at me.

“Oh, we know exactly what you need,” Amy says with a wicked smile.

“We’ll fix you up right,” Alicia echoes.

A few minutes later, all three of us have a shot of tequila, salt on our other hands, and a lime wedge.

“On the count of three,” Alicia says. “One. Two. Three!”

Boom.

I lick the salt, toss back the shot, and stick the lime in my mouth, sucking out the juice as I swallow the tequila.

It’s still burning on the way down when hands circle my waist from behind. I gasp, unsure whether it’s the shot or Ridge’s very capable hands drawing the air out of me.

“Tequila shots?” he asks.

I shrug. “It’s not a party until Captain T shows up.”

My insides sink at the puzzled way Amy and Alicia look at me.

“It’s a joke,” I say. “Something we always said in college.”

They both burst out laughing.

“I need you for a minute,” Ridge growls in my ear.

Waving at Amy and Alicia, I walk away with him.

“Don’t do that to yourself,” he says, once we’re out of earshot.

“Do what?”

“Look so freaked, thinking you’d embarrassed yourself in front of them. Darlin’, they love you and so does damn near everybody you’ve met in this town. You’re cutting yourself short again.” He stops, steps in front of me, and cups my face. “I know you’ve been through hell. It doesn’t define who you are. What matters is how you came through it. Head up and standing tall. Own that, woman. Be proud of yourself. You know I am.”

Heaven help him, he gets a smile out of me.

Still, a pep talk isn’t what I need right now. More tequila sounds better.

Grabbing his hand, I lace my fingers through his and squeeze.

“You don’t need to do this anymore, you know,” I whisper.

“Do what?”

I can’t look him in the eyes.

“This hero act. Being extra nice to me like we’re more than a couple mixed-up people who got tossed together. It’s over...or it will be soon, I guess.”

No sooner had the words come out than I know I’ve made a mistake.

He runs his hands over my shoulders, down my arms, and cups my waist. Then he pulls me closer so our hips collide.

“Is it?” he wonders, that sinful smolder in his voice. “Doesn’t feel one damn bit *over*, Grace. Not to me.”

Oh, my. I hold my breath against the hot frenzy of emotion.

Lust.

Worry.

Love.

Stir them up together and you’ve got one heady cocktail. I’m not even sure I want that tequila anymore when I’m drunk on this infuriating, sexy, all-too-hard-to-crack man.

“So I heard something interesting,” I say softly, laying my hands over his shoulders. “Bebe told me I’m the reason you agreed to give Hollywood another chance.”

“I told you from the beginning I’d do anything and everything I could to help you and Nelson. Bebe risked her ass arranging this party, working her contacts for the drugs that set up the sting operation. She wanted a few more movies in return, so I agreed.”

“I still can’t believe how many drugs he was packing.” A shiver ripples through me. “Why, Ridge? Why did you do something so dangerous?”

We lock eyes. Those gems of his glow like bright-blue flames, his expression pure stone.

“The fact that you’re even asking tells me I’d better show you. C’mon.”

Taking my hand, he rushes me to the dance floor, and we step into the soft orange light. It takes roughly ten seconds for the entire crowd to go eerily quiet.

Oh, boy.

Dancing with him in front of these people is the last thing I need.

“Ridge—”

He holds up a finger.

“Just trust me,” he whispers.

After everything we’ve been through, there’s no doubt about that. I clamp my lips together.

Then his hands are on my waist, and we sway to the rest of this country rock tune. Our own fluid movements mirror the rhythm and wailing lyrics. I think it’s a hit off this new album by formerly infamous pop star Milah Holly, singing in a style I barely recognize about a clown rodeo called love.

Only, when Ridge bends me low in a thrilling dip, I see through the people clustered around the stage.

It’s a live band.

The Milah Holly is actually here, belting out her song. She’s tall, blonde, and picture-perfect, her eyes done up like an Egyptian goddess as she watches us and wipes a tear as soon as the song finishes to gentle applause.

“Thanks, everybody!” She says into the mic. “And how about a hand for our hosts tearing up the dance floor? I think there’s a twister on fire in this little town tonight. You two lovebirds are sweet as pie. You remind me of a lot of folks back home...and it takes a special kinda man to shut down a freak show with drugs. Trust me, *I know*. Never let him go, Grace Sellers.”

Dead.

I'm a goner. A world-class artist knows my freaking name. I can hardly focus on the gentle applause rippling around us.

"Darlin'?" Ridge purrs in my ear. "You still with me?"

"I, um...seriously, Ridge? Milah flipping Holly? You told her about us?"

"It's Milah. She's famous for being nosy." He grins, entirely too coy and too gorgeous. "Plus, she's got her own crew of badasses backing her up. Didn't want a lady sending Enguard Security after my ass for refusing to answer a few little questions."

Wow.

Just...*wow*.

That's putting it elegantly. I'm beyond frazzled.

Even with the song over, he keeps us in the center of the floor, gazing into my soul with heavy questions it'd take a lifetime to decipher.

"Ridge?" Now it's my turn. "Still with me?"

"Stay right here," he tells me, suddenly peeling away, leaving me alone with about a thousand eyes glued to me.

Questioning my own sanity, I stand there, glancing around nervously at the smiling faces, trying to make out the hushed murmurs going around.

A second later, I realize Ridge jogged over and jumped on the stage. Milah Holly gives him a quick hug before passing him the mic.

He says something to the guys on guitars and then faces the crowd again.

Dear Lord, what's he doing now? Singing?

Listen, if this is some weird karaoke thing...I think I'm out.

But the band begins a new tune, delicate and slow, and Ridge jumps off the stage with the microphone, heading for me.

And yes—holy Toledo, he’s singing. An Elvis song I recognize. *Can’t Help Falling in Love*.

Is there anything this man can’t do? He actually matches the King’s voice pretty well.

All the feels are there in every line.

All the fears in every raging beat of my heart.

