

A muscular man with dark hair and a serious expression, looking down. He is shirtless, wearing a silver chain necklace with a cross pendant. He is wearing dark jeans with a black belt. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a warm, golden light.

WILDHEART
SERIES

The
COWBOYS
Enemy

A COWBOY ROMANCE SERIES

C.H. JAMES

The Cowboy's Enemy

C.H. James



Golden Storm Publishing

OceanofPDF.com

The Cowboy's Enemy – Cowboy's of Wildheart Ranch – Book Three

eBook - First Edition

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About the Author

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Blurb

A rugged cowboy is challenged to tear down his enemy, but will his lonely heart fall for the beauty's curves instead?

Zachary Harrison

Irrelevant. The one everyone hates.

That's my story at Wildheart Ranch. I'm destined to fail. Destined to lay in the shadows of my brothers forever.

Until now.

Exhausted and fed up, Falls Creek's most successful cowboy chooses the wrong night to pick a fight with my brother. I'm done sitting in the background, listening but never saying a word. Finally, *finally* this is my chance to win. To stand up and change everything for my family.

But that woman at the billionaire's side won't stop frowning at me... what's her problem?

She's the enemy, yet I can't get her out of my head. She's too rude, too smart for her own good. Not to mention how inconsiderate those sexy curves are. A swarm of jealousy and over protectiveness grips me. She's driving me wild until I'm finally left with a choice.

I can give her the world, change her life forever.

But can I risk generations of my family's legacy and fill my absent heart at the same time?

Wildheart Ranch is a new filthy-sweet, high heat series by short romance author, C.H. James. This series features rugged cowboys who fall hard, fast and forever.

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CHAPTER ONE

Zachary

“**F**uck. Fuck. Fuck.” I rip the kitchen gloves off my hands and throw them in the sink. The sting of my palms burns as I rip the faucet on and the charred fabric fizzes and splatters as I drown it in the water. Gritting my teeth, I slump over the sink, letting out a low, aggravated growl as the flames slowly extinguish.

Bleep! Bleep! Bleep!

“Dammit!” I shout, racing to collect the cloth from the counter and begin jumping up and down, waving it over the smoke alarm.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Mama Harrison bellows, her hands flapping away the smoke from in front of her face. “Zachary! Those were my favorite mittens! What have you done?”

It’s like a scene from Kitchen Nightmares. The smoke alarm continues to blare, splitting my ears in half as I collect the pot of homemade tomato sauce from the stovetop. At least, it was

tomato sauce. Now it's just black muck that's filling the house with smoke.

"I was cooking," I grunt, slopping the smoking sauce in the sink. "You said all these tomatoes were driving you crazy, Ma, so I thought I'd help out and use some up."

Mama storms across and rips the pot from my hands. "By using them to burn the house down?!"

She glares at me with wild eyes that send me stepping back, running my hands through my dark hair. I know that look, and I have better sense than to stay standing beside her.

It's been this way my whole life. For as long as I can remember I've been an inconvenience. A bother. A nuisance. Being the youngest of five Harrison brothers meant that by the time I was born, life was already chaotic and I just made it worse. No one had time to sit with me, let alone build the foundation of a strong, healthy relationship that would blossom as I grew into a man.

Mama purses her lips and places her hands on my shoulders. "Go. Get out, you've done enough."

"Mama, let me-"

"Go!" Mama shouts, a sharp finger thrust towards the front door.

I let out a resigned breath.

I hike back through the house, collecting my keys and wallet from the hall table. My dad, better known around here as Grampa Sam, is sitting in his usual armchair, a newspaper

covering most of his grumpy face. I slide my boots on, feeling the burn of his stare. He peers up enough for me to see his eyes narrow as he shakes his head.

“I told you not to bother,” he grunts. “Leave the cooking to your Mama. Your skills in the kitchen are about as good as the grip you had on that shovel today.”

I don't bother with a response. There's no point.

I slam the front door so the main house of the ranch rattles and make my way towards my truck. The sun is setting in the distance, and I give my older brother Cole and his new wife Leah a limp wave. I wish I had a big smile like the one permanently imprinted on their faces these days, no wonder the produce is spilling from the fields. The way they work together each and every day is an inspiration and it's doing wonders for the life of the ranch.

It's no big secret Wildheart Ranch has been going through a tough time. Drought, the rising cost of living and, shall we say, *unfortunate* accidents have set us back in a changing world. But I don't care what anyone says, those automatic gates on the chicken coop were a bad idea. I'm not taking blame for losing our entire flock just because I programmed the timer wrong.

I slide behind the wheel of my beat-up blue pickup and pull the door closed. I turn the keys and wait for the bounce of the rickety engine to engage, watching the rear-view mirror until I see a blow of black smoke from the tailpipe. Just as I'm about to put my foot down, two bodies come out of nowhere,

slamming onto the hood of the truck with a loud thud, forcing my boot to slam on the brake.

“AND WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” Ethan grins through the windshield.

“Yeah, bit late to be going for one of your *drives*,” Lucas says, his wide eyes identical to his twin brothers.

I put my foot down and rev the engine. “Get off, dipshits. I’ll be back later.”

Ethan slides down and skips to open the passenger side door. Lucas just sits up on the hood, tucks one leg on top of the other and holds his hands up in the air, one finger pressing into his thumb as if he’s practicing yoga.

“Time to spill the beans baby bro,” Ethan says, a long piece of straw dangling from his mouth. “Every night this week you’ve been taking off, leaving us behind in a trail of dust.” He pins me with a questioning look. “So unless you’ve found a boyfriend down the road, and you’re not ready to tell Grampa Sam that you’re finally out of the closet, you’re gonna tell me what you’re up to.”

I grunt and roll my eyes. “First of all, I actually think Grampa Sam would be supportive no matter what life choices we make. Our father might be a savage old rancher who’s hard on his children, but he’s no dinosaur. Gay or not gay, our parents have always said love is love.”

Lucas unfurls his legs and turns around, listening through the windshield with a lazy expression.

“And secondly, I’m not telling either of *you* anything.”

Lucas feigns a shocked gasp. “And what exactly are you insinuating, little bro?”

Ethan chuckles but I remain unimpressed.

“That both of you gossip more than the girls at the salon in Falls Creek.” Another gasp, but this time Ethan just shrugs his shoulders at his twin and agrees with me. “So whatever I’m going to do right now is my business. And my business only. Anyway, since when has anyone cared about what I do?”

“Ever since you almost sent that big fella rolling down the stands at the rodeo, that’s when.” Ethan’s eyes get that excited glint in them again.

“So fucking cool,” Lucas beams, his bright blue eyes alight with excitement. “I’ve never seen you so wound up, man. You went all crazy on that son of a bitch.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes, slamming the gearstick into neutral.

Every time the night of the rodeo is brought up, suddenly I’m this big hero. After years and years of sitting in silence, keeping my thoughts locked inside and nodding in agreement, doing whatever my family wants, the night I watched some billionaire cowboy cross the line and threaten to bring my family down was the night I became a man.

Apparently. That’s the way the story is portrayed, anyway.

I glance to Ethan and he’s practically bouncing on the seat beside me.

“Oh my God, can you both just let it go? All I did was let the fucker know not to mess with us...” I grip the steering wheel and stare down the driveway. “Any one of us would have done the same thing. I don’t get what the big deal is.”

Lucas swings off the hood and piles in the passengers seat, his shoulder colliding with Ethan’s so we’re all crammed in the front of the truck. Fuck. They clearly didn’t build these trucks big enough for three big, beefy cowboys to all be crammed in the front seat.

“We’re coming with you,” Lucas says, nudging Ethan to try and create some more room for himself. He yanks the door closed and reaches for the handle above his head. “If you’ve got nothing to hide, then you won’t mind if we tag along for a ride.”

Ethan’s grinning beside me. “Precisely.”

They giggle like fucking school kids, both bouncing in the front of the truck. I close my eyes and take a long, deep breath, praying for composure and patience.

But all I see is *her*.

All I ever see is her.

She’s there when I go to sleep. She’s there when I wake up. Those big blue eyes and the thick, golden hair that haunts me, casting a shadow over my every move as I fight in my mind, holding strong to concentrate on the massive task I’ve set for myself by challenging a billionaire at his own game.

I can’t drag these idiots along.

If I did that, they'll know exactly why I've been so desperate to drive fifteen miles every damn night. They'll find out I'm just as useless on the back of a bull as I am at using Cole's fresh, plump tomatoes in the kitchen. They'll see the perfect figure of the blond girl who I study each and every move of as she trains at precisely fifteen minutes past seven every night.

But worse than that, worse than anything I've ever done before, they'll find out that I've signed up to risk ten thousand dollars of money we don't have to prove a point to that asshole *Gary Saison*.

"You can't come!" I squawk, squeezing my eyes to hide the flowing blond hair invading my mind. "I've got things to do. Important things." I scrunch a fist and smack it down on Ethan's thigh. "Get out! Get out! GET OUT!"

My knuckles drive into his chunky leg and Ethan screams and shouts as he lunges across Lucas's lap and grips the door handle. It swings open and he rolls out of the truck, landing on the dirt headfirst as I start piling into Lucas' leg next.

"Fuck man!" Lucas shrieks, rolling out to land on Ethan just as he finds his feet.

I scamper across and yank the door closed, the corner catching the back of Ethan's head as he starts to sit up. He screams with pain and I grip the wheel and speed down the driveway, glancing in the mirror to see my brothers left behind in a blanket of dust, wild fists thrown in the air.

I speed ahead and eventually my blood cools just as I reach the arena. Reaching behind the seat, I grab the dusty old vest I've been using for practice and change my boots. The lights of the arena are shining in the truck and I look out across the parking lot, taking an extra moment to stem the flow of excitement buzzing right through me.

The air feels cooler tonight as I move through the gates and down the passageway. Some shouting from the floor echoes around the empty stadium and when I reach the stands just above the shiny silver chutes, I lean over the edge of the rail and watch the dark-haired cowboy complete his practice ride.

He's seamless. Absolutely perfect as he grips the rope with one hand, the other held high and firm. A perfect ride and now that feeling of dread and terror in my stomach comes racing back.

What the fuck have I done?

I work every single day on a ranch and have since I was old enough to walk, so livestock shouldn't frighten me. But the bulls waiting in the chute aren't just your usual beast. These aren't some dairy cows needing relief from tight, uncomfortable udders. These aren't chickens scratching at your feet for some feed or fresh water.

No.

These bulls will kill you. Literally.

A firm slap on my shoulder pulls my gaze away from the deep, guttural snort of the bulls.

“I was wondering if I’d see you here tonight, Harrison,” Gary Saison says, his chubby cheeks wobbling with every word.

I turn to face him and puff my chest out, dodging the glint of his gold watch as it catches the lights of the arena. My jaw tightens as he looks down his nose at me.

I’ve never hated anyone as much as I hate this fucker, but now I’ve risked everything just to bring him down, there has to be room for more bad blood between us. The night he started on Mike, using his power and presence to try and take his girl away from him... that was the night that kicked it all off.

“Gary,” I growl, my chest broadening beneath every heavy breath. “You won’t get rid of me that easy. Like I told you, I’ll be here every single night until we go head-to-head. And perhaps if you stop withholding information about my opponent, I wouldn’t have to keep studying every single one of your riders.”

Up there with the stupidest things I’ve ever done, agreeing to a one night rodeo event against a professional rider is up there. I’ve barely ridden a bull, let alone tackled the fiercest beasts in the whole town. And Gary’s rodeo team is one of the best in the country, yet, he still won’t reveal the full details of the winner-takes-all main event.

I guess you can do that when you run the entire show.

Gary chuckles so wildly I swear he’s snorting louder than the bulls. “I told you, I haven’t decided who I’m going to split

the prize money with yet.” He steps in and I can smell the garlic on his putrid breath. “Better yet, I think even I could ride one of those dumb animals and still beat a weak opponent such as yourself.”

My fingers start to curl just as a waft of sweet perfume floats between us, calming my fury in a way I didn’t think was possible. A curvy as fuck woman breezes by, her blond hair matching the sway of the strands haunting my dreams every single night. I turn on the spot, watching the way she bends down to collect her helmet, a big plump ass so bountiful and smooth it’s begging her denim jeans to hold on tight.

My feet shift in the dirt as I swallow down. She’s the one I watch the most. Normally I would say this is no place for a woman, especially one like her.

But she’s the best there is. Graceful. Elegant. Stunning.

And the way she rides the bull is pretty amazing, too.

Silence can be heard around the arena as I try to hide the excitement pressing against my jeans. She swishes her hair, slides the helmet on and spins around. *Holy fuck*. Her heart-shaped lips are bright red, her sultry eyes taking me in, growing wider by the second.

Gary clears his throat beside me and when I shake my head and look at him, he has a mischievous smile that’s hooked one side of his mouth.

“Actually, you know what...” He looks me up and down, forcing me to drag my eyes away from the gorgeous blond. “I

think I've just found your opponent." Gary whistles with his fingers and waves the blond girl over. "Zachary, I'd like you to meet Amanda Rodriguez. She's my best rider. She's also a fierce competitor and an even fiercer woman. So it gives me great pleasure in informing you that *she* is going to be the one to take you down."

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CHAPTER TWO

Amanda

I feel like everything I've been doing with my life up until now doesn't matter.

"Nice to meet you," I say, my voice sounding more like the rattling of a bell on a bull than my usual confident self.

Zachary Harrison grips my hand.

Oh my. *Oh my.*

"Pleasure is all mine, ma'am."

The deep timbre of his voice sends sparks right through me. His dark eyes pull me in, squeeze my insides and threaten to never let go. I just stare at him, unable to look away as a loud buzzer sounds out across the arena, signalling the start of the next practice ride.

This all feels so unfamiliar, so foreign. I've just come here to train, to do my job and get paid, much the same as I do every single night. Living on the edge as a female bull rider, I'm used to living dangerously.

Yet, something about holding Zachary's hand in mine feels completely *safe* and *perfect*.

"Amanda here has been part of Team Saison for over a year now," Gary says, clamping his big hands on my shoulders. "Recruited at the height of her career, I know you've seen her ride; you've been stalking my team for weeks now."

Zachary straightens to his full height. "Well now I know my opponent, I will be able to focus on who I'm checking out."

Checking out? Oh God, I'm not sure I can handle that.