All the heartbreak if this isn’t the spectacular, miraculous, unbelievable Big Thing coming.

My heart leaps into my throat as he holds out his hand, singing the last few lines with passion gushing out of him.

Everyone is watching, so of course I do, too, trembling from head to toe.

His eyes are locked on mine and they’ve never been so clear, so real, so beautiful.

The spotlight above the floor reflects in his gaze like the Milky Way.

Suddenly, I hear my mom’s voice.

If you’ve got a light, you’ve still got a wish.

Tonight, we both have all the light and—dare I say it?—*love* we could ever need.

I do wish, Mom.

I wish he’ll love me like this forever.

When it’s over, I’m a teary-eyed, trembling mess. My eyes are so fixed on him that I can’t even worry about the public affection, the crowd erupting, clapping and cheering and yelling out encouragement.

With his gaze still locked on mine, he whispers, “That’s why, darlin’. Didn’t think words could do the heavy lifting for this.”

Stunned, I shake my head.

He can’t mean...

He can’t be saying...

Oh my God.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” he says into the microphone, again sounding exactly like Elvis as he bows to the crowd. Then, in his own voice, he says, “I also want to thank all of you for coming here tonight to our big celebration. One thing I’ve figured out about Dallas, North Dakota, is how this town loves secrets. That’s something you’ve got in common with L.A., and since we’ve got plenty of folks here from both...when Grace and I got engaged, we talked about it, but I never officially asked her. Go ahead, shame on me, but I’d like to remedy that right now.”

Then, to my utter shock and awe, he goes down on one knee.

“W-what are you doing?” I whisper, my lips trembling.

Holding my hand, kneeling before me, he kisses the back while looking up at me. “Grace Sellers, you were the best stray who ever came into my life. I had my own demons when we met. Hell, I’m still working them out, but you showed me I was someone else, too. I love you more than I ever thought I could love, woman. I told you the only thing I ever expected when we took down Clay Grendal was for you to live. Yet you’ve shown me what living actually is. What loving can be. And now I’m just wondering one thing...”

It’s the heaviest silence of my life.

My face becomes a gooey red mess, but I so don’t care.

I’ll never care about anything again except the next words coming out of his mouth.

“Will you do me the honor of being my wife, Grace, so we can live the best way we can—together? Will you marry me?”

No words could ever describe the torrential flood rushing through me.

Happiness. Joy. Glee. Bliss. Nerves. Ecstasy.

Butterflies with *teeth*.

I don’t release my other hand over my mouth until I feel his lips brush my palm.

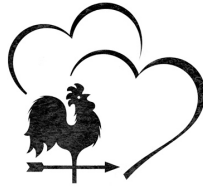
Lowering my hand, I press it against the rapid thud of my heart and try to remember how to speak.

“Yes!”

One simple word with more feeling than I’ve ever known.

Then his arms are wrapped around me, his lips attack mine, and my mind keeps shouting, *yes, yes, yes* until I can’t stop the joyful tears.

NO LOOSE ENDS (RIDGE)



As I hold Grace in my arms, the most beautiful woman ever made, I feel like a volcano.

Even as I'm kissing her face off, there's a growl in my blood, churning like magma.

Now, it's with excitement.

Sweet relief.

A moment ago, it was fear. The thought that she might say no scared me worse than anything I've encountered in my life.

I think it's the only thing that could've truly broken me.

This heart beats for her. She's put the love back in it and given me every breath, every beat, every heartfelt word I found the courage to say.

All for a love I never knew I had in me.

I lift her up, twirling her around, and kiss her again. Then I pick up the microphone I'd dropped on the floor.

"Sorry for the mic drop," I mutter into it. "But you heard what she said!"

The crowd cheers and I kiss her again before taking the microphone back to the band, with Grace at my side, right where she belongs, tonight and forever.

"Now, I can tell you the rest of the story," I say, leading her to a quiet, somewhat secluded corner of the room.

Her eyes are so bright, so merry, even as she frowns. “The rest?”

I kiss the frown lines between her eyes. “I mentioned you traveling with me when it comes time to shoot those films. You’ll develop an awesome eye for design with the best of the best. Bebe thinks you could even work on the set someday, if you want. I know you’ll like it, and you’re so damn good at those things. It’s a Western, after all.”

“You *what?*”

I nod, grinning. “I almost told you in the truck, on the way to town, but I figured I’d wait until we were back home. Alone. Which is when I also planned on asking you to marry me, originally. For real.” I kiss her hand. “I couldn’t wait. So I had to improvise here, tonight. And Milah Holly was down to help after we struck up a conversation, so...”

“You know how to improvise like an eagle knows how to fly,” she says, leaning her head against my bicep.

“I’ll show you more later,” I say. “In a bed full of rose petals.”

“Rose petals?” She’s holding her breath.

“My bed should be covered in them by now. There’s a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice with our names on it.”

Her body shakes real sweet from laughter. “Don’t tell me you improvised that too. I won’t believe it. How long have you been planning this?”

“A little while.”

Only white lie I tell her tonight.

Truth be told, the idea of being married to her was in the back of my mind for weeks.

I just never let it hit with full intensity until I knew Grendal was on his way.

The thought of losing her hit so hard and strong. The day after I got over the poisoned scotch, I put a plan in place for

asking her tonight. Very, very privately since everyone already thought we were engaged.

I knew I couldn't do it until after Grendal's entire ring was busted. That came together like lightning this week.

"Are you sure, Ridge?" she whispers. "We aren't exactly cut from the same cloth."

Shit.

That's exactly why she would've never agreed.

Grace has this foolish belief she's not worthy of me.

Every second I look at her, I know it's the opposite.

I cup her face. "Thank God we aren't. You're cut from an angel's robe, and mine's more like the devil's suit. I need you, woman. I'm going to keep needing you for the rest of my life. I love you like hell. Love you with everything I am, everything I'll ever have, and every damn thing I'll ever be."

I love how she pauses and takes a sharp breath.

"I love you, too, Ridge. So much. But what if your friends find out about Clay? About my past? It could ruin your career."

I laugh. "You kidding? I'm the only idiot who could ruin my career, and it doesn't mean nearly as much to me as you do. And anyone who has doubts will learn why they're stupid soon enough. Clay's being prosecuted. The Old Town Boys will be national news. Hell, friends of mine are already sniffing around about pitching a film based on it. You'll be the heroine of that story." I kiss her. "And I'll be your hero."

"A little late. You are my hero." She smiles awkwardly. "I know how cheesy that sounds, but—"

"But nothing. I love it, darlin'." I slide my hands over the silkiness of her shoulders, down her arms, and around to cup her ass. "Let's go mingle a while so we can leave. Best not to keep that champagne waiting too long."

~

IT'S after midnight before we're finally able to leave after shaking so many hands it feels like a workout.

The visions I've been having for hours turn into torment.

Grace naked, on my bed, legs spread wide for the taking.

"I saw you talking to Dad," she says once we're on the highway.

"Had to apologize for not asking his permission first. He's an old-fashioned guy." I glance at her. "He forgave me, don't worry."

She laughs. "He's excited about your idea with the pumpkins..."

"Yeah, he said he really loved that. I have the perfect place for him to start growing a patch. He can live in the cabin until he figures out if he wants to take off for Montana fishing. We've got the whole season to plant fields full of pumpkins and give hayrides to his heart's content. Bet Rosie and Stern will enjoy the exercise, too, and you know Cornelius will love the visitors."

I wink and she laughs again.

"Damn, do I love that rooster, though, even if I hate what he does to my eardrums," I say, shaking my head. "I apologized for riling him up to take on Clay and promised him a few hens this summer."

I'd brought the farming idea up with Nelson while also apologizing to him for not asking his permission before asking Grace to marry me for real. Wanted him to get something out of the bargain. He's giving me his daughter, after all.

"I'm sure he'll be a hit with the ladies," she says, fluttering her fingers against my hand.

Not the tease my dick needs right now, but damn if part of me doesn't like it.

"Jackie liked the idea for your dad, too." I say, glancing her way to see how she reacts to that.

Smiling, she nods. “Good. I like her a lot, and I’m happy Dad was able to make a friend, finally.”

“Enough to have her as a stepmother someday? Because if I was a guessing man, I’d say ours won’t be the only wedding in the future.”

She beams like the sun. “Nothing would make me happier. He’s been so lonely since Mom died, and he deserves a little happiness after what he’s been through.”

“You do, too,” I say, taking her hand. “When’s the date?”

“Date?” She folds her other hand around our clasped fingers.

“Wedding date. Ours. When are we getting married?” I let out an exaggerated sigh. “Please don’t make me wait long. I have a few insane honeymoon ideas.”

That gets a giggle out of her as sure as it paints her cheeks red.

“Seriously. If we were in Vegas, we’d already be married. Fake Elvis and all instead of me singing his tunes.” I stare at her. “Want to fly there tonight? Tobin would probably love to book us a jet. He’s dying to feel useful again after having to take a week off.”

“No.” She lifts our hands, kissing mine. “I want to see rose petals and drink champagne.”

“Goddamn, do I love you.” I push down harder on the gas pedal.

Within minutes of arriving home, we’re naked on the bed, throwing rose petals at each other.

I never expected this day to end in a petal-fight with a woman who’s agreed to spend eternity with me, but here we are.

Eventually, I hurl myself back against the pillows, arms wrapped around her, bringing her with me. “I’ve never gotten undressed so fast in my life.”

She wiggles her lithe, perfect body on top of me and props her elbows on my shoulders. “I don’t know. I’ve seen you strip pretty fast before.”

Her back is arched and her tits are just below my chin. I tweak one of her nipples between my thumb and forefinger.

My other hand sweeps between her legs.

I’m throbbing like a drum when I see how wet she is.

“Fuck. So tonight wasn’t a record for getting undressed?”

She shakes her head. “Sorry.”

I tweak her other nipple, loving how it puckers at my touch. “Then we’d better set a new record. How many times can my cock take you over the edge tonight?”

“That sounds fun, but what will we have to look forward to on our wedding night?”

“Breaking the old record,” I growl.

Whatever the fuck I have to say about records, I’m ready to break something right now. I lift my hips, grinding my cock against her folds, touching my swollen tip to her clit.

She pushes off my shoulders and sits back on her knees between my legs.

“I’m down with that idea.”

I smile. “And we haven’t even cracked the champagne yet.”

She shuts me up with a kiss that could douse the world in flames.

“Save it for round two.” Her eyes are hot, big, ready to be shook into oblivion. “I want you now, Ridge.”

“Ditto.” I grasp her sides as she rises up, plants her knees on both sides of my hips, and positions herself over my hard-on.

“Or maybe round three,” she says with a whimper, lowering down on my shaft.

I feel her like mad.

Her pussy is so slick, so ready, so fucking mine.

I love how it stretches just right, anchoring my dick deep inside her.

“I’ll never get tired of this,” she whispers, sinking all the way down so I can feel her wetness on my balls.

Damn!

Then she rises up again, urging my hips to chase her. The sensation, the friction stalls my breath and breaks my inner beast off his chain.

I suck a ragged breath as she lowers back down.

Whether it’s truly the best ever, or I just think so because now I know she’s mine to keep, I’m not sure, but I know one thing.

At this rate, I won’t last long.

I reach down, gently flicking the tip of her clit as she rises up again, and then give it my thumb.

She gasps, and then it’s my turn as her pussy tightens more, plunging down faster, then up again for another strike.

Again.

Oh, fuck, *again*.

I grab her hips, slamming her down harder every time, and arch up to meet her.

Driving, leading, taking her harder and faster with every stroke until we’re both soaring.

“So close. So...oh! Ridge!” she screams, arching as she comes, my hands swinging her hips deeper into the storm.