Gary chuckles behind me. I'm just trying to stay focused. I'm due in the chute any minute now and if I'm not giving the ride my full attention, I might not make whatever event Gary's just thrown me into.

"I'll have my team set a date for the event," Gary says, stomping around and glancing at his watch. "We're set on the rules, though. Three rides. Three different bulls. One night only."

My brows pull together, and I tuck the streaks of blond hair behind my ear, forcing the butterflies flapping in my belly down before clearing my throat. "Anyone care to tell me what the hell I've been tossed into?" I turn and glare at my boss. "Gary? What *event* are you talking about?"

Gary walks around and stands behind Zachary, his heavy legs thumping in the stands. He's much shorter than him, and his roundness almost hides how stocky and well built Zachary's chest is as he moves in beside him and smiles at me.

“Mr. Bigshot here has finally grown into a man. He’s a proud rancher. A real cowboy.” Gary looks up to Zachary who releases a tight growl that makes my nipples tighten. “He’s decided to challenge us, Amanda. Can you believe that?” Gary releases a big-bellied laugh but Zachary and me just hold a straight face. “Ten grand. You beat this piece of shit, Amanda, you take it all. Just make sure you leave him wailing so I can catch his tears and display them in my trophy cabinet.”

I lean back and watch Zachary. His face doesn’t fold, his eyes never leaving mine as Gary walks away, laughing into the night until we can no longer hear him.

We stand in silence.

It’s as if we’re sizing each other up like some heavy weight boxers. Better yet, with his open collar shirt and dusty, ripped jeans, I’m just standing here waiting for the tumbleweed to blow between us.

Inside, my head is swirling around with the stakes laid out before me. By the sounds of it, I’ve been caught in between some stupid dick size competition. Big men with even bigger egos. I’ve seen it all before, my father was the worst of the lot. He ruined our entire family with his inability to set aside his differences with Mama. The stress and mental torture drove them both to their deathbed prematurely, no qualms about that.

Yet here I stand, a chance to change everything for my little brother.

Ten grand. Ten fucking grand.

The only reason I'm standing here is because the pay is so good. My skill set for the workforce is about as useful as, well, tits on a bull. That's what happens when you miss out on a proper education because your parents force you to look after your younger sibling instead of going to school.

They promised it wasn't forever. *One more day off, sweetheart, it won't hurt.* They would shoot off to the nearest casino, every hope, dream and next meal poked down a coin slot, never to be seen again.

I don't hold it against Brody. He's a good kid. He'd kill me for calling him that, considering he's fourteen now.

Ten grand.

"I've seen you out there," Zachary finally says, turning to face the arena. "You're one of the best."

He bends to lean on the rail, making the light blue denim jeans hug his tight butt. I'm not usually the type of woman to get riled up on hormones and an uncontrollable need for a man's attention, but damn, that's one behind I could sink my teeth into.

What is wrong with me? I haven't even mounted a bull tonight and my brain is rattled.

"That's very kind of you," I reply dreamily.

I shake my head to rid any thoughts of his cute behind as I move in to look out over the arena beside him. As I grip the rail and watch Jefferson fall from our tamest bull, I take a sharp breath and almost explode. A rich, earthy smell washes

over me and I'm sucking in the hints of citrus and pine that pull me closer towards the rugged cowboy beside me.

Wow. I'm in so much trouble here.

"So you're Mr. Bigshot, huh?" I ask as Jefferson scampers away from the wild bull, his screams echoing in the stands.

Zachary huffs. "Hardly. Just proving a point."

"And what point is that exactly?"

His gaze narrows as he turns to face me. Every single inch of me lights up like flashing red signals warning me away. He isn't scary or intimidating... No. Quite the opposite. He's giving me all those sexy man vibes my girlfriends keep telling me about.

It's an impressive feat to get me all worked up like this. I can *feel* the blush in my cheeks – I'm not sure that's ever happened to me before.

I'm just the cowgirl who rides bulls for a living.

This is my life.

Living outdoors to escape the yelling and never-ending arguments of my parents eventually paid off during my teenage years. I found the atmosphere of the rodeo and spent as much time as possible here, watching riders like *Eve Dash* and *Georgia Daye*. Seeing women in a male dominated world inspired me to keep at it, keep practising and working hard.

Now, I'm the number one female rider in all the South West.

“Amanda, I’m sorry you’ve been caught in the middle, and I’m not usually an arrogant jerk, especially to women.” The edge of his mouth curls behind a wicked smile. *Man alive*. I’m definitely not ok. “But the way I see it, we’re in competition now. You hate me, and I hate you.”

I frown, gaping in amazement. “What did you just say?”

His expression doesn’t falter. “You’re the enemy. I’m going to win, so as far as I’m concerned, whatever this is-” he waves a finger between us. “It stops here.”

It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts. Firstly, because: what the hell? Who says stuff like that? And secondly, *this... whatever this is...* What is that? Does that mean he’s feeling whatever I’m feeling, too?

“Listen, Zachary,” I begin, glancing down at the crumbled heap that slightly resembles a dusty, worn out protective vest at his feet. “If you want me to have a word to Gary, I can. We’re close and he owes me a few favors. You can back out, and no one will ever know.”

He gives me a long, slow blink of disbelief. I notice just how thick his eyelashes are and feel a twitch of jealousy biting at my belly as I go eye to eye with those full lips. They look impossibly soft and rich, but when he clears his throat I snap my stare and realize he’s been watching me.

“Let me get this straight.” Zachary steps in closer. His breath hits my nose and I’m stumbling back just to steady myself from the fucking heat searing between us. “You’re forfeiting already?”

I cough. Or laugh. Or splutter.

Whatever it is, a chunk of saliva flies from my mouth and hits Zachary right in the eye.

Rubbing the moisture away, he pops one eye open and fuck me. If I didn't think he was dangerous before, the look he's shooting me now might just change my mind.

The siren blares around the arena and my name is being called over the speakers. I fumble backwards, dodging the heavy stare beating down on me as I spin and race towards the chute. Jefferson is receiving medical treatment when I throw a leg over the bull and hold the rail.

“Ready?” Coach Hughes looks me in the eye and I give a firm nod.

My hands are sweaty as I grip the rope and hug my legs around the broad chest of the beast beneath me. It grunts and growls, snorting against the gate, ready to fly the moment it opens. I usually get a good look at the bull I'm riding, but tonight, my head is a mess.

Ten grand. One night. Three bulls.

One sexy fucking opponent.

“Away!”

The bull bucks before I even leave the chute, tossing my body in every direction. I'm clasping the rope with one hand, steadying my balance with the other. It's only a practice run, but I treat them all equally. Eight seconds isn't long, but believe me, when the eyes of your competitor are ripping right

through you with every thrust the raging bull bucks beneath you, eight seconds is a fucking lifetime.

As always, I complete the ride. Sliding down, I safely escape the arena, my heart pounding in my chest as I make my way to the safety exit. I pull myself back in the stands and race towards where Zachary is standing, adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I rip my protective vest off and throw it right at his chest.

“You want it, you’ve got it.” My eyes roll down his body, my nose crinkled with disgust. “*Mr. Bigshot.*”

I storm towards the locker room with dollar signs flashing before my eyes. The world around me is a blur and I fight back the temptation to go back. He’s driven me wild in more than one way tonight, but I’ve never surrendered to my heart before, so I’m not about to start now.

This could change my life.

An easy ten grand to pay the debts my parents left behind. An easy ten grand to pay the medical bills we can’t afford. But most of all, beating that arrogant asshole will allow me to pay for the right treatment that will ease the pain my baby brother struggles through each and every day as the cancer riddles his body and rips every hope and dream away from him.

CHAPTER THREE

Zachary

I get to the arena nice and early after dodging the advances of the twins. They've been on at me all week, attempting to block me from leaving the ranch until I tell them what I'm up to. I'm pretty sure they've reeled Mike into the conspiracies too, because he's been shooting me weird looks as we work the fields all day.

I can't tell them though.

After sitting in the stands, watching Amanda practice all week, I'm fucking petrified. She oozes class, the way she rides those bulls is incredible. A calm confidence that washes over her the moment she steps up to the chute, it's as if she's taking a walk through the paddocks on the ranch.

I've been jogging every night, mentally preparing myself for the main event as I increase my fitness. Gary Saison has pinned advertisements all over town. There's no way I can back out now, despite my name on the headline appearing as '*Special Guest*'.

A cool breeze circles around the arena as I make my way down the concourse and towards the training room at the back of the building. A group of young boys are all chatting excitedly, and I tip my hat to them as I pass through the door with the strap of my bag cutting into my shoulder.

A waft of stale sweat and moldy carpet smacks me right in the face the moment I step inside. The room is filled with an assortment of mechanical bulls, all set up in groups that distinguish the difficulty of the ride.

I grab a towel and fill a cup with water at the cooler before moving to a row of bulls in the middle of the room. I take small sips, dropping my bag to the floor and looking around as I stick a leg out and start to apply some light stretches to the tightness in my hamstring.

I begin to loosen up when I see a whirl of blond hair in the far right corner of the room. My stomach does a weird flip thing as the woman turns around and the richness of Amanda's gaze catches my eye.

"... and when you reach the height of the ride, just relax these muscles right here..."

A tall man steps across and runs a hand down Amanda's arm. A low growl leaves my throat involuntarily, catching me completely by surprise. I frown, unsure why my body is reacting at seeing my opponent with another man.

The man continues to hold her, bull shitting his way through some explanation about using *all* her muscles just so he can touch her. Maybe it's her boyfriend? I don't know her story.

My heart rate increases as his chest starts brushing up against her body, nudging her so I catch sight of her eyes.

Her crystal blue gaze is locked to the floor, unblinking and emotionless as the man slides two hands down her waist. She's wearing tight leggings with an orange leopard print fabric that's hugging her thick thighs, and the white tank top that looks dotted with tiny pebbles of sweat isn't doing much to hide her generous curves.

She spins and goddamn. A deep split of cleavage may as well have just smacked me in the face.

I throw back the water and lean against the mechanical bull, peering over the top so I don't catch any unwanted attention.

"OK, I think I've got it," Amanda's voice calls out, sounding more like an angel than the enemy right now. "Maybe we try the practice routine one more time?"

My throat swells as I look across the room and see the man standing behind Amanda, eyes locked on her behind.

He steps in and my fingers curl. "Let's just try this one more time..."

His hands find her hips, only this time, instead of sliding up towards her shoulders, I see his knuckles whiten. He grips her and bends her over by placing one hand in the middle of her back. My stomach drops as she falls to the floor, two hands pressed on the blue mat in front of them.

"Get your hands off her!" I roar across the room. "You sick bastard, get back! Get Back!"

My hands smash against his chest and I'm huffing as I beat him away with shove after shove against his solid torso. He's forced back by the anger simmering through me. It's pure rage like I've never felt before, what the hell?

Amanda's glaring up at me, her eyes searching the length of the room as if searching to see where I've appeared from.

"Zachary! What the fuck?" Amanda snaps.

My neck twists between them both, the flare of my nostrils filling my lungs with excess oxygen.

"He was touching you," I grunt, daggered eyes glued to the piece of shit.

Amanda's eyes roll and she clutches a drink bottle resting at the side of the mat laid out on the floor. She swallows two big mouthfuls before yanking at her ponytail, allowing a thick flow of blond hair to fall around her shoulders.

"I saw him," I continue, my teeth clenching harder with every word. "H-he... The way he looked at you. It was... It was..."

Amanda gives me a withdrawn look as she pops a hip out. Every thought suddenly evades my mind and gets lost somewhere in my throat.

"This is Patrick," Amanda says, pointing the water bottle at the brown-haired man behind me. "He's my personal trainer on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Sundays." She takes another gulp and drops a shoulder. "I can show you my schedule if you need?" Patrick grunts a laugh and I glare directly at him. "If

you must know, I've been having trouble with my lower back. Patrick here is offering some advice and showing me a few stretches."

I'm shaking my head as Patrick steps in beside Amanda. Adding salt to the wound, he wraps an arm around her shoulder and dips his head down as if speaking to a child.

"Now if you'll let us get back to it," he says, grinning.

I fight the urge to punch him right on the nose. Fucking asshole.

"Whatever," I grunt, spinning around to return to my station.

The next half an hour is fucking torture. I can barely stay on the easiest bull in the room, my hands shaking so bad every time I see Patrick's hand 'slip' somewhere it shouldn't. Amanda flashes a look my way every now and then, but even with a questioning frown aimed at her, I can't get a straight answer as to whether there is something going on between them.

Do I care? The only reason I'm here is to try and get some practice in before the rodeo event. I don't need to know whether some cowgirl is riding her personal trainer on the side. I don't give a shit. All I need to do is beat her, or at a minimum, *not lose* to her and save myself ten thousand dollars.

I fetch myself some more water and block out the laughter in the room, but eventually it's too much. The giggling mixed

in with the looks Patrick keeps shooting my way, smirking at me like he knows something I don't.

I collect my bag and don't look back, racing all the way up to the chutes at the edge of the arena. I find a good viewing point and settle in my favorite viewing stance, watching the training tips the rodeo teacher gives the group of young teenagers I passed earlier.

The first few kids are bucked off by the tamest bull I've seen here at Falls Creek Arena. I bite my tongue as I block any image of Amanda from distracting me. Maybe this is part of her plan, getting me all worked up with jealousy so I can't train properly.

But I'm not jealous. If that's what she's trying to do, then it won't work because I don't even *like* Amanda. Is she stunningly beautiful? Yeah, of course she is. Clearly she's hard working and committed to her craft too, but that doesn't make me attracted to her.

I'm not jealous.

I'm *not* jealous.

Another few teenagers fall to the ground. The group all laugh at their classmates and I'm just sitting here wishing I get that placid animal as one of my three bulls on the night.

Suddenly, as the next guy steps up, a man sprinting down the corridor catches my eye. He barrels into a garbage can before gathering his balance and continues steaming ahead.

Patrick.

I shoot up from my chair, my heart pulsing. I see him glance over his shoulder, cheeks flushed and eyes wide. He's looking back as if he's running away from something. Or *someone*.

What's happened? Why is he running away?

Without another thought, I grab my bag and speed down the stands. My mouth is dry and it's all I can do to stop picturing Amanda in trouble. I shove the door to the training room open and steady my shaky breath, casting an eye over the room.