Her wet heat squirts on my dick.

What little control I had left goes to shreds.

“Grace, fuck!”

Driving deeper one last time, a firestorm rips through my body as she takes me with her, coming pure lightning. My

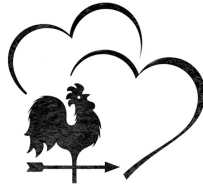
seed erupts in her, furious and hot, my balls pumping and aching to spill everything, to claim her from the inside out.

The aftermath is just as perfect, just as electrifying as she collapses on my chest, my cock still inside her, still throbbing as her pussy quivers with the last of her aftershocks.

We lay there, breathing hard, before she lifts her head and laughs. “I think you’ve convinced me. I’m ready to set some new records.”

I fully agree and spend hours that night setting several new barriers for us to break on our wedding night.

NO SUBSTITUTE (GRACE)



For the tenth time today, I pinch myself in the thigh.

I'm not taking any chances that this is a dream.

Part of me worries that one morning, I'll wake up and none of this will be real.

Barely a month after Ridge asked me to marry him, we're back at the hotel, in the banquet room, saying our I do's.

Dallas comes out again in full, and so do many of his high-profile friends from Hollywood. This time, when I enter the crowd-filled room, I'm beaming with happiness.

Dad walks me along the red carpet that's been laid out from the huge door to where Ridge stands on the stage. They've turned it into an altar, complete with an archway covered in yellow roses.

He's in a lady-killer tux again. Black with a gold cummerbund.

I swear, a hotter man never existed on this planet. In this galaxy. In this freaking universe.

"It makes me smile to see you this happy, Gracie," Dad says with a sniff I pretend I don't notice. "Some days, I just can't believe our luck."

"I feel the same way, Dad." My heart swells with love as each step brings me closer to Ridge. "We've been through hell and back and have a lot to be proud of."

“We sure do, Gracie-girl. Your mother wouldn’t believe it.”

The sun shines in through the window, soft gold highlighting my groom in his full glory just then.

I’d be a fool to miss the symbol.

A light.

My guiding light to happiness.

My wish, finally coming true.

“If you’ve got a light, you’ve still got a wish,” I say, mostly to myself.

Dad chuckles. “You remember that, huh? Haven’t heard that old saying in years.”

“Every day,” I whisper. “Every single day.”

I should do more than remember.

After today, I should believe it with all my heart.

It took Ridge Barnet to restore my shattered faith in wishes. Love truly doesn’t have any boundaries.

The ceremony is as beautiful as our commitment for life.

More memories than I could ever hope to hold spill out in every moment. I don’t think we’re up there for more than ten or fifteen minutes with everybody’s eyes glued to us.

I’m so stuck on Ridge, I barely get to glance around at the tears falling out of my bridesmaids, Amy and Alicia, or the solemn nods of approval from Faulkner, Grady, Joel Andrews, and Drake, Ridge’s groomsmen.

I do catch Tobin, Ridge’s best man, quickly flicking aside his glasses to catch a tear, then straightening his suit like nothing ever happened.

It’s so hard not to smile until it hurts.

I wish I could brand every second into my brain for life.

The fierce way he says *I do* with his midnight-blue eyes blazing with promise.

The sweet, oh-so-possessive way he slides the ring on my finger.

The unbelievable way he lifts me up and gives me a kiss that sears my soul.

It happens about half a second before the pastor finishes the famous call to kiss the bride.

If there's a glitch anywhere, I never notice. I'm too focused on Ridge, now my husband, to have and to hold for the rest of my days.

The reception that follows is the perfect celebration of our new life together. We slip away while the band plays on, drinks keep flowing like water, and finally Ridge carries me over the threshold of the hotel's honeymoon suite.

And yes, I'm sure he's thrilled that we finally break that record for our clothes coming off.

No easy feat when I'm decked out like a white bell with laces that give his fingers the ultimate MacGyver test.

We both groan at the pleasure when he enters me for the first time as my husband, and again as he plunges deeper, to the hilt, claiming my depths.

God.

My nails rake down his back, and I can't stop my legs from shaking to save my life.

He fills me, thrills me, and languishes in these slow, focused thrusts. They unite us fully, just like each feral kiss, fully intent on marking each other for life.

"Damn, darlin', how do you stay this tight?"

He thrusts harder, sexy precision, taking me to a happy place where I can't think of anything except the building fire, leading to a climax that's out of this world.

When the crescendo comes, I shout his name, feeling it down to my bones.

I'm glad he's there with me, burying himself so deep he stretches my walls, growling his release in my ear as his thick

heat pours into me.

Holy hell.

It's like riding a wave, reeling in aftershocks that have my pulse echoing in my ears, my body jolting at the brilliance of how good it feels to come together.

I cling to him tighter as we descend, loving the weight of his body on mine as I sink into the mattress.

Completely boneless, I lay there, every cell in my body spent, and even more in love with this man.

"We're gonna break some records tonight," he says, rolling off me and onto his back, as listless as I am.

A tiny giggle is all I can muster right now, but I'm up for the challenge.

Rather, I will be in a few minutes.

He slides an arm beneath my neck, pulling me close. "Have you thought about where you want to go for our honeymoon?"

I snuggle in closer. We'd discussed a honeymoon, but there was so much to do with the wedding I thought it'd make sense to relax closer to home for a couple weeks.

I've also got plenty of Dallas folks blowing up my phone and email constantly, booking design projects. Soon it'll also be time to fly to California for his new film.

"Any place you've dreamed of," he tells me. "That's where we'll go."

I lift my chin, looking at him with a smile. "Right here. Nowhere else comes close."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "Then we'll figure it out. We've got the whole world to enjoy each other's company."

Laughing, I scoot up and kiss his lips, running a hand down his hard, flat stomach.

He wraps my fingers in his and guides my hand down to his cock, leaving no doubt where we're off to.

~

A MONTH LATER, we're in Hollywood.

I'm thoroughly enjoying being an intern of sorts on the set crew, helping decorate scenes to be shot in old homes, saloons, stores, jail houses, and a mass of other settings.

Yes, he's doing another Western, but this time it's by one of the best and brightest creative teams in the industry, or so he says.

I'm also amazed by the film process.

Mostly, though, I'm awed by my stunning husband. Ridge's ability to read something once, and have it memorized, is truly astounding.

So is the way he repeats what he's read with such passion and belief. He makes every bit of fiction come alive.

And when the cameras aren't filming, he's back to being himself, which is even better.

I've read the script. It's compelling, action-packed, but there's also a love interest for Levi, Ridge's reformed outlaw character. It's a small part of the story, but it still makes my stomach queasy.

I know Ridge loves me, but I know what it's like pretending to be his love interest.

I don't want anyone else having the honor.

Call me jealous. Whenever he breaks from scenes, I've got my lips on his, marking my territory for all to see.

"Grace, you're needed in wardrobe."

I fluff the pillows on the old bed I'd just covered with a patchwork quilt for an upcoming scene, and turn to the producer's assistant, James. He's older, with grey hair and more lines on his face than a road map.

"Wardrobe? Why?"

"For your fitting," he says. "C'mon down!"

"Fitting for what?" I shake my head.

“Aw, Jesus, didn’t...” His wrinkles double as he frowns. “Didn’t Ridge tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Change of script. You’re making a special cameo.”

Instant goosebumps.

“Um, what? No, no way, I’m no actress.”

“There’s no acting involved.” James pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’ll see. Follow me.”

Ridge is still busy filming scenes outside, so I can’t ask him what this is all about. “Wait, how? What did he change?”

“Instead of him and Cleo getting together in the end, after he’s cleaned up the town, he rides away alone,” James tells me.

I know the scene he’s talking about. Cleo, the dance hall girl, is supposed to jump on the back of Ridge’s horse and they ride into the sunset together.

“When he rides off, that’s when the audience finds out that every time he looked at his watch, he was looking at a picture of you,” James says. “I like it. It’s unexpected. If the people behind his last movie just listened to his suggestions, the movie wouldn’t have flopped. This one won’t. I guarantee it. It’ll be a blockbuster.” He nods at his own affirmation. “Anyway, they need you in wardrobe for a dress to get some photos taken so we’ll have them for the watch.”

Ridge walks in just then, dust on his boots, jeans hugging those hips I know too well.

My heart melts at the sight of him for so many reasons.

“I was just telling Grace about the changes you made,” James says.

I nod.

Ridge’s eyes smolder, just like they do at night when we’re alone, as he walks toward me. My face tilts up as he arrives, fully expecting a kiss.

After I give him the sugar, he says, “I decided you’re the only love interest I’m having, whether it’s real life or make-believe.”

“I love you,” I mouth as our lips meet again.

After a kiss that leaves me wishing we were at the place he keeps in Malibu, the one his mother bought years ago and he still owns, he steps back and looks down at me with a broad smile.

“We’ll celebrate your first role in a film tonight,” he tells me, pressing his head to mine.

I pull back softly, touching his chin.

“Better idea—we’ll celebrate our love.” Shaking my head so my hair flips, I add, “But right now, I’m needed in wardrobe.”

His laughter echoes in my ears as I leave the set. I choose this gorgeous old dress, historical down to the last detail, and sit through several photo sets.

Weeks later, I’m in that dress again for the movie’s final scene.

I’ll never be an actress, but I agree to participate in the fade to black because Ridge insists I’ll be the only love fit for him.

The scene is just me, standing at an old well, drawing up a bucket of water, when Ridge appears in the distance.

I drop the rope instantly and go racing toward him through the tall grasses.

He rides in, jumps off his horse, and catches me in his arms, lifting me high into the glowing light. The scene ends with us kissing, wild and carefree and worth every bit of the PG-13 rating this movie is likely to get.

Some would call it cheesy, ridiculous, over-the-top.

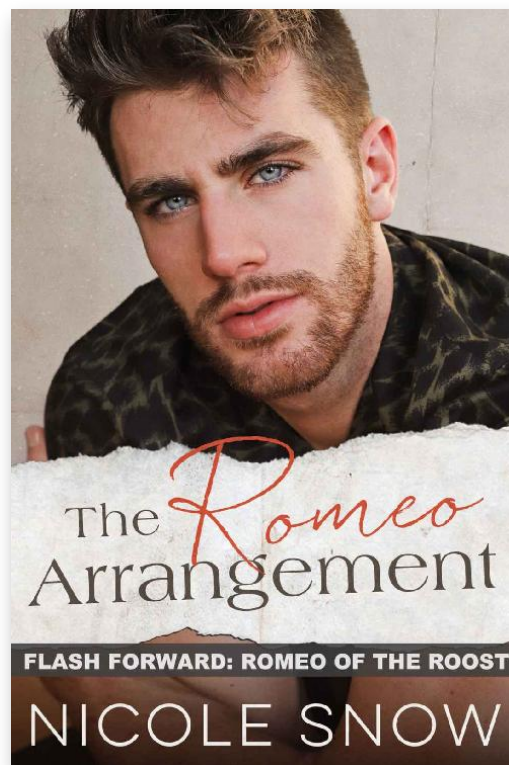
But me?

I just call it living with the wish that came true.

My hero, my guardian, my Romeo who saves me, lifts me up, and pieces me together a little better, every last day of our lives.

THANKS FOR READING *The Romeo Arrangement!* Look for more **Knights of Dallas** coming soon.

Wondering what happens to Ridge, Grace, and the rest of the family after the wedding?



Check out a glimpse of their lives after the happy ending in [this special flash forward story followup.](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/k315bm1uwb) - <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/k315bm1uwb>

Then read on for a preview of another Dallas love story, *Accidental Knight* with Drake, Bella, and Edison!