"Amanda?" I call out, pacing forward. "Amanda! Are you ok?"

Panic starts to hit when seconds pass and there's no one around. I duck down, looking beyond the mechanical bulls to the front of the room. The exercise mats are set out. All her stuff is still there. A sports jacket. A bright pink drink bottle.

Silence stings my ears, and my skin has goosepimples creeping the length of my arm when a noise from behind forces me to spin around.

"Amanda!" I cry out automatically.

An older woman with gray hair smiles at me. I've seen her around before, the lavender-colored skirt and plump waistline unmistakable. Maybe she works at the drinks station. Or the gift shop. Hell, I don't know and right now I don't really care.

"Excuse me? Have you seen a woman? Blond hair, blue eyes..." My voice comes out in one big, desperate burst. "She's about this tall, best rider in town."

The woman holds that smile on her lips, looking me up and down with the wrinkle in her eyes lifting slightly. It's agonizing how long she stares at me. How the hell can she be so calm right now?

"You're looking for Amanda Rodriguez, young man," the lady says with the utmost peace and tranquillity soothing her voice. She palms the door open and sunshine bursts into the room. "She's out here, on a personal phone call, dear."

I swallow down and try some nervous laughter. Maybe that will hide the embarrassment burning my fucking face off right now.

"Thank you," I grunt, stepping forward and trying everything to hide my eyes from the lady.

I tread quietly outside but when I reach an open courtyard with some old patio furniture scattered around, there's still no sign of Amanda. My heart rate picks up again but as I turn to head back inside and give the lady a piece of my mind, I hear the soft patter of the most wonderfully soft voice I've ever heard.

"Please, Brody," the voice drifts towards me like a songbird singing. *"I know it makes you feel bad, but you need to take it. We're working on something better, I promise. For now, this has to do, I'm sorry. I'm nearly done for the night, and I'll be home, ok?"*

A crunch in the sand has me scampering for a chair. I throw myself down but as my ass hits the old plastic support, it

buckles beneath my weight, and I fall to the ground with a thud.

Amanda turns the corner, her brows furrowed. “I’ve gotta go, Brody. See you soon.”

“Oh, hello,” I call out, faking a smile.

She pins me with a cocked brow. “Yeah, right, cowboy. What the hell do you want?”

I hold my hands up, pleading innocence despite the crumpled, broken chair hanging off my shoulders. It looks like I’ve been in some kind of extreme wrestling scene or something.

“Wow, can’t a guy just enjoy a bit of fresh air? I’m tired alright...”

She pops a hip out and folds her arms over her chest, making the rounds of her breasts pop from her tank top. *Holy shit.* I’m totally not ready for this right now. Could she look any more fuckable? Perhaps if she was naked. *Fuck.*

“You’re right, I should give you a break,” Amanda says, pulling a chair out from under the table. She sits down and leans her elbows against her knees, looking down at the messy pile of limbs and stained clothes that resembles me. “After all that falling off and climbing back on the mechanical bulls you did in there, you must be *exhausted.*”

It takes all my willpower not to yell at her right now.

“Yeah, well... Shut up.”

Great. Good one, Zachary.

Amanda chuckles and leans back against the chair. My eyes drift down her body and I hate how fucking attracted I am to her right now. That tank top that's clinched so tight beneath her breasts, making them look even bigger than they already are.

“Anyway, if you must know I was coming to make sure you're ok,” I continue. “I saw Patrick running away. What did you do, finally come to your senses and fire his sick, degenerate ass?”

I drag my eyes from her body, feeling about as perverted as that piece of shit Patrick right now. What does she see in him anyway?

“Patrick is a good guy,” Amanda says, lifting her chin slightly. “If you saw him running, it was probably because he's chasing after some girl he's falling head over heels in love with.”

I scoff. “Yeah, right.”

Amanda flashes those big, beautiful eyes at me and twists her head. “Another great sentence, well done, *Zachy*.”

I bite my lip, choosing it as the better option than using actual words. Apparently, whenever I'm around this woman, I'm about as useful with my language as those kids were on the bulls.

Amanda's phone rings and when she looks down at it, she releases a heavy sigh.

“Are you gonna answer that?” I ask, pushing away the broken chair to rest on my palms.

She shakes her head. “No.”

“It’s Patrick, isn’t it?” My tongue slides between my teeth as she shoots me a death stare. “Sorry, you left yourself open for that one.”

She remains silent and when she brings her knees to her chest and settles in the chair, it gives me a chance to really admire the richness hiding in her eyes. I’ve seen the smile that lights up the room, hell, it *did* light up the room. So much so, I kept falling off the damn mechanical bull. She’s got a swagger, an air of confidence that I admire despite the fact that it’s driving me crazy.

But now I’ve got her up close, there’s something else behind her gaze that’s been hiding until now. She’s tired. Exhausted, actually.

“Is everything ok?” I ask, trying to soften my deep, gravelly voice.

“Fine, thanks.”

“I don’t think so.” I wriggle off the concrete floor and pluck another seat out, testing it for strength before sitting down. “This one is safe.” I wink to Amanda but her stiff expression holds firm. “Come on, I know we haven’t exactly seen eye to eye but you can tell me what’s going on. That wasn’t a happy phone call.”

She looks me up and down, a frown splitting the hardness in her eyes. “Trust me, of all people, you don’t want to know what that phone call was about.”

“Oh really?” I say it like she’s just laid out a challenge. Gripping the underside of my chair I slide it across so I’m directly in front of her. “Well how about I take you for a drink at *The Rusty Tavern*? Then maybe you can tell me exactly why eyes as pretty as yours have sadness in every beautiful corner?”

She gives me the once over, her mouth hanging open. “You’re not going to give up, are you?”

I smile wickedly, rising to hold my hand out and help her to her feet. “If there’s one thing that you will learn about me, my fierce competitor, it’s that I will never, *ever* give up.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

Amanda

Zachary leads the way into the bar, his masculine scent pulling me through the swinging doors right behind him. To distract myself from gawking at his tight butt, I scan the dimly lit saloon, treading across a few wobbly, squeaky floorboards.

“You a beer drinking gal?” Zachary asks, leaning on the polished bar.

I nod and turn to face the room. “So long as it’s ice cold and poured from a tap.”

Zachary flashes a smile. *Dammit*. I must still have some of that Zachary-induced phlegm stuck in my throat, because I’m choking on nothing but those dangerous feels when he turns away and orders our drinks.

The Rusty Tavern is an old-style saloon set up as a modern day bar. The air is thick with the smell of whiskey and cigarette smoke, and everywhere you turn, patrons are dressed in plaid shirts and stained denim jeans. The bartenders stand

out though, dressed in suspenders and bow ties, they add a touch of modern day class to the joint.

“Here,” Zachary huffs, thrusting an enormously sized glass in my hand.

I look down, then up again. “What the fuck is this?”

He spits his beer out, spraying the floor before laughing at my response. Like a whistle in the wind, one of the fancy dressed bartenders races over and swipes a blue cloth over the wet floor, quickly bowing to us both before disappearing as quickly as they appeared.

“You said you like beer,” Zachary grunts, leading the way to a round table.

He rests his glass on the wobbly timber and I’m wondering why his drink doesn’t look anywhere near as big as mine does. Maybe it’s those big hands. And long fingers.

Okay, Amanda. Stop staring at him now.

“Yes, yes...” I shake my head and hoist myself up on the stool opposite him. “I do like beer, but I didn’t want the entire townships supply in one glass.”

He laughs and I get a glimpse of that panty-melting smile again. Shaking his head at me, he lifts the glass to his lips and sucks in a long, deep gulp. It’s not like me to melt into a puddle of goo over a man, but damn, this cowboy isn’t just *any* man.

I’m drawn in by the warmth in his blue eyes, the way they crinkle at the edges every time he smiles. His hair is messy,

close cropped with a fade darkening just above his ears. I should hate that, I mean, I *do*. But the thickness of the dark brown strands is enough to give him that rugged appearance I've always liked on a man.

After a few more slurps, Zachary shifts his big, athletic build on the stool and grabs my attention with a gentle kick of my ankle under the table.

“Hey,” he says. “You ok in there?”

I nod, using both hands to bring the beer to my lips. “Yeah, this is nice. I can't tell you how long it's been since I've been out this late.”

“Late?” He twists his wrist and looks to his watch. “It's only 8:30, Mandy.”

My gut drops.

I can't stop the daggers I'm laying into him with my eyes.

“Don't ever call me that again.”

It's like the room has fallen silent. Everyone is still moving but the tunnel inside my head grips me and pulls my under. The clutter of glasses stalls, the murmur of dozens of patrons all playing card games and drinking together freezes as flashbacks of my parents come screaming back from the dark depths of my mind.

Across the table, I can feel Zachary looking down at me.

“Um.” Zachary's clear blue eyes are wide. He's not blinking. “Sorry?”

I shake my head, shoving the memories back. Right back. Down that long, windy road at the back of my fucked up mind. Right behind the forcefield blocking my emotions where they belong.

Noise reengages around us. Music starts mid-song and the bartenders aren't unloading dishwashers in pure silence now. Everyone starts moving and life resumes as normal. *Fuck*. I mean, I should be used to it... That's how it always feels when someone scratches at that painful memory. Believe it or not, I've learned to shove most of my emotions down whenever I'm summoned with that nickname.

"I hate that name," I admit. I'm squeezing my eyes shut, dipping my head to dodge the hard stare from across the table. "You didn't know that, though. Sorry for snapping."

"Don't be." Zachary grins, reaching across and gently tapping the top of my hand. He reaches for his back pocket and plucks out his wallet, looking across to the jukebox in the corner of the room. "Got a favorite song? Let's lighten the mood a bit, yeah?"

He jumps from the stool and holds an arm out for me. With a tiny smile, I slide down next to him and we select the next five songs together, poking fun at each other's music taste before finally settling on classic 90's grunge as a compromise.

"Right," Zachary says, slapping the button to start the playlist. "Next on my list of things to make you smile is shots. Lots of shots."

I frown up at him, suddenly realizing my arm remains looped through his. His massive forearm is warm and my hand looks tiny against his tanned skin, but I yank it back and take a giant stride backwards.

Too close, Amanda.

“Oh, I don’t think-”

The words are robbed from my throat as I’m yanked forward. Before I know it, I’m throwing back a shot glass spilling over with tequila. I suck hard on a lemon and squeal like a fucking college cheerleader when I’m done. Zachary holds two fingers up to the bartender and we’re slamming back another one.

An arm slides around my back, pulling me in. My head falls to Zachary’s shoulder, and I can’t help but breathe in his skin-tingling cologne. Bodies gather around us, all joining in the line of shots Zachary has ordered and I’m melting against his body.

“I hope you’re paying for these,” I shout over the music.

His hands squeezes my hip, pulling me to my toes as he grunts in my ear. “I’ve put it on my tab. I’ll clear it when I win on the weekend.”

He winks at me and holds his glass up, clinking it against mine as we slam back another round. The people around us cheer and demand more, Zachary bellows back at them, smiling playfully like he’s enjoying the attention.

When they die down, he parts the crowd with a big arm and finds a quiet corner of the room by the burgundy colored lounges. The leather on the arms is ripped, stuffing falling out between the cracked fabric.

Zachary slumps down and pats the cushion beside him. It might be the shots talking, but I swear I see a glint in his eye that wasn't there before. There's heat in his gaze, and I'm sure that smile on his full lips has grown even bigger in the last ten minutes.

"Fuck," he breathes, stretching out his long legs. "I can't remember the last time I did shots."

I shake my head. "Me neither."

He sits up slightly and looks me in the eye. "No. Like, I *can't remember*. It was my brother's wedding night and I blacked out pretty much straight away."

My chest bounces under a chuckle. "Please don't say that. I might look strong, but I can't carry you all the way home, trust me."

He nudges my shoulder with his elbow, smiling. "Oh, come on, I saw you lifting those weights today. Don't underestimate yourself."

"I was just trying to impress Patrick," I tease, my tongue wagging between my teeth as Zachary's face falls dead flat. My head rolls back with laughter and I allow it to fall across his lap. "You're so easy to wind up, Zachary Harrison."

He fakes a grin. “Yeah, real funny. Don’t come complaining to me when he gropes you next time. Dirty piece of shit he is. You’ve been warned.”

Suddenly my head feels lighter. I’m sprawled across the sofa, legs trailing across the edge on the opposite side, head resting against Zachary’s thighs. I lift up from his lap and slide my lingering gaze up his body, my chest tightening with every close breath I draw from his manly aura.

Slowly, I move up and stare at him right in the eyes, inches from the warmth of his breath.

“Is that jealousy I hear in your voice?”

He visibly swallows. I’m just staring, taking in as much of his face as I can. I might never be this close to a man as handsome as this ever again.

“As if, Amanda.” His voice is weighted as his gaze drops to my lips. “Just looking out for you, that’s all.”

He gulps down again. *Fuck*. Is it hot in here or what?

The volume of the jukebox grows louder as the lights around the bar are dimmed right on 9:00pm. Zachary won’t stop staring at my mouth, so I do the only thing I can think of doing right now.

I kiss him.

My lips cover his and a hand goes to the back of my head, pulling me in closer, demanding I open my mouth. His tongue swipes across my lips and I’m obeying every advance he makes, moving my tongue across his.

“Oh,” I moan against his mouth. “Oh, shit... Shit. *Shit!*”

I launch back, my hand clasped over my mouth.

Zachary’s mouth remains open, his lips wet with my saliva.

“What are you doing?” he asks, frowning.

“We... I...” I scrunch my face and grunt with clenched fists.

“We can’t do this!”

“Why not?”

I shake my head and start pacing before Zachary grabs my hand and pulls me back down beside him. He’s staring at me, watching my mini-freakout. Ok, *big* freakout.

“I don’t even know you. You could be like... a weirdo or something,” I spit out, clearly not thinking straight. “I just can’t, ok?”

“OK,” Zachary grunts. “I’m not going to make you.”

I pause and harden my brows at him. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Being nice to me all the time.”

“Sorry.”

My brows snap together. “Stop that, too! Stop apologizing, you’re too nice. Too kind. I hate that. It’s fake and dishonest because you don’t mean it. You know how I know that... because no one is that nice. No one is as nice as you, Zachary.”