ACCIDENTAL KNIGHT PREVIEW

Unfinished Business (Bella)

My nerves can't take much more of this.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and cringe because it's only the beginning.

Oh, Gramps, I miss you so much already. But a big teary-eyed part of me is glad that you aren't here to see all this bickering.

I don't know what's worse. My grandfather being gone, or the fact that his death hasn't made a dent in my parents' egomania.

Using a wadded-up Kleenex to wipe at the tears slipping out of the corners of my eyes, I open them slowly and take a good, long look at reality.

You'd think the sadness would be dried up by now, if only for a few hours.

But it's like I've been crying for years rather than days. Grandpa Jonah was the only stable, sure thing in my life.

Now, the bottom just fell out. There's nothing left to paper over this circus.

My parents want money. Nothing new. It's all they've ever wanted, but they didn't even wait until the funeral was over to start making big plans.

Dad's new pet winery in Northern California.

Mom's new sauna, complete with a Japanese garden that will no doubt be assembled by the very best crew flown in from Tokyo.

New harebrained investment schemes that'll just leave them poorer and angrier, trying to turn a certain fortune into a golden goose bigger than their appetites.

God. You should've cut them off years ago, Gramps.

A twinge of guilt strikes me. I'm hardly better than them.

My college, my failed business ventures, always had one patient financial backer. Jonah Reed.

My parents claim they paid for it all, but I know better.

Gramps did. The greatest man to ever walk this earth.

The mold was broken several times over when he was born, and there are days, like today, when I wonder if Dad inherited a single good gene from his father.

If I had the energy, I might chastise them for being so shameless, so greedy, so...predictable.

But it wouldn't do any good.

They'd barely arrived in time for the funeral. Not that there was anything for any of us to do.

Gramps had his goodbye meticulously planned.

One of his employees, along with his lawyer, had all the details taken care of. Including today's meeting.

At least I'd arrived in North Dakota yesterday rather than rushing to the funeral home five minutes before the service started this morning. That dishonor belongs to my parents.

Both so eager to get to the lawyer's office for the will, they didn't even go to the cemetery for the burial.

No church service for Gramps, of course. No loud, chest-thumping eulogies. He went out of this world with the same amount of pomp and circumstance as he'd arrived. The quiet, simple kind.

The countless flowers, plants, and cards that people sent from every corner of the country were proof of how many lives he'd touched, though. I read every one of them this morning, alone, at the funeral home, sitting beside the small urn that contained the last remnants of the only person I've ever had a true connection with.

The only person I knew who loved me, unconditionally, flaws and all.

"Please, if you'd quit interrupting," Reynold Sheridan says. The lawyer whose office looks as staunch and sterile-looking as he is points a finger at my parents. "I could get the answers to your questions much faster."

Mother huffs. Father pats her arm. I pinch my lips together.

Ugh.

I sort of like this lawyer guy, though. His no-nonsense attitude at least makes them work for it.

They're used to getting their way, and you'd think they'd both witnessed a sacrilege when the lawyer politely checks them. Gramps probably warned Mr. Sheridan about that.

Another big sigh. I let it out quietly.

Why am I even here? I can only imagine this meeting going down one way.

Dad's an only child, so everything – a vast fortune that includes the sprawling ranch and an oil company worth ten figures – goes to him. To *them*.

They've been married longer than I've been alive. I came along years after they'd gotten married and were set in their ways. I've always believed I was the only *oops* that they couldn't buy their way out of. Or that Gramps couldn't pay their way out of.

I've heard more than once that they'd already have a third home on Lanai or some other exotic island if I hadn't *accidentally* come along.

But neither of them felt like raising a child overseas anyway.

Raising one in the States hasn't been so good either.

Another tinge of guilt strikes.

I get it. We're loaded, even without Dad getting a hundred times richer today. I should be grateful.

I've never wanted for anything, and as far as parents go, they haven't been total monsters. Not compared to some. And I always had Gramps.

But not anymore. Now, we just have his assets. And soon, I won't even have the one place I always considered home.

The Reed Ranch.

When I was little, I loved hearing my parents say they were going on vacation because that meant I was going to stay with Gramps. I spent every summer there for as long as I can remember, and practically every school break, too.

I even missed school during the times when my parents *'just had to get away for a while.'*

I've never figured out exactly what they had to get away from. Neither of them has ever worked a normal job. Dad sits on the executive board of directors for North Earhart Oil, which is really just a made-up position, yet it sounds better than simply admitting his father's company sends him a check every month to stay away.

Another mystery. I don't know what happened between them, why there's bad blood, other than Gramps told me once that it didn't work for him and my father to spend too much time together. He more or less paid him to stay away.

Family dinners full of love and laughs weren't our gig. Or holidays where someone would have a little too much wine and wind up spilling some shocking secret over the table.

It was always just me and Gramps, or me and my parents. Two exclusive worlds running forever parallel, never to meet.

Except...I hadn't spent much time in the world I loved with Gramps, had I? Not recently.

There's that pesky guilt *again*.

It's not like anyone paid me to stay away. But somehow, in a flash, it's been six freaking years since I was here, visiting Dallas, North Dakota.

Time has no chill. I spent my last summer with Gramps after my high school graduation. Then I moved to California and started college.

Summer vacays became a thing of the past. Hell, so did vacations of any kind. Six years blurred by in a flash flood of life of attempted adulting.

That thing they tell you not to do in life? I did it.

I blinked.

And when I was done, I already had one failed business and was working frantically to save my second. Now, I just dissolved my third.

Three strikes, Bella – you'rrrrre out!

I wish I'd known the first two times.

Real estate, plus California, plus me? That's an equation even Einstein couldn't fix.

No, I didn't lose my shirt, as Gramps would've put it, but I barely made enough scratch to pay my parents back each time – something Gramps, my true backer, always insisted I use for my next 'adventure.'

More accurately, my next failure.

If I had a dime for every time I ever wished I was home, at the ranch, I'd be richer than my parents are, or will be once this godforsaken meeting ends.

I'm pinching my thigh under the table, imagining the next six months of misery.

They'll sell the old ranch first thing. That's for sure.

Mom hates the place, so Dad does too. She's the reason he left it in the first place, and never came back. She'd wanted out of this town and knew my father was her ticket to the moon. It worked...and it's been 'working' for more than twenty years in the screwiest family unit imaginable.

Mother's gasp stops my rabbiting thoughts.

"Now, see here!" Dad yells, holding up a finger. "You're a smart man. There's no way – no goddamn way – my father would've ever set it up this way. There's been a mistake."

I hold my breath, wondering what I'd missed.

Talk about going well. So they've blown right past annoyed into screaming mad.

"No mistake, sir. You can read it for yourself right here," Sheridan says, lowering his glasses on his nose. "Jonah's will is remarkably straightforward. Every asset, every account, every penny, every stake in North Earhart Oil, and every earthly possession all goes to his granddaughter, Ms. Bella Reed." He gives me a pointed gaze over the rim of his glasses. "Annabelle Amelia Reed, to be technical."

Eep. That's me. Annabelle Amelia Reed.

Named after the famous Amelia Earhart, who Gramps always swore was a distant relative. He was the only one who combined Annabelle and Amelia into Bella and called me that. For that reason alone, that the will says *Bella*, I have to ask, "Wait. What?"

"Jonah Reed was senile!" Mom retorts. "Ever since the first day I met him. I don't believe it's a mistake at all, Gary."

Her eyes flash to my father. He pinches the bridge of his nose, muttering something under his breath that sounds like *here we go*.

"It's a sick joke. One last way for that old fool to toy with us beyond the grave. Listen, Mr. Sheridan, and listen good. No way. There's no earthly way Annabelle gets everything. She's too young."

I try not to snort at how ridiculous she sounds. Worse, her latest Botox rounds still don't allow her to make proper facial expressions. But she doesn't need to.

It's in her tone. She's always been petty and jealous over my relationship with Gramps.

Never when it benefited her, of course, but when it didn't. Whenever she had something to lose by Gramps flying me out to Dallas, or in her words, 'sticking his wretched beak where it doesn't belong.'

It wasn't pretty. Like now.

"She's over twenty-one," Sheridan says. "So legally, under federal and North Dakota law, she inherits it per Mr. Reed's wishes. All of it." He almost cracks a smile when he looks at me. "Including Mr. Edison."

Edison! My heart skips a beat. "Oh my...he's still alive?"

"Alive and more trouble than ever," Sheridan tells me with a sly grin.

Edison might be the smartest horse on earth. He has to be over thirty, which is ancient for a horse.

I smile, seeing him like it was just yesterday. Coal-black with a white streak on his forehead, the horse is practically Houdini – a born escape artist.

Gramps hadn't mentioned Edison in any of our last phone conversations. I'd been afraid to ask, didn't want to know if he'd died.

He loved that horse, the same as me. How else would a grown woman ever feel about her favorite playmate growing up?

"Ridiculous! What's she going to do with a ranch and an oil company out here in the middle of nowhere?" Mother snaps.

Sheridan lifts a grey brow. "Whatever she pleases, Mrs. Reed."

"Well, she can't. The girl has commitments in California." Mother's dagger eyes drift in my direction, her lips pursed sourly, expecting me to fly to her rescue. *Say something, damn it*, I can almost hear her beaming.

"Actually...no, I don't. I had obligations until last week, when I submitted the papers to dissolve my latest company." I flinch, knowing I shouldn't have spoken.

This is already bad enough. But Gramps would want me to have a little fun, wouldn't he?

Dad just shakes his head and averts his eyes. He's drained, in disbelief, thoroughly *done* with all of this.

"Ms. Reed, you should know there are a few stipulations, which you and I will address privately." Sheridan then casts his stoic and somewhat tired gaze back at my parents. "That, too, is in the will."

"I'll stipulate you," Mom whispers under her breath, sniffing loudly. "And after all we've done for her, too."

Then she snatches her blue and white dimpled Gucci purse off the floor. It's a perfect match for her outfit, as always. "Enough! I've never been so insulted in my life." Standing, she snaps, "Come on, Gary."

That's Dad's signal to follow, and he will.

The look he gives me as he stands up is *almost* sympathetic. For the briefest second, I see a resemblance to Gramps, mainly in the eyes. Lush green, just like mine.

He turns to the lawyer. "I'm assuming you want us to wait outside?"

Sheridan stands up, a movement that seems to take forever since he's nearly as tall as a telephone pole and almost as skinny.

"That's up to you," the lawyer says. "You're perfectly welcome to return to your hotel, or visit the cemetery."

For a second, they freeze.

He knows they didn't go to the grave this afternoon to watch that little bean-pot-looking urn get placed in the ground. Only I did. The only soul on earth besides the attendant who watched him being interred.

"Oh, please! The hotel...that hovel?" Mom says, already marching toward the door. "Hell is a national hotel chain. Do you have any idea what the bleach in those sheets does to my skin?"

I try not to roll my eyes. If only we could blame even half her antics on the bedding.

“We’ll be in the lobby, Anna,” Dad tells me, catching up with her just in time to yank open the door.

I nod, swallowing the lump growing in my throat because I truly wish I didn’t have to go through this alone.

“Can I get you anything?” Sheridan asks once the door clicks shut, leaving just the two of us in his office. “Coffee? Soda? A glass of water?”

I shake my head, thankful it still moves. I feel stiff, frozen, and chock-full of dread. I’ve had three failed business adventures, mostly rentals I thought I could manage and turn a profit on.

How could I *ever* take on the complicated monstrosity Gramps turned into his empire? How could I ever do it justice?

A flipping oil company? I don’t even know the price at the pump today!

Mom might be right. *I can’t.*

And I’m kinda sorta panicking.

Mr. Sheridan slowly sinks back into his chair, eyeing me slowly. “Forgive me, Ms. Reed. I recently had back surgery, so I’m not moving very fast yet.”