He shrugs his shoulders and leans back so the collar of his shirt ruffles and reveals his broad chest. *I hate that, too.* We sit in silence for a minute, watching the movement of the people starting to dance in the dim lights.

My head is racing with all the reasons I can't fall for this man. All the reasons I'm blocking the rampaging beat in my heart.

Then, out of nowhere, his voice skims across the back of my neck, sending those fucking goosebumps rolling right over my body again.

"I'm the youngest of five siblings," Zachary's voice deepens behind me. "I work on my family ranch, Wildheart Ranch. Have my entire life."

He really doesn't give up.

I get comfortable, just grunting a reply that insists he continues. Call me stubborn, but I can't pretend that I'm not interested in this man. That doesn't mean I'm ready to blow the shield I've put up around my heart away just yet.

"It's a tough life, probably not the life I would have chosen for myself. But that's the trouble when you're born into it. It's in your blood, in your genes. My father drilled that into me before I was five years old." He chuckles and the entire sofa shuffles under his weight. "You know he had me hammering wooden pickets along the fence line when I was old enough to grip a handle?"

"That's impossible. A two-year-old couldn't lift a hammer."

Zachary grins, a smile stretching across his lips the moment my mouth opens.

“It was a plastic one, but it was all the same to my father. Do you know how unrealistic it is to expect a child to nail a fence with one of those flimsy things?” Zachary shakes his head. “Seriously. I missed out on so many warm bottles of milk because I couldn’t finish my work in time.”

Laughter spills from my mouth, sending me rolling back against the back of the sofa.

“Your parents did not do that,” I comment, smiling at the brightness in his eyes.

“I might have overexaggerated a bit, perhaps,” he says, grabbing my leg and giving it a squeeze.

“What would you have done then? If you weren’t on the ranch?”

Zachary looks into the distance, contemplation making his eyes glaze over. “Horses. I love horses. I love their beauty, their stature. I love how strong they are, all while remaining grounded and faithful to man.” He grins at me, a cute little smirk almost melting my heart completely. “See... It’s entrenched in my blood. I’m still a cowboy, just not in the way I wish I was.”

I smile gently, feeling myself drift in closer. “Horses, huh? That’s funny, because as a little girl, I escaped to the rodeo just to see this one beautiful mare. She was pure white, fur as silky as cotton.”

He clears his throat and asks, “And that’s how you got into riding bulls?”

I nod. “Yeah, weirdly enough. Pretty soon, I was almost living at the arena. Anything to get away from-” I pause, catching my thoughts and dragging them back in. “You know what, it’s getting late. I have an early start tomorrow... so I should get going.”

Zachary doesn’t try and argue.

Instead, he walks me to the door of the bar, gripping my hand tight the entire way. He steps out into the cool night first, waving down one of the town taxis for me. As he holds the door open, I smile up at him, my heart trying to escape my chest as he gleams down at me.

“Goodnight, Amanda,” he says.

I step in, the arch of the door separating our bodies as I peck his lips gently. “Thank you for a wonderful night, *cowboy*.”

As he closes the door behind me, he grins through the window and holds a hand up to wave. The car steers away and the moment I tear my gaze from his, I know that I’m screwed. So fucking screwed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Zachary

The night out with Amanda has been at the front of my mind all week. Trudging through the paddocks, working my hands to the bone with demand after demand shouted at me from my brothers. The memory of that kiss is what's pulled me through.

The softness of her lips. Her skin, so smooth as I brushed against it with my nose.

Fuck.

It wasn't long enough. But it was too long.

In two nights time, the woman I kissed, the woman my chest thumped so fucking hard for that night will be my opponent. Standing between me and the chance to change everything is the sweetness of her soft mouth.

“Chuck me the nail gun, man,” Cole grunts, holding a sheet of new timber against the old barn. The ladder he's standing on is casting a long shadow over the weathered old timber.

I grab the rusted red tool and pass it to Cole, continuing to stare down the valley. The late afternoon heat is sweltering, my body aching from the amount of training I've been doing. Even after a long day at the ranch, I haven't had time to rest.

"Wake up!" Cole slaps me around the back of the head. "More nails! Come on, man, I want to get out of this fucking sun before it sets."

"Sorry," I shake my head, reaching for another row of nails from the box.

Cole frowns at me, his eyes looking me up and down as if he's trying to figure me out. It's been this way all week. I've been lumped with all the odd jobs of a night, anything to try and stop me from bolting out of the gate in my truck.

But even then, I haven't been going to the arena. I can't. I'm so far gone with my opponent I can't bear to see her. I spent the whole night tossing and turning after that kiss, wondering how the hell I'm going to follow through with this challenge.

Why did Gary Saison have to bring her into it? This is between me and him. Well, actually, it's between our entire family and that rich bastard. Why couldn't he climb on the back of one of those bulls to try and beat me?

I scrunch my face at the thought that maybe this was the wrong fight to pick. Too late now.

"There," Cole says, dropping the nail gun to the dirt. "That should hold up enough to give the greens some shade."

"All done?"

He frowns at me and climbs down the ladder. “Got somewhere to be, have we?”

I shake my head. “Just a question. Fuck...”

He pins me with a hard glare. “Quit the shit, man. What the hell is going on? You’ve been weird for weeks now.”

I bite down. I’ve made it this far without telling everyone what I’ve done. What’s another two nights of lies?

“Nothing. I’m just hot and tired,” I snap back.

“So that means you’re not gonna waste more gas in the truck by going wherever you’ve been going tonight? It’s not cheap, you know...”

I shake my head, a sarcastic laugh hitting my chest. “It’s always about money for you, isn’t it?”

Cole’s eyes narrow as he presses his chest against mine, his nostrils flaring. “In case you haven’t noticed, *little bro*, we’re all trying to get this ranch back up and running. Maybe you should start doing the same thing, huh?”

His nose twitches as he turns around and huffs away, leaving me to pack up the mess. *Asshole*. I throw the tools in the bucket and run through my escape plan for Saturday night. Not only have I got Cole on my back, Ethan and Lucas are still poking and prodding with every chance they get. Just yesterday I had to lock them in the chicken coop just to get away so I could hit the gym at a time when I knew Amanda wouldn’t be there.

Amanda. Fuck... I miss that smile.

As the thought of her magical eyes torture my mind, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I ignore it at first, but the vibration continues, and I pull it out to see a phone call from an unknown number flashing on the screen.

“Who the fuck calls anyone these days?” I grunt to myself, swiping across the screen to answer. “Hello?”

“Zachary, please...” A woman’s voice chokes on the other end of the phone. “I... I... Oh God. Please. I need your help. My horse, she’s sick and I don’t know what to do.”

I drop the electric drill on my toe. Thank God for steel capped boots.

“Amanda? Is that you?”

“Yes, please, hurry. I don’t know what to do and no one else in answering.”

The strain in her voice makes my throat close over. She needs me.

“It’s ok, stay calm. Text me your address and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Amanda thanks me and I leave Cole’s fucking mess at the back of the barn. Racing up the front steps, I swipe the sweat off my brow and collect the keys to the truck before storming back down the driveway. I pull the door of the rusty pickup open and a scream bellowing from inside almost causes me to fall over I jump back that fast.

“For fucks sake!” I shout, grabbing Ethan by the scruff of his shirt.

He's bawling with laughter as I yank him from underneath the steering wheel. I toss him to the dirt and grab Lucas next. He's hiding underneath the dashboard, too. I grip him, fighting off his wailing fists as my blood pumps through my body. How the hell do two giant men fit underneath the dash of an old truck anyway?

Fuck, that's not what I should be thinking about right now.

I go to slot the key in the ignition, but Ethan knocks them from my hand. They fall to the floor, and he kicks them away, dancing on his toes with a menacing smirk on his lips.

I glare up at him and he waggles his brows at me, mischief written across his face.

"I swear to God, fuck with me right now and I'll kill you," I grunt, reaching for the keys again.

Just as the loop of a keyring slides over the tip of my index finger, Lucas punches me fair in the arm, making me roar with pain.

"FUCK! YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!"

They're both laughing their heads off.

I launch from the truck and scruff them with all my strength, throwing them against the side of my pickup. A dent appears behind their bodies, just another one to add to the collection of the beat up old truck.

"Alright, here it is," I growl. "You guys want to know what's going on so bad, this is it. I'm in love with a girl. I've fallen like a true Harrison, so fucking hard and fast I can't stop

thinking about her. The trouble is, I barely know her. Sucks, huh?” I start shaking my head, an evil laugh rolling from my chest, escaping from my gritted teeth. “But that’s not even the worst part, you little pricks... No. You wanna know what is?”

They both nod their heads, smiling at me like two fucking hyenas thriving on the conflict and chaos they’re causing.

I snigger as my nose scrunches. “Let me go right now, and I swear to God, I’ll tell you everything tomorrow.”

They share a quick look as I release my firm hold. They stumble sideways and fall to the dirt, scampering up the driveway as I speed away, the truck twisting sideways as I race towards Amanda.

“It’s just mild,” I say, running a hand down the horse’s back. Her hoof shifts in the stable and a deep groan rumbles beneath her chest. “We’ll monitor her for a few hours and if it gets worse, we’ll call the emergency vet.”

I look to Amanda. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes drained and tired.

“You took her heart rate?” I ask, standing and wrapping an arm around her, squeezing her shoulder tight.

She nods. “Yeah, twenty minutes ago. I don’t understand, it just happened so suddenly. One minute she seemed fine, then

out of nowhere she was distressed and acting all weird.”

I bring her closer to my chest, my nose diving into the sweet smell of her hair. I inhale deeply, thanking whatever lucky star is shining above me right now.

Why the hell was I distancing myself from this woman? So what if we’re about to go to battle?

Amanda looks up at me, her long lashes batting. “Thank you for coming out. I think I owe you a drink...” She twists around and locks her arms around my waist. “Want to come inside?”

I nod, unable to form proper words.

Amanda leads the way up a dark garden path to a tiny cottage house. I see a small pile of shoes at the door. For someone who lives alone, she sure has a lot of boots and runners. They range in size, too. How weird.

I kick my boots off and follow Amanda through the house.

My skin heats as the warm glow of a crackling fire instantly makes me feel cozy. Amanda disappears into the kitchen and I’m gazing around the small living room. It’s decorated with rustic furnishings, all old looking and shredded by what looks like cat claws. The fragrant air smells homey, like a freshly baked loaf of bread has just been plucked from the oven.

“Everything ok?” I call out, moving over to a dining table hogging the corner of the room.

“Yeah, make yourself at home,” Amanda replies.

I pull a seat out from the table before looking across it and thinking twice at where I'm about to sit down. The table is covered with paperwork, barely an inch of the light brown timber visible through the mess. I slide the chair back underneath and go to turn towards the ragged sofas when a bunch of bright red words catch my eye.

A navy blue stamp of the local hospital sits at the top of a stack of thick paperwork. The headings on the documents are all the same, written in thick, bold text: **OVERDUE**. My stomach sinks as I look over the table, dozens, if not hundreds of different letters all looking similar.

“Well, what do you think?”

I turn around, my chest pounding.

And what I see doesn't help my racing heart.

My breathing stalls in my chest from the sight of Amanda's curvy body covered in lacey black lingerie. Her blue eyes shimmer before me, her blond hair falling over her shoulders, teasing my eyes to the roundness of her breasts. *Fuck*. They're incredible, oozing from the cups struggling to contain them, spilling over as the silky lace covering her soft belly pulls me closer.

Seriously, I'm worried I'm about to pass out. But I find myself standing right before her, my hands sliding down the smooth bare skin of her waist, fingers sliding beneath the loose fitting silk, catching on the thin piece of fabric at the height of her wide hips.

“I thought you were in the kitchen,” I mumble, catching my eyes from dipping to her deep cleavage.

“Oh... You don't keep your underwear in the pantry?” Amanda says, a seductive twinkle in her eyes making me lick my lips. “That was my bedroom, silly. Do you want to see?”

She twirls around, her large plump backside split by a black G-string making my cock throb with need. I'm struggling for breath, and before I know it, Amanda falls to the mattress in her bedroom, sultry eyes locked on mine as she curls a finger, inviting me forward.

I rip my shirt off, trying my best to force the images of the documents on her table from my mind. She's so goddamn beautiful, this is the moment I've been waiting for ever since I kissed her the other tonight.

So why can't I stop the images forming in my mind?

The phone call I overheard. The hospital bills spiralling out of control. The way she's reacted to the things I've said.

“Kiss me, Zachary,” Amanda says, sliding my shirt over my shoulders. “Let go of everything. I want you. Tonight, and tonight only, we let everything else go.”

My mouth crashes against hers. It's a wet mess of scorching hot kisses. Lips, teeth and tongues all clatter against each other as Amanda removes my belt and unbuttons my jeans. I kick them down, my hands roaming every inch of her smooth body.

“Oh,” Amanda moans against my mouth. “Make me forget. Make me feel again, Zachary.”

I grunt against her mouth, her tongue slotting perfectly against me as I move down, trailing hard nibbles and bites down the curve of her neck.

I've tried to escape. I've tried to hide.

But something about this curvy cowgirl keeps pulling me in. The curiosity and layer of mystery behind those eyes, the woman holding my mind ransom.

I can't give up.

It's not about the money. It's not about saving Wildheart Ranch anymore. Gary Saison can go and get fucked for all I care.

My heart is locked and loaded, the woman flashing her eyes up at me consuming my every move. And despite the declaration of tonight only burning at the front of my skull, I can help but think the explosion at the end of all this might just end in disaster.

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CHAPTER SIX

Amanda

A big, rough hand cups my face, pulling us closer as I sink into the mattress, letting Zachary fall on top of me. My body is burning hot as he settles between my legs, his excitement pressing through his underwear against my core.

Holy shit.

The lace of my outfit isn't doing anything to cool the skin ravaged with pure heat. I rock my hips and feel just how big he is. He feels so good, so long and hard. My clit throbs as I grind, desperate to feel his tongue slide across mine again as I loop my arms around his neck, erasing the distance between us.

“So fucking beautiful,” Zachary says, his eyes losing that weird glaze they had a few moments ago. “I’ve never seen a body like yours, baby. So perfectly round and full. These thighs, *gorgeous*. These tits, *fuck*.”

I stepped out of the bedroom, risking everything by presenting myself like this. One big event. Three rides. Ten

thousand dollars. It's all on the line in less than 48 hours.

But I can't deny the attraction, despite everything Gary has told me this week.

Stay away...

I don't want to hear my staff saying you've been hanging out with Zachary again...

You want to give up the prize money, do you?

Maybe Zachary is right? Gary might pay well and keep me living on the edge of surviving, but I've never been a girl to do as I'm told. He might be rich, powerful and in complete control of my life, but I never listen. Just ask my fucking parents.

Plus, I think it's safe to say it's about to pay off. That giant wave of panic that flooded my body when I saw my horse lacking her usual energy... Fuck. What a night for Brody to have the first sleepover since he's fallen ill... I really could have used his help even though I'm happy he's well enough to be with his friends for once.

I move into Zachary's touch, loving the way he's prickling across my skin as he smoothes feathered kisses down my neck. A big hand clutches one breast, releasing the soft fabric support and drawing a nipple into his mouth.

He releases a deep growl that sends a shiver down my spine.

I scrape my nails across his shoulders. He slants his head sideways, locking eyes with me as his tongue glides over my heightened peak. He reaches for the other breast and switches

his mouth, nibbling around my large nipples while tweaking the other with tight plucks and pulls.

“Fuck,” I moan, my back lifting slightly off the bed.

That tiny piece of fabric between my legs must be drenched. I swallow hard as Zachary moves down my body, peppering kisses over my belly, nibbling the inside of my thighs as he loops fingers around the band of my panties and glides them down my legs.

I pull my bottom lip in my mouth and watch as Zachary’s eyes darken the moment he locks on the moisture escaping my pussy.

“You’re drenched,” Zachary grunts, his hand gripping the raised tent pressing against his underwear. “Look at you, it’s fucking pulsing. You want me to taste you, sweetheart? You want me to lick your cunt until you come?”

“Wow,” I breathe, eyes hooded and needy. “I didn’t know I needed to hear that, but yes. Always, yes.”

He grunts as he levels with my core, drawing in a long, deep breath. I never knew someone inhaling the scent of my arousal would be so damn sexy, but damn, here we are.

He lowers his mouth to my pussy. He doesn’t ease into it... no way. As always, he holds nothing back, his tongue striking my clit with venom, sending a shooting hit of pleasure right through my body, escaping from my mouth as a loud scream.

“Oh! Fuck!”

I grip his hair, sliding my hips so my pussy grinds over his mouth.

“That’s it, baby,” he growls, digging his nails into my ass as I lift off the bed slightly. “Take what you need. Fuck my face with your filthy cunt.”

My teeth clench hearing his dirty talk. He keeps going, grovelling against my core with his messy words. How the hell did I get so lucky? I’ve never been lucky, not since the day I was born and snagged two dead beat parents who couldn’t care less about their children.

“Fuck!”

He moves his tongue over my entire length, dipping into my entrance, fucking me as deep as his long tongue will allow. He takes a finger, sliding it in so my tightness grips him. I feel like my skin is on fire and I’m reaching down my body, searching hands clawing for him, desperate to feel his hard, steel rod.

“I want your cock,” I moan, his heavy arm holding me in place as he circles his tongue over my pussy. “Please. I need it.”

He grunts and wriggles, his mouth never leaving the heated center between my thighs. He plucks his underwear off. *Fuck.* His naked body is a sight to behold, even through strained eyes and long, heavy moans that fill the bedroom. He’s all ridged muscles and tanned skin as he curls himself around, lifting my leg so he’s eating me out at an angle that allows me to grip his cock at the same time.

I stroke his full length, gliding across the veined skin. He's not just enormous in stature, his cock is huge, too. His breathing intensifies with every jerk and he slides a second finger in my pussy, fucking me with curled fingers rubbing against my inside walls.

His fingers scissor inside me and I feel his cock twitch when I swirl my hand around the tip.

"Don't come," I moan.

He grunts at me, pulling his mouth off my clit with a hard suck. "Then stop doing that."

He chuckles as I swipe a thumb over the moisture gathered at the tip of his cock. His body jerks on the bed and I do it again, my eyes locked on his. This time he growls and swiftly moves until he's right above me, hands are clasped over my wrists, pressing me into the bed.

He dips down to kiss me. "You like tasting yourself on my lips?"

"Uh huh," I whimper, catching sight of those electric eyes.

I lean up to him for another kiss, but he pulls back. Something washes over his gaze. It's different to the passion and desire that's been there for the past hour. His brow crinkles and he's staring deep into my eyes. Not just looking at me, really *watching* me, studying every rapid blink that the heightened nerves in my body are sending out.

Everything stills.

For a moment, my heart stops.

“Zachary,” I breathe, his eyes dropping to my lips at the sound of his name. “We don’t have to do this. If it’s too crazy for you, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t-”

A hand cups my mouth, blocking all apologies.

“Amanda, I haven’t stopped thinking about you from the moment we met,” Zachary admits, his naked body shifting, slotting perfectly between my legs. “But you know what... this is *crazy*. You’re right. You’re always right.”

My heart might have stopped before, but right now, it’s catching up on any missed beats.

He pushes forward, that big cock of his nudging at my entrance. His eyes remain glued on mine, locked tight as a hand slides between us and he holds himself steady.

“I’m not gonna fuck you, Amanda.” He slides his cock across my clit, swirling it over the bundle of nerves before dropping it back to my opening. “I’m going to make love to you. You said it’s just for tonight, but you’re forgetting one thing...”

He pushes forward. I gasp.

It stretches me, sliding inside so fucking tight my skin burns.

“Zachary,” I pant, his cock creeping deeper inside me. “Zachary... Oh... Tell me.”

His hands plant on either side of my face. He pumps his hips, deep groans bouncing from his chest, colliding with my nipples, sending waves of pleasure rolling down my body.

Inch by inch, I take him deeper, never losing a trace of his hooded gaze.

Finally, he pushes all the way in.

“I’ll never give up, baby. Not on you. Not on your life.” He pumps faster. “I’m all in. Forget the ride. Forget the money. You want me, you got me. You understand that?”

His hands run across my body, eventually falling to grab my hips as I nod up at him. My body is more alive than it’s ever been. I can worry about what this all means later. What this hidden message this man is swearing to promise me.... It can wait.

I feel a deep ball of warmth forming in my belly as Zachary dips down, his breath warm against my face as he starts pounding harder. Harder. Harder. I grab at his hair, moaning, screaming out his name as his balls slap against my ass.

Then it all begins to move. It’s a feeling like I’ve never experienced before.

Starting at my heart and moving to my lips.

“Fuck!” Zachary roars, his cock throbbing inside of me.

He’s pushing so deep, so hard and fast. He’s hitting all the right places. The smooth tip of his cock rubs against the walls of my sensitive parts, and when he reaches between us and rubs a thumb over my clit, that’s it.

I let go.

My orgasm explodes. I feel my inner walls clamp down around him, squeezing his length so hard he can't hold back any longer. The room around us closes in, but I don't dare look away from his eyes. It's intense. Wonderful. Filled with... with...

"I love you!" I scream, gripping him as he finally lets his heat release deep inside me. "I love you, I love you, I love you!"

He roars above me, his face so elated with pleasure when he opens his eyes again I see a small blood vessel has popped.

Fuck.

He crashes down beside me, breathlessly staring up at the empty ceiling. I scoot up the bed, clawing at the blankets to hold them over my naked body.

My head circles round and round.

Oh my God.

What have I just done? Did I just say that? Did I *really*? What the hell is wrong with me?

I couldn't just leave it at sex. That's all this was. I fucking set the rules when I said one night only. That's all this was. Get in, stop the attraction and get back to business. I need that money. *Brody* needs that money.

I can be falling for Zachary.

Zachary slides up the bed, his broad chest still heaving as he struggles to catch his breath. I can't look at him. *Goddammit*.

Now I really do have to beat him in that fucking rodeo. If I didn't already have a good fucking reason, now redeeming any self-respecting pride I might have lost in the heat of the moment, the second I declared my love for the man just because he made me come all over him, that's reason enough, right?

I swing my legs to the edge of the bed, dipping down to collect the pink dressing gown on the floor. As I go to swing it around my shoulders, an arm stops me.

I turn around and Zachary is leaning across the bed, smiling at me with a mischievous grin that should scare the hell out of me.

Except, with him, it doesn't. It never does, despite my brain screaming out at my heart to hate him. I *need* to hate him.

“Where are you going?” He asks, white teeth gleaming in the subtle light of the room.

I swallow the nervousness in my stomach down. “Just to freshen up.”

He hums. “OK... I'll wait here for you.”

A devilish wink hits me right in the gut. I shrug and pull the gown around my shoulders, rising to scamper towards the door.

“Wait,” Zachary calls out, leaning forward off the headboard.

He pauses, staring across the room, those dark eyes rolling up and down my body before finally landing back on my

shaky gaze.

“I love you, too, Amanda,” he says, smiling. “Don’t be too long.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Zachary

I wake up and the room is pitch black. I'm toasty, my skin feeling like it's on fire. As I slowly come to my senses, I rub my eyes and twist in the soft sheets, my bare chest coming into contact with the beautiful, naked woman beside me.

"Morning," I whisper, cradling into Amanda's body, sliding a hand down her smooth belly.

She stretches, her ass poking out against my morning wood. My cock is throbbing already and I reach up, sliding a hand to palm one of her breasts. Smooth, hard and silky, all in one amazing handful. More than a handful, even.

I pluck at her nipple, nuzzling my chin against her neck, kissing her, breathing her arousing scent. It's like we have all morning to just lay here.

My hand dips between Amanda's thighs, her slickness guiding my fingers inside her. She moans, but when I try to roll her over and look her in the eye, she just bumps her backside against my crotch and moans.

“Like this,” she whimpers.

I slide a hand down her spine, applying a gentle pressure to the small of her back. She arches. Her big, plump ass rubs against my groin, guiding it to the soaked entrance swelling with need.

I grip my cock and nudge it through her folds. I want nothing more than to see her face, see those eyes right now. But Amanda’s face is buried in her pillow, her blond hair fanning over her pretty features, hiding them away from me as I slide inside with a groan.

She bucks into my touch, taking every inch quickly. I push forward, angling my hips as I fuck her from behind, gripping her large rear, squeezing hard with every moan she makes in the cool morning air.

“Fuck, you’re so tight, baby,” I groan, tossing the blankets away from her legs.

I watch my cock disappear inside her, pumping deep thrusts harder. Her ass acts as a cushion for my pelvis, her hips rising slightly off the bed as I grip her hips and bring her to her hands and knees. My heart pounds inside my chest, every pump, every thrust making me fall further and further in love.

“Baby, yes... Amanda, sweetheart. So good.”

I slap her ass, waiting for her recall. Hearing her words last night, every tight moan she squealed made my cock that much harder. Nothing could take away the night we shared, but now,

as I drive deeper, bringing myself closer to the edge, I feel a distance moving between us.

“You like that?” I grunt, trying to hear the sound of her sweet, lustful voice. “You like that, don’t you baby?”

Her head dips between her arms. Her hips are moving, her ass wobbling so seductively before my eyes. I push harder. My teeth grind. I slap her cheek with a hard open palm, and again. I want that scream. I want that passion and heat.

Nothing.

Nothing but deep moans and fingers clawing at the pillows her face is buried in.

The root of my dick disappears, and I feel my orgasm building. Do I keep going? Maybe she’s still waking up. Maybe she’s not a morning person.

“Baby,” I grunt, my jaw tightening. “Fuck! Yes!”

My nails drive into her hips and I pull her hips closer. Her pussy is so wet, so tight around my cock as I release my load deep inside her. I wait for her body to respond to me, and finally, with withdrawn moans smothered by the sheets, her pussy clamps around me, milking every last drop from my length.

My body crashes down, my mouth desperate to find her lips, sealing the moment with all the feelings washing over me. I lean across and search for her face, pawing at her long, blond hair to try and find her hidden lips.

But Amanda just rises from the bed. I swear I see a tear in her eye as she pulls her gown tight and looks at me from the side of the bed.

“You should get going,” she says. “I’ll check the horse and call the vet if needed. Thanks for last night.” She looks to the floor, then back to me, her eyes distant. “For everything.”

The arena is empty when I get down to the chutes, the smell of the bulls not doing anything to soothe the spiraling thoughts storming my mind. After a long day on the ranch, plucking weeds for Cole and Leah before moving a herd of cows from paddock to paddock with Mike, it’s not just my legs that are tired and worn out.

It’s less than ideal preparation, thinking about why the woman you love suddenly slammed the gate down on whatever was developing between us.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

It’s like torture, hearing her words circle around in my head all day. Only, when I see her lush lips mouthing those words, it’s not the image of her beneath me, clenching my love with her own. No. I see that straight face, those hardened eyes glaring down at me from the side of the bed.

You should leave.

I grab my old vest and slide it over my head, the sun beating down on the dusty arena as it sets behind the grandstands. I draw in some final breaths and look at the bull waiting in the chute. He's young, pretty tame.

Still, I'm trying my best to cut him with piercing eyes that demand dominance.

Does it work that way?

Fucked if I know. All I know right now is that this will be my final practice run before the big event tomorrow night. Finally, the score will be settled, I'll be facing off against Amanda.

I squeeze my eyes and mount the bull. He snorts and paws at the ground, stomping already. The only thing holding him back is the silver metal gate blocking his path. My heart starts to race and I look up at the empty stands, picturing hundreds of cowboys all shouting at the top of their lungs.

"Ready?" The gray-haired trainer on the opposite side of the gate growls.

I nod, tensing every muscle tight.

The gate flies open and the bull starts to buck immediately. Adrenaline kicks in, coursing through my veins like wildfire. He spins, round and round, dirt puffing under rapid movements. My neck jerks, my whole head swirling on my shoulders as I grip tight with both hands. My body feels like a rag doll being bounced and thrown in all directions, but I

know if I stand any chance at winning tomorrow night, I need to raise an arm.

I release one hand and steady my body just as the bull slams to the ground with a jarring thump. I lose my balance and fall to the ground, a giant hoof just missing the side of my face as I scramble to the edge of the arena, climbing the fence for safety.

“Fuck!” I shout, falling over a chair. “Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!”

Pain riddles through my body. I’m not sure what it is, I wasn’t hit. Was I?

“Are you ok?” A hand curls over my shoulder and I spin around quickly.

“Amanda?” I choke, my body trembling.

She glances to the floor of the arena where the bull is being rounded up. A few of the trainers are yelling instructions at each other.

“That was a brutal fall, are you ok?” Amanda asks, concern tugging at her brows.

I huff, ripping my vest off and slamming it to the ground. Frustration boils inside of me, forcing me to scrunch my hands in fists.

“What do you care?” I spit, glaring at Amanda.

“Zachary, I was-”

My arms tense up as I pump my fingers in tight handfuls, cheeks hot and ears burning. I’m about to ask what the hell her

problem is, why she acted the way she did after such a glorious night. Why she blocked herself off from me and left me questioning *my* actions.

I'm in this situation because I'm tired of being left behind. Finally, I've made a change, standing up for myself, for my *family*. My entire life I've been the inconvenience. Useful only when someone wants me, tossed aside when they don't.

"I won't be played," I growl, stepping closer into her face. "You laid it all out for me. You're the one who said you loved me, not me. So what is it, Amanda? What do you want? Is this all just part of your game? Is this just your way of distracting me?"

Tears well in her eyes. "Zachary, no. You don't understand... It's complicated, ok?"

I open my mouth to reply, but a deep, disparaging voice grumbles from behind me.

"What the hell is going on?" Gary Saison stumbles over, sweat stains darkening the blue shirt beneath his armpits. "Amanda. I hope I'm not hearing this correctly, missy."

My arms remain at my sides as I turn around, my nostrils flaring.

"Gary, this is none of your business," I growl.

He scoffs a laugh and moves in so close I smell the body odor radiating around him. His nose twitches as he looks me up and down, a look of pure disgust written in his expression.

“If my employee is contriving with the opponent, it sure as hell is my business.” He daggers eyes over my shoulder to Amanda and I’m tempted to slog him right here, right now. “I should have known better than to trust you, Miss Rodriguez. A second-class tart such as yourself can’t stop herself meddling with my business. So what is it? You split the winnings? He fucks you in the backroom and you take it all?”

My teeth squeak as I grind them hard. “Don’t you fucking dare speak to her like that.” My chest bumps against his and I force him back with my eyes. “I’m calling it off. Screw your stupid competition, I don’t need to prove anything to a useless piece of shit like you.”

I curl a ball of saliva in my mouth, tempted to hurl the spit in this motherfucker’s face.

But I don’t.

“Zachary, please.” Amanda’s hand clutches my wrist but she can’t pull me away from going nose to nose with this bastard. “Please, stop. I need this. I *need* this.”

Gary’s eyebrows rise up his face. “Yeah, *Zachary*. Listen to your girlfriend. It doesn’t matter anyway, it’s going ahead. A verbal agreement is a binding contract in this state. You back out, no matter what, you pay me my money.”

“Zachary, come on,” Amanda says, desperation in her voice.

She pulls at my arm, fingernails scraping across my sweaty skin until she clutches my wrist and yanks me back. I stumble, my eyes locked on Gary as Amanda whisks me down the

steps, through the concourse beneath the grandstand. Her hand grips mine tight, fingers locking me in place as she leads me through a door and slams it behind us.

She twists the lock and I'm standing there, chest heaving, arms clenched glaring at her, demanding answers.

“I need to tell you something. Something I should have told you the moment I was dragged into this mess.”

“Start talking.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Amanda

I hold back the tears threatening to come hard fast. Over the years I've gotten pretty damn good at it but my heart hasn't ever been involved like it is right now.

"Start talking," Zachary says, his eyes unusually dark and demanding.

I glance around the room. It's small and almost completely empty except for a few plastic chairs stacked in one corner. The back wall has a rectangular window letting in some light, the glow of the dangerous world outside creeping in through the glass.

I don't know why I care right now, but I'm suddenly aware of what I'm wearing. Tiny shorts riding up my thighs, a tank top that's now drenched with nervous sweat that's making my thick socks grip tightly around my ankles.

I stare at the chiseled jawline in front of me, the stubble across Zachary's handsome face darker than I've ever seen on

him before. He's not smiling and the thick hair on his head is darkened with moisture that also pebbles right across his brow.

My heart pounds. I hear it in my ears it's that fucking loud.

"So I guess we're still enemies," I begin, trying a smile that doesn't work. "I guess you're right, he is a real piece of work."

Zachary's eyes widen as he nods. "No shit. Does he always talk to you like that?"

I shake my head and shrug. "Not always. That's not the first time he's grilled me like that, though."

A deep growl broadens his chest and he moves in closer. I tilt my head to meet his eyes, surveying the way his lips are forming a completely straight line. Somehow, they still look irresistible.

"Why do you work for him? He can't be paying you that much," Zachary says, a hint of something I can't put my finger on lingering in his words.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, splitting him with furrowed brows.

He steps in and holds my shoulder with a hot hand. His gaze slowly washes over me and I realize he knows more than I think he does. How much, I'm not sure but the sinking feeling in my stomach spins around and forces me to fall to the floor in a crumbled heap.

Zachary drops to his knees and sits opposite me. "What's going on? What were those medical bills I saw? Are you

sick?” He shakes me, fear striking in those beautiful eyes.
“Please Lord, don’t let it be you, sweetheart.”

I shake my head, swiping a single tear that’s escaped.

“It’s not me,” I cry. “My brother.”

“Brother?”

I nod. “Brody. Poor kid, he’s been so strong. But I can’t keep it up. The treatment is too much and I can’t keep up with the minimum repayments.”

I don’t have the energy to be upset he’s seen my private documents. Hell, maybe it’s not even his fault. It’s my mess, *literally*, scattered over the table in plain view.

Zachary doesn’t respond. He just sits there silently.

“I’ve sought out sponsorship or help with payments, but the system is overloaded. People like us don’t matter.”

“What do you mean people like us? Of course you matter.”

He squeezes my hand and I make damn sure to make sure he doesn’t let go.

“We’ve been in the system for too long. Ever since-” I look up at him, a long sigh leaving my chest as I blow out my cheeks. “Well, it’s all out there now. I may as well tell you how fucked up my parents were while we’re at it, if I hadn’t already scared you away, this might just do it.”

He sinks down beside me and brings my eyes to meet his. “You’ll never scare me away, Amanda. I don’t give up, remember?”

I shake my head. “You’re too nice, Zachary. Remember?”

We both laugh a lazy chuckle. It feels weird in my throat but the joy is short lived.

“It’s funny, you see,” I say distantly, as if speaking into the empty room. “Taking care of Brody now, it’s no different to how it’s always been. *Mandy, we’re going out. Make sure dinner is on the table.*” I mock my father’s deep voice, scowling with my best impersonation of the man who died with nothing but a black heart. “*Mandy, no school, the housework needs doing. Mandy, cook dinner. Mandy, where is all the food? Mandy. Mandy. Mandy.*”

A slow blink flushes the memory away.

“I was just a normal teenager, wanting to live a normal life.”

Zachary’s hand squeezes my thigh. I didn’t even feel him place it there, but now that it’s holding me I never want it to leave.

“Because of him, I’m not sure I knew the real Ma. We were all under his command, doing as he said, following his dreams, whatever that was. I still think the day he crashed into that tree was a blessing for her. Put her out of her misery, as sad as that sounds.”

“That’s awful. I’m sorry.”

I smile weakly.

“You really pissed him off back there, you know that?” I say, meeting Zachary’s eyes. “Gary Saison doesn’t get stood up to very often. You should be proud of yourself.”

He scoffs and rolls his eyes. “Proud? Ha. I’m an idiot more like it. Challenging a rich man at his own game, I mean, come on...”

“You’re not an idiot. You’re a proper cowboy. Pride. Honesty. Integrity.” I shift across and lay a soft peck on his cheek. “You’re a good man, Zachary.”

He smiles and opens his mouth to say something. A hint of pain flickers ever so briefly as the words almost fall from his lips, but as they do, he slams his mouth shut. He swings an arm around my neck, pulling me into him and kissing me.

Heat scorches my skin as his mouth swarms over mine, his lips drawing my tongue to swipe over his with rapid movements. I moan against his mouth and my hands go to his hard chest, gripping his shirt, pulling him closer until finally we break the kiss.

“Baby, you’re gonna win the rodeo,” he breathes, narrowed eyes locked on my mouth. “I’ll forfeit and you take the money. Gary said it himself, right? The day I met you, he wants my tears and you get the money.”

I shake my head and laugh. “The whole trophy cabinet filled with tears thing...”

Zachary nods and smiles. “Exactly.”

I pause for a second, straining to take everything in.

“Zachary, I can’t let you do that.”

“You can.”

I jerk back. “No. I can’t.”

He looks at me, but I harden my lip and glare right back at him.

“It’s no secret that Wildheart Ranch is on the brink. You know what this town is like, gossip, gossip, gossip. You need the money just as much as I do, and I’ve fought against my genetics for so long, I’m not about to give in and start being a selfish bitch now.”

Zachary stands and paces in front of me, a hand scrunched through his brown hair. His shoulders are tight, hunched over like a heavy weight has been thrust upon him. I’m watching a man with twisted emotions, tugging and pulling at his heart right before my eyes.

A big heart at that.

I want to pull him against me, cuddle him close and promise that everything will be ok. I want to make the hurt stop, for both of us.

But I can’t do that.

Not when I can see he’s hiding something from me now. The way he’s pacing, there’s more than money on the line here. I know that look when I see it. Agony. Desperation. I’ve seen that look every day for the past five years, staring at myself in the mirror each and every morning, wishing for it to all just disappear.

I shoot to my feet and slide my hands around his waist, clutching him tight and just holding him. Our bodies almost

merge as one as we hold the embrace, squeezing each other, listening to our heavy heartbeats striking simultaneously.

Something dissolves in this moment. Like the floor is slowly falling around us, a crack in the earth pulling us away from each other, as if destiny is taking hold of our lives. We separate until we're standing by ourselves, staring into each others eyes as opponents again.

The battle has resumed. Winner takes all.

Heart. Soul. And money.

With a brief smile, he draws a deep breath and releases it with a sigh.

“Until tomorrow night then, I guess?” he says heavily.

I give a half smile. “I guess so.”

He brings my hands to his chin, cupping them and dipping down to kiss my knuckles.

“May the best rider win.”

I grin and feel the twinkle in my eye. “Oh, don't worry, I plan to, *Mr. Bigshot.*”

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CHAPTER NINE

Zachary

The rolling hills fade in the long shadows of the afternoon. Warm rays kiss my arms, the sleeves of my shirt rolled up after yet another long day on Wildheart Ranch. I clutch a shovel in my hand, my hat in the other as I walk across the bright green fields where Leah is bent over, thinning carrots in the afternoon heat.

“All done, mister?” she calls out.

I nod. “Packed up for the day. You gonna be much longer?”

“Almost done with this row,” Leah says brightly. “Save me a beer, won’t you?”

I nod and continue up the path, taking deep breaths of fresh air in the hope that it might soothe the nervousness in my stomach. I open the door to the tool shed and slide the shovel against the stack of old tools piled in the corner, stepping back to close the door.

“Boo!”

I jump back, tripping over a bale of hay and falling to the ground. My hat rolls down the hill and I'm staring up at Ethan's cheeky face. Lucas appears from behind the barn, my hat pulled down over his sweaty mop.

"You've been avoiding us," Ethan squeaks, smiling brightly. "Sneaking away again tonight?"

I gulp down.

All day, I've been trying not to think about what I'm about to do at Falls Creek Arena tonight. It's bad enough I'm up against the love of my life, but if I win, I'm not only ripping away any chance she might have to get her brother the treatment he deserves, I'm risking losing everything my heart desires with her.

Lucas kicks my leg, standing over me and holding out a hand. "Don't even think about running. Harrison's are men of their word, and you're about to tell us everything. Don't skip on the details of this lover-girl you talked about, she sounds hot."

He flashes a glance to his hand and I grab it. He yanks me up and settles on the bale of hay, Ethan quickly joining him as the twins simultaneously swing one leg over the other, as if settling in for story time.

"Fuck," I breathe, scrubbing a hand over my face. "It can't wait? Promise I'll tell you everything tomorrow. The *full* story, not just half of it. Please."

Ethan's crossed his arms over his chest and Lucas is shaking his head.

To be fair, I have made them wait. I swore to reveal my secrets yesterday, but spending the night with Amanda saved me. By the time I rolled back up the driveway yesterday morning, everyone was hard at work and Ethan had left the ranch for his day job in town.

I pull a haybale across and settle on the spiky texture, sucking in a long breath as I look my brothers in the eye. They're staring at me, the quietest I've ever seen the pair of rascals.

"Here it goes," I mutter, moving to the edge of the bale. "I assume you guys know about the rodeo event tonight?"

Ethan nods excitedly. "Round Eight of the South West Championship, of course."

"Yeah, well that's part of it. But it's not the event I'm talking about." I scratch the back of my head, scruffing my hair nervously. "The main event tonight is Team Saison-"

"Versus some secret, mystery rider," Lucas interrupts, frowning. "We know. And did you know there's a big prize?"

"Just a lazy ten grand," Ethan chimes in, eyes alight with exhilaration.

I grin at my brothers, swallowing down the nervous energy bubbling in my gut. "Yes, I know."

Ethan frowns at me, Lucas looking identical beside him. A few seconds pass and I choose to remain silent, leaning back

on my hands as I watch every tiny muscle on their faces twitch. Slowly, they study my body language long enough to piece together the mayhem written in my eyes.

Lucas leans in closer, a frown forming above his eyes. “You’re not...” He cuts back, shaking his head. “Nah. No chance.”

Ethan slaps him on the shoulder and says, “What?”

Lucas leans over and whispers something in his ear. I look towards the sun; it’s almost tucked directly in the middle of the valley. The heat and humidity in the air is fading and I know there isn’t much time left.

“No chance,” Ethan grunts. “Zachary? He’s barely sniffed a bull, let alone mounted one.” He looks at me, eyes rolling as he shakes his head again. “Lucas thinks you’re the mystery rider.”

I shrug lazily and Lucas punches Ethan on the leg.

“See! He is! He is!” Lucas shoots to his feet, eyes wider than before. “I fucking knew it. I knew it.”

My eyes snap as I shush the twins and demand they sit back down. “Shut the fuck up, you morons. Do you want Cole to hear?”

They both nod rapidly. “Of course we do! We’re coming, man. I’ve gotta see this.” Ethan stands and clasps my shoulder, bending down to look me in the eyes. “You’re gonna die, you know that?!”

He rolls his head back and laughs up at the orange-hued sky.

“Nah man,” Lucas says, standing alongside Ethan. “Just think, if our baby brother here wins... *ten grand*, man. Ten grand.”

They hold each others hands and start dancing in a circle like some kind of simple idiots at a folk festival. My eyes roll and I wipe my hands down my jeans, sliding the nervous moisture down my legs.

“Or he loses everything for us all.”

A deep voice cuts through the air and I turn around to see the serious face of the eldest Harrison brother. Cole’s face is red, his mouth hard and jaw tight. Ethan and Lucas hide behind the haybale as Cole’s boots clog along the dry ground and he steps in front of me, looking down his nose with a fury in his eyes I’ve never seen before.

“Cole-”

I open my mouth to calm the tension but it’s too late. He’s scruffed my shirt and a fist drives into my gut, winding me instantly as he drags me up the driveway and tosses me like a bag of trash on the porch. Rolling in agony on the splintered old timber, I hear Cole screaming for our parents. A stampede of footsteps rattle the porch beneath me and before I know it, I’m thrust up against the wall, eight stern sets of eyes all locked on me.

My parents look confused. Mike and Emily are in their pajamas already. Ethan and Lucas have lost the excitement in their eyes now and Leah is just staring at her husband, almost appearing frightened at the aggression he’s showing right now.

Cole paces in front of them all, hands curling at his sides.

“Go on, Zach. Tell them what you’ve done,” Cole says.

I stutter incomprehensible words at first. Then Cole drops to his knees, scrunches a fistful of my shirt and shakes me wildly.

“TELL THEM!” Cole shouts in my face.

“Cole, stop!” Leah launches forward and grabs her husband’s flailing arms. “Give him a chance to talk, would you?”

Cole’s eyes don’t leave mine. Neither do anyone else’s for that matter.

I clear my throat and sit up. I take in each of my family’s eyes, looking at them for a second before moving to the next person. Before long, I’m casting a longing gaze behind them, staring at the old red barn I’ve seen from my bedroom window each and every day for my entire life.

My body comes alive.

Images of Amanda flash across my mind. I see a younger version of her, a teenager mopping up her parent’s mess. Ordered around, day after day. A never-ending cycle of the abuse of power a family can hold over their loved ones.

I think about her before I open my mouth.

She’s my heart, my soul, my *inspiration*.

“Wow...” I chuckle, a crazed kind of laugh shocking the glowering eyes of the people in front of me. “For the first time in my life, I’m the center of attention. Feels weird...”

“Cut to it, dipshit,” Cole says, Mama shooting him a dagger.

“Everyone is here, staring at *me*,” I continue, choosing to ignore Cole for the first time in my life. “Waiting for *me* to speak. Listening to *me*. Finally, the family wants *me*. After all this time, I’m not just some shadow. Or some inconvenience that can be tossed outside when I burn a pan.”

Mama winces as I stand up and brush down my shirt.

“That’s right,” I say, eyeballing each and every one of them. “The quiet one has feelings. A voice that should be heard, whether you like it or not.”

“That gives you no right to risk the ranch,” Cole growls, eyes narrowed.

“Risk the ranch?” Grampa Sam speaks up, a heavy gaze cutting between his oldest child and the youngest. “What does he mean? Zachary? Cole?”

I look to Cole, brows flicking up like I’m challenging him.

“Gary Saison is a dangerous man,” Cole says, looking to Mike and Emily. Their dealings with the billionaire are well known and it’s what started this whole mess in the first place. “He’s power hungry, willing to do anything to win.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Mike grunts from the back.

I clear my throat. “It’s pretty simple. I win tonight, I take home the prize money.” I hear Ethan and Lucas whispering excitedly, plotting out what they’ll spend their cut on first. “If I lose, it comes from my pocket.”

“*Our* pocket,” Cole corrects, his face growing redder and redder by the second. A gasp comes from the women, the guys all murmur as Cole closes the distance between us. “You’re a fool. Here we are, all busting our asses to keep this place alive and you go ahead and risk it all just to prove a point.”

I puff my chest out, but Lucas pipes up at the worst possible time.

“And he’s in love with the other team.” Lucas reveals and I glare across at him with wild eyes. “He told us, didn’t he?”

He looks to Ethan, and he nods sheepishly.

Accusations fly around, Mike telling Lucas if they knew they should have spoken up. Ethan defends his twin while Mama and Grampa Sam have words with each other like I’ve never seen before. Leah is holding Cole back from Mike as he attempts to throw a fist across his face.

It’s a big mess of anger, frustration and emotions all spilling over.

But it gives me an opening.

I jump down the steps, escaping the porch and racing towards the truck. I don’t care what anyone says, this is still my chance to prove myself. I pull my keys out and shove them in the ignition, twisting quickly and revving the old engine, waiting for the splutter. Behind me, I can see everyone still arguing through a cloud of black smoke and I plant my boot on the accelerator.

The engine roars and I speed away from the ranch, a tiny dot of a man shaking his fist at me as I turn onto the highway and steam towards the grandest prize of all.

Amanda.

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CHAPTER TEN

Amanda

An electric energy surrounds me, a palpable heat sucking the moisture from the air, making my throat dry as I grin at Brody. He's been my biggest fan since I made my professional debut three years ago, and he's never missed an event since.

"Go and kill it, sis," Brody says, his pale face splotchy with boils from the treatment.

I give him a hug and tell him to wait in our usual spot. He high fives a few of the riders who have come to know him over the past year and I smile at them, showing my appreciation for doing something that I know will make his night.

Suddenly, the crowd erupts in cheers and screams. The loud beating of a drum explodes around the stands and a chorus of excitement makes the hairs on my arms rise.

"*Ladies and gentleman,*" the announcer's voice matches the deep, groggy tone of none other than Gary Saison perfectly. "*I*

only have one question for ya'll... Are you ready?" A loud roar. "No, I don't think you heard me... I said, AREEEEEEE YOUUUUUUU READYYYYY?"

The floor beneath my boots vibrates under the screaming fans. The energy surges right through me as I wait beneath ground level in the waiting bay set aside for riders. It's a space filled with cold water stations, snack benches loaded with fresh fruit and nuts for the riders. A few soft sofas are scattered around, but tonight they're all empty.

I suck in a breath, turning around when suddenly I come face to face with my opponent for the night.

My heart skips a beat.

Zachary is smiling at me, his jawline trimmed so only a light smattered of facial hair darkens his features. His shoulders are high, a wicked smirk new on his face. A deep shade of indigo highlights the worn knees of his jeans and a leather belt hugs his hips. Scuffed boots and a button-down denim shirt complete the look that has my body all hot and flustered.

"You know you shouldn't be allowed to distract the opposition before the big event?" I say, stepping across to meet the strong scent of his cologne.

He slides a finger through my hair, trailing a soft fingertip across my cheek. "I've just come to wish you good luck. May the best cowboy win."

I smile. "Or cow-girl."

He nods, knowingly.

Unable to look away from those majestic eyes, the sound of my boss revving the crowd up before the main event rings in my ears. I breathe a sigh that catches the attention of Zachary and he steps in beside me to follow my gaze out across the arena floor.

“Something the matter?” he asks, concerned.

I shake my head, unsure whether to tell him about the ‘pep talk’ I received from Gary an hour ago. Shortly after changing in the locker room, I was surprised to see him leaning against the bench of the ladies bathroom when I stepped out.

I should have known he would pull something like this. This is me, after all. Nothing in my life goes to plan, but hey, it could be worse. I *could* have been fired. He could have ripped everything from me instead of just being told I won’t be receiving a dime of the prize money if I win.

No bonus to pay the bills. No extra money to relieve that pressure piling on top of me.

Somehow, it’s supposed to teach me loyalty. Stop messing with the opposition and maybe, *maybe* next time I’ll get a cut of the prize money.

“Just nervous,” I lie, smiling weakly up at Zachary.

As Gary tosses the microphone in the air, letting it fall with a crash to the dirt in the center of the arena, Zachary slides in and curls an arm around me. He pulls me in, hugging me

against his chest as he releases a few heavy breaths above my head.

“It’s time,” he says, stepping back with a timid smile.

My stomach twists and turns, a million different emotions swarming my mind. I could tell Zachary. Maybe I could just forfeit right now? What would happen then?

I can’t do that, though.

Despite losing the chance to win a huge prize pool of cold hard cash, Brody is watching from the stands.

Plus, I still have my pride. I’m a professional and this is my passion. It’s my *job*. I’ve worked my entire adult life to get to the main event, and this is my time to show that female riders are just as talented as the men.

I shuffle forward, the rumble of the crowd growing louder the closer to the arena floor I get. In front of me, Zachary’s stands stoically and listens to the stewards bellowing out instructions before his eyes. The rules are simple: we ride the same three bulls. Once per rider. Best overall score wins the cash.

Except in my case, *Gary* wins the cash.

“Good luck, Mr. Harrison,” the Chief of Events, Marshall, says sternly, slapping Zach on the shoulder. He adjusts a two-way radio looped over his belt before looking my way. “You’ll need to have your wits about you to beat Miss Rodriguez.”

Marshall flashes me a smile. I acknowledge the compliment as Gary appears from behind a door leading out into the arena.

He's sweating like a pig, a broad grin lifting when he locks eyes with Zachary.

“Ah! There's the big chump.” Gary storms towards Zachary, his large waist wobbling with every hurried step he takes. “Listen, I was just thinking... After you lose tonight, if it's no trouble, I'd love to swing by Wildheart tomorrow. It would give me great pleasure in snatching that cash right from your old man's filthy hands.”

Gary's snarl meets the dark look Zachary shoots him.

“Don't you dare speak like that about my father,” Zachary growls, a rumble in his voice that, as his opponent, scares the shit out of me.

Gary doesn't give him the grace to finish as he rolls down the concrete walkway and heads towards the VIP boxes at ground level.

I glance at Zachary, apologizing with my eyes that my boss is a cunt.

Zachary shakes his head and looks away, but not before I catch a glint of something that changes everything. *He'll never give up.* He's promised to give me a good run for my money, despite the mutual feelings between us. Zachary will give it his all each and every ride. Guaranteed.

I step forward and stare at Marshall as he explains the rules to me. But I'm not listening.

A verbal contract is binding in this state.

“Mr. Harrison, you're up first.”

He doesn't look back, instead his rugged features are darkened beneath a wide brimmed hat that he slides over his head. There's the usual noise and men grunting instructions as he mounts the bull at the gate. All I can see from where I am in the holding bay beneath the grandstands are Zachary's boots, dangling from on top of the first bull.

“AND HE'S OUT!”

The roar of the crowd tells me Zachary's still on top of the bull. He's survived that first big burst of energy as the beast runs from the gate. *Come on, you can do it.* I'm counting in my head. Eight seconds. The first ride will be set up as the easiest, so he needs to ride this one out if the plan formulating in my head is to work.

“What a ride from Zachary Harrison! What. A. Ride!”

The arena erupts around us, and I find myself slapping my hands together, gleaming with joy. Marshall spins around, a frown planted along his brow as I'm ordered forward.

My turn.

My vision is blurry, blood pumping around my body. I've worked hard to get here and now my leg is swinging over the snorting bull, the warmth of the fury building in the beast heating my legs as I steady my grip around the saddle, I catch those blue eyes from the corner of my vision.

Zachary bows his head, wishing me luck with his eyes.

“And we're out!”

Fuck. The bull races forward and the whiplash almost causes me to fall back instantly. I grab hold, my sweaty hand riding the first three hard bucks. My body crashes against the saddle, pain shooting up my leg, down my spine and across my chest with every bone-crunching blow the bull throws at me.

I ride the eight seconds and we go into the next round even.

It's intense. The same energy and adrenaline mixing with my blood. Just like it does every time I take center stage.

We go head to head in the next round, both riding another perfect ride. It all comes down to the last bull. *Three bulls. Three rides.*

Silence takes hold.

I'm pacing in the waiting area, staring at the ground as Marshall's two-way cracks with a deep voice. There's confusion as he holds the speaker to his mouth, searching the room with wide eyes until he catches sight of me right stretching against the brick wall at the back of the room.

"Got her," Marshall says, racing across to grab me.

His hand curls around my upper arm and he's dragging me towards the chute.

"What are you doing?" I blurt out.

"Gary's orders. This round, you're riding first."

I cut him a hard look.

This isn't part of my plan. I *need* Zachary to go first if I can rig this event. I need to know his score so I can make sure I don't beat it. If I don't beat him, he gets the money. Gary said it himself, a binding contract, he can't back out of paying if I lose 'fair and square'.

"There must be some mistake," I say, desperation catching as I'm pulled past Zachary who's looking around, wondering what the hell is going on. "There's a riding order that must be followed. You can't change the order in the middle of the event."

Marshall shrugs his beefy round shoulders. "Bosses orders. We just do as we're told."

I roll my eyes. Been there, done that.

"Come on, it's time. You're up, Amanda."

Marshall goes to grab my arm, but I rip it back and glare at him. "At least give me a second to consult my competitor about this."

I pull Zachary aside, dodging the heavy eyes of the security staff as we scramble around a corner. I push a hand into his chest and look up into his eyes. I'm not sure what makes me do it, but before my mouth opens, I'm pressing my lips against his, fumbling in my boots to reach his mouth on my tiptoes.

He pulls me against him, kissing me deeply. He angles his mouth, sliding a tongue across mine until I'm breaking back, looking him directly in the eye.

“I’m going to fall off,” I breathe, watching the pupils in his eyes dilate with alarm. “Don’t argue with me. I’ll explain everything later, but for now, *please*, you have to trust me. Whatever score I get out there, make sure you beat it.”

“Amanda, wait,” Zachary grabs my hand and spins me around. “I want you to have the money. Brody needs you. *I* need you. Please.”

I’m standing there, shaking my head.

“Stop being so nice,” I tease. “Just this once, listen to what I’m saying. OK?”

I go ahead, leaving Zachary behind with a confused look. Head swirling, I mount the bull in exactly the same way I do every single time. I hold my nerve, staring ahead, not giving the dangerous plan in my head away by appearing to be nervous despite fear striking every red blood cell in my body.

This is it.

I’m about to rig the event so Zachary wins.

Tonight, I might not be able to change my life, but I can sure as hell save his.

“AND SHE’S AWAY!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Zachary

I can barely watch.

The crowd roars, the bull bucks before leaving the chute. I've watched Amanda ride a million times now. Sitting in the stands, studying her team before I even knew *she* would be my opponent. She stood out from the rest.

Grace. Style. Poise.

Strength.

God, she's strong.

Even stronger than I ever thought possible. Just hearing her talk about her parents stirred emotions deep down inside of me I didn't think I had. Add a sick sibling on top of that and a load of responsibility I couldn't imagine dealing with each and every day.

I'm going to fall off.

I clutch the railing separating me and the dusty floor of the arena. The beast is bucking hard, landing to the ground with

two large hooves that shatter the earth beneath it. Amanda is holding on and I watch her eyes slowly dip to the ground.

Her hand loosens.

Her white knuckles fill with color.

Thud.

A groan of pure astonishment washes over the crowd. Gasps, clutched mouths and shocked shrieks ripple down the stands as I look to the clock and see Amanda's ride lasted four seconds. Four seconds.

Make sure you beat it.

Whispering grips the arena as Amanda is pulled to safety. The raging beast is cooled off and whisked away, the hum of the audience slowly reigniting when background music starts playing again.

I swallow down. Why is she doing this? I don't care about the money. So what if my entire family hates me? I can deal with that, I've been doing a pretty darn good job at it my entire life. She needs the cash. *She* needs the win.

"Alright, you're up," Marshall, the big beefy man says.

I rub my hands over my chest, stepping forward just as Amanda breezes back down the walkway. She shoots me a wink, hope filling her big blue eyes. No woman has ever looked more beautiful to me, my heart is thumping and begging for answers.

But there is only one.

I won't let her give this opportunity up.

"Let's go," I grunt, storming forward as the bull is rustled in the chute, ready for round two.

I close my eyes. The bull's chest explodes with heavy, huffed breaths between my legs. I settle on its back, gripping tight with shaking hands. I can feel the electricity around me, the buzz of the final round. The ride that will decide the winner of ten thousand dollars.

It all comes down to this.

Me or Amanda.

As my eyes slot open, the loud beep counting down to the opening of the chute, I know there is no such thing as me *or* Amanda. Hell no.

"AND HE'S OUT!"

The bull storms forward. The gust of wind rips right through me as it starts to shake and twist under my backside. It's fast and rapid, everything that I need to make sure I slide right off the top the moment we exit the gate.

I fall to the ground.

The clock stops and I've barely registered a full second for my final ride.

"TEAM SAISON WIN! TEAM SAISON WIN!"

The bull is rampaging in the arena and I should be petrified. Only, something fills my body with a renewed sense of completeness. Joy and happiness rises in my stomach,

bubbling in my chest. I didn't need this victory to prove my worth. I didn't need to stand out from my brothers.

Fuck, I didn't even need the ten thousand dollars.

I crawl on my hands and knees to safety, knowing that the journey to get this far and literally fall down at the last hurdle wasn't for nothing. My life has changed, my heart is filled with so much love and affection, a new sense of adventure feels imminent.

“Zachary! Zachary!” Amanda's voice meets me the second I drift back down the chute, my head held high as I meet her wide eyes. I go to congratulate her, but she cuts me short with a slap against my chest. “What the fuck! What did you do?!”

Amanda's voice is hushed, her hands grabbing, gripping at my arm as she yanks me backwards down the race and into the room.

“I told you, baby,” I say, smiling ever so gently. “It's time to take care of yourself and your brother. Take the prize money, look after Brody.”

Amanda's face turns bright red. “There is no prize money!”

“What are you talking about?”

The relief in my body quickly shifts. I feel the weight of my frown creasing across my head.

“Gary withdrew on his promise to give me the prize money,” Amanda says, wild eyes blinking harshly as her spine stiffens.

“Like hell he did!” I growl.

Amanda releases my hands and starts pacing, scrunching and pulling at her hair. I’m trying to put it all together in my head when she turns to me, blond hair frizzled and messy on her head. Her mouth opens to speak, but my eyes catch sight of the one person who I want to see more than Amanda right now.

“Gary! What the hell is going on?” I shout, storming across to meet his elated eyes.

He’s beaming. Almost floating through the air as he treads towards us. Fucking asshole.

“Ah, well isn’t it always the way,” He chuffs, beaming chubby cheeks all smug and happy looking. I think I might actually hit him this time. “The poor people always end up second best. No harm, no foul, though. It’s all in good competition, right?”

“She gets the money,” I spit, fury churning in my gut. “That was the deal.”

He pulls back and glares at me a little. “Now, now. I don’t go telling you how to spend your money. Oh, wait, that’s right... You don’t have any.” He glances down the hallway and his eyes brighten. “And look! It seems your family are here to enjoy this moment with you, young Zachary.”

I turn around. Cole’s shoulders hang low, covering one side of Mama’s sullen expression. They’re all there, my whole family staring at me with disappointment written in their eyes.

Not today.

I march forward and grab Gary's shirt, scruffing him and sending his spine crashing against the wall. My nose flares, my breath short and fast as my teeth grind together, trying their best to block the words flying from my mouth.

"We had a deal. I win, I get the money. She wins, *she* gets the money. You said so yourself, so be a man and follow through with your promise."

I give him a shake, fear widening his eyes. "I make the rules, cowboy. Now let me go."

I shake my head with disgust, taking a tiny step back with a glance to my tightly gripped fist. Without thought, I swing my arm, my knuckles driving right across Gary's nose, flooring him with one big whack.

It's like I'm in the center of the arena again and I've just fallen off the bull. Pure silence grips the air around us until tiny, hushed whispers meets the burning of my ears. Tiny squeals of joy begin to fill the room. Ethan's boots clonk on the floor as he jumps up and down, clapping for joy.

Everyone is watching as Gary slides down the wall clutching his face in agony.

I stoop over his fallen body. "A verbal agreement is binding. You pay her the money, or I'll see your ass in court."

I spin around, my hand throbbing painfully as I slide my arm around Amanda and pull her into me. I can feel the eyes

of my family, but for once, I wish I couldn't. Amanda's eyes relax and I swipe away the tears falling down her cheeks.

"Amanda, I love you. Nothing will ever stop me loving you. My whole life, I've waited for someone like you. Someone to make me feel like this. You're it, baby. You're what I've always needed and I'm going to spend the rest of my life making you feel like the most important woman in the world." I smile at her and take her hands in mine. "Because to me, that's exactly what you are."

She smiles. "I love you too, Zachary. Even if you can't follow instruction."

I laugh and kiss her. Her hands go to my shoulders, and we ignore the wooing in the distance, savouring the kiss until finally we're broken apart as my brothers swarm around me.

"Dude, you fucking slogged him!" Ethan blurts out. He turns to Amanda and his eyes pop wide open. "Wowzers, little bro has good taste."

Amanda laughs and stretches a hand out. "Amanda. You must be Lucas. Zachary has told me all about you."

Ethan is pushed aside by Lucas who smiles at Amanda. "No! I'm Lucas. The better looking one."

"You're both ugly."

A deep voice rumbles around us and I feel Cole's stature behind me. He grips my shoulder and forces me to turn around. When I do, I see a look in his eyes he's never used on

me before. It's soft, a glint sparkling with something that I've barely felt my whole life.

"Little brother, you've made your family proud tonight," Cole says, smiling.

"Even if I did just lose ten grand?" I joke, pulling Amanda back to my side.

"Money isn't everything," Cole says, winking to Amanda. "Money can be replaced, but having a brother like you around to defend the family name, that's something a piece of shit like Gary Saison won't ever have." He grins at me and Amanda, a big smile warming my chest. "We're Harrisons, after all. And we never give up."

Amanda twists in my arm and cocks a brow at me. "HmMMM, I think I've heard that somewhere before."

I pull her into my arms. "And I think you're going to be hearing it a lot more."

EPILOGUE

Zachary

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THREE MONTHS LATER

“Check out that ass,” I cheer, holding Amanda’s hand as she dismounts the horse.

She slaps my arm, shooting me a glare as her feet hit the ground. “Stop that. Brody will hear you.”

I laugh and grab the rope, leading our favorite mare across the paddock and into the stable with the other horses.

“I think he’s in a whole other world now, sweetheart. Have you seen him with Lucas? Those two have really hit it off.”

I see the concern in Amanda’s eyes. “I just hope Lucas doesn’t lead him up the wrong path.”

I shake my head and pull her against me, holding her warm body, sliding my hands down her soft hips to cup her plump ass. The stable is heavy with humidity but having Amanda by my side all day soothes me in a way I never thought possible three months ago.

“No. He’ll be fine. Something has changed in the last few weeks. Lucas has been seeing an old friend from high school. It seems to have calmed him down a bit, but we’ll see.”

“Do you think they’re sleeping together?” Amanda teases.

I nod with the upmost assurance brightening my eyes. “One-hundred fucking percent.”

Amanda laughs as we finish tidying up the old barn. It's a pleasure to keep this place clean these days. Gone is the slog of being ordered to dust and sweep it out by Cole. It used to be a way to hide away from it all, escape the judging looks of my family and just have a minute alone.

Now, it's home to six horses. Five beautiful mares and a giant stallion who thinks he's king shit of Wildheart Ranch. To be fair, he does keep the students of *Wild at Heart Riding School* on their toes. Amanda leads class after class, building our rapidly growing reputation as Falls Creek's best horse riding school.

The passion she showed with her rodeo career has spilled over to her new career. A career where she calls the shots and is never, *ever* spoken down to.

“What do you say we finish up and test out the new office?” I wink and glance up to the newly constructed loft that creates a second level inside the barn.

Amanda steps in and grips my chin. “Do you think it's ready?”

I drop the ropes in my hand and scoop her in my arms. “Only one way to find out.”

Amanda laughs as I race towards the newly constructed timber landing. Fumbling in front of her, my cock is hard already as I lay a blanket down on the empty floor. Her blue eyes flash at me, sparkling in the subtle golden light of the sunset creeping in through the cracks in the timber.

“I love you, baby,” I step in close and hold her cheek. “I’m so proud of where we’re going.”

She grabs my hand and plants it on her breast. “Yeah, yeah. Come on. I’ve been staring at that cute butt all day. Let’s do it.”

I laugh and we fall to the floor. Her palms run across my face as she kisses me deeply, both legs wrapped tight around me as she mounts me. Her tongue plunges into my mouth as we loosen our clothes.

In no time, Amanda’s bra falls behind her and I sweep a nipple into my mouth. She sucks in a breath. Her peaks are hard, pointed and moist as I palm the other breast, loving the way she’s clawing her nails through my hair and moaning.

Our sex is always wildly hot, but right now, it feels like we’re forming as one in every way possible. Sparks inside me catches ablaze, my heart pounding as she wriggles down and unbuckles my belt. I lose my jeans quickly and my underwear follow.

“Stand up,” Amanda says, reaching for my throbbing member.

I rise to my feet and she curls a soft hand around my shaft. She pumps my cock, shuttling her hand faster and faster.

Something about seeing her eyes looking up at me overpowers me, and I nudge my dick across her lips. Amanda shifts her feet, as if getting comfortable on the blanket. Her

tongue licks the tip and she lifts my cock, rolling her warm kisses down the underside.

I groan heavily as her mouth meets my tight sack and she sucks one tight ball in her mouth, stroking up and down my hard rod at the same time.

“Fuck,” I growl, gripping her hair tight. “I love you sucking my balls, baby. Oh yeah...”

A handful of blond hair is scrunched tight in my fist as she releases my wet sack with a pop of her mouth. She looks up at me, lashes batting, as she slides back up and takes my cock in her mouth.

“I bet you’re fucking wet right now.”

Her head nods in agreement and I tip my head back, rocking my hips as I slide down her throat. Her hands move around to grip my ass, her nails digging in pulling me deeper, deeper into her mouth.

“Fuck,” I grunt, pumping so the sensitive tip of my cock slides along the inside of her warm cheeks. “You make me the happiest man in the world. You know that, baby? So fucking happy.”

She releases with a pop and continues stroking me. We stare into each other’s sultry eyes, and I grab her hand and pull her up. Her naked body fits perfectly against me as I hold her so her soft belly is pressed up against my throbbing cock.

“I want to marry you,” I breathe, my heart doubling down.

“I want that, too,” Amanda says, before she frowns slightly and pauses. “Wait, you’re not just saying that because I’m naked right now.”

I shake my head. “No. It’s because you sucked my balls.”

She slaps my chest and we both laugh. “You’re the worst.”

I slide a hand through her hair and our lips meet softly. She feels so right in my arms, the softness of her breath, every exhale warming my skin so damn perfectly. Our kiss deepens and I pull her closer, wanting this moment to last forever.

I pull back, and this time, my face is dead straight. “Jokes aside, I mean it, baby. I don’t have a ring, hell, I don’t even have pants right now...” She laughs with a bumpy chuckle that presses her naked body against my cock. “But I have a big heart just for you. It’s all yours, forever and ever. Will you be my wife?”

Amanda gleams up at me, nodding. “Yes. Of course I will.”

The moment is beautiful and perfect, but not only is Amanda savagely gorgeous and sexy, my cock won’t stop aching.

We lay on the blanket, and I position myself between Amanda’s legs. Her eyes are glued on mine, filled with love and admiration for the life we’re building. Together. Those delicate blue eyes widen as I slide inside her delicate pink pussy.

I drape her leg over my shoulder, pulling her entrance wider to allow my girth to stretch through her wetness. She’s already

so wet. A shaky moan fills the rooftop and I feel her thighs trembling around my hips. Her soft lips lock on mine and I feel her body tighten, approaching the edge of a climax.

“Oh...” Amanda moans, pulling me closer.

Her back arches and she quivers beneath me. Her cries become louder, and I increase the pace. I’m so fucking hard my cock feels like steel, our naked bodies tangled in heated passion. I grip the inside of her legs, spreading them wider, pressing deeper until she’s screaming my name.

“Zachary! Yes!”

Her body shudders and I rock against the pressure, watching her face clench and release as she rides the height of her orgasm. Slowly, her eyes flutter open and she hitches both legs over my shoulders.

“Deeper. I want that again.”

“Damn, baby. You’re so fucking sexy when you come.”

My forehead presses to hers and I pound harder