I nod again. Then, because I should at least acknowledge he’d spoken, I say, “I hope you feel better soon. Gramps went through something like that maybe ten years back...he was practically doing cartwheels a year later.” God. I’m really out of my element here.

“Ah, I hope to be half that lucky. And you won’t be alone in this, let me assure you. Your grandfather was a careful man and a good planner. He left generous provisions for my services as long as you need them. Additionally, you’ll have the full support of his most trusted companion, who’s also listed in the will. Mr. Larkin will provide you with everything you could ever need.”

His...companion? Mr. Larkin? *What the what?*

I knew Gramps had an assistant around the house, of sorts, but...I'm drawing a total blank on the man's name. Gramps never said much about him, only mentioned his *helper* a few times.

Someone who worked at the ranch, and sometimes dealt with company business. Probably an old Army buddy or something.

It's a big place, but there's not as much to manage as there used to be.

Gramps sold off his cattle and chickens years ago and rented the majority of his land, so his man simply filled in the gaps, did odd jobs he couldn't keep up with in old age.

Honestly, I was glad he had someone there with him, living on the property. I wish I'd asked more, knew more, but whenever we'd talked, it was always about me. That's what Gramps loved to talk about more than anything. Living vicariously, maybe.

To hear what I was doing, and when I was coming home.

We'd talk for hours, even when the visits I'll always regret not making couldn't happen.

Gramps heard it all.

Life. Dreams. Triumphs. Every good thing any loving grandfather wants to know about.

Well, I'm here now, and at least I've got help.

Sorta. An old attorney, an old companion, and an old horse.

Hopefully they don't all die on me the same week.

I catch myself, shaking my head. What an awful, selfish thought to have. I hope it isn't Mom's craptacular attitude rubbing off.

Slowly, I plant my hands on the black dress covering my thighs and try to refocus on what Sheridan says.

"...need to live at the ranch for at least six months. I'll be checking in with you regularly. Do you have any questions?"

Considering I hadn't been listening to most of what he'd said, I should have a million, but I shake my head. I don't want him to know what a failure I am at business, or today, following a simple conversation.

My shoulders slump. He probably already knows.

From what I gather, I have six months to either make it or break it here.

God only knows what'll happen then. Or maybe Sheridan does, but right now, I don't even ask because I don't even want to know.

"As I said," he continues, "Jonah has everything in perfect order down to the last T crossed. The board of directors will handle everything with North Earhart Oil. The company has a vast legal framework, so I won't be as involved in that, but will be available to assist you with anything you don't understand pertaining to your role in the founder's seat."

Heavy lies the crown, they say. Except, in this instance, the thought of even sitting in my grandfather's seat before a gaggle of sharp-dressed executives makes my stomach twist.

I nod, swallowing hard, pretending it'll be just dandy.

He leans back in his seat. "As I told your father earlier, his position with the company won't change, and neither will his income. Jonah saw no need to modify his usual compensation."

Fair. Dad barely does anything to warrant his six-figure salary, but I know my parents would be ten times as irate losing it.

Gramps inherited North Earhart Oil when it was small. His father was a wildcatter way back when, and the company had always been prosperous, but when the oil boom hit North Dakota with Gramps at the helm, North Earhart did exceptionally well. Practically the only thing about Gramps that Mom was extremely proud to talk about.

"I know this is a lot for you to take in. For someone as young as you to take on, but I'm here to help. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Just call." A smile curves the

edges of his lips. “Jonah was very specific about his wishes, and how they ought to be overseen. I gave him my solemn word I’d help ensure every detail gets executed to the letter of the law.”

I nod again. What else can I do? It’s sink or swim, and I can barely doggy paddle.

Still, I can’t let that show.

He pushes a pile of papers toward me. “I’ll need you to sign these, please. Two copies of what we discussed here today.”

I pick up a pen and sign my name mechanically next to the little red *Sign Here* stickers.

“Have you been out to the ranch yet?” he asks.

“No. As soon as I got the call, I packed up and drove straight here,” I say, signing the second copy. “I arrived yesterday and went straight to the funeral home. I stayed at the hotel last night, with the service today and then this meeting.”

He collects both copies. “I understand. Do you have a house key?”

“Absolutely.” Truly, it’s never left my keychain since the day Gramps gave it to me when I was twelve.

I don’t share that. To some, it’d be insignificant. To me, that key symbolized belonging *somewhere*.

“Would you like your copy, or do you want me to keep it?” Sheridan’s smile holds sympathy. “We can go over it again, in a few days, if you’d like, after it’s not such a shock to the system.”

I think of my parents, and until they’ve left, everything is safer out of their reach. “Go ahead and hang on to it. I’ll get my copy then.”

“Perfect. Before you leave, there’s one more thing...”

I look up, almost afraid. My fingers flex before reaching out to take the white envelope he’s holding.

“It’s from your grandfather. A personal message.”

Nodding, I close my eyes for a moment, and then draw a deep breath before unsealing the flap.

I can't help but smile, even as tears sting my eyes like hornets at the sight of the tan Post-it note with JONAH REED printed across the top of it.

Gramps adored those little sticky notes. They were tucked inside every card, every gift he ever sent me.

I pull out the three-inch square slip of paper and blink back more tears at the familiar handwriting.

Bella, you followed your head to California.

I know who put those thoughts in your head, so this time, I want you to follow your heart.

Trust me.

Love, Gramps

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ABOUT NICOLE SNOW

Nicole Snow is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She found her love of writing by hashing out love scenes on lunch breaks and plotting her great escape from boardrooms. Her work roared onto the indie romance scene in 2014 with her Grizzlies MC series.

Since then Snow aims for the very best in growly, heart-of-gold alpha heroes, unbelievable suspense, and swoon storms aplenty.

Already hooked on her stuff? [Sign up for her newsletter here](#) for exclusive offers and more from your favorite characters!

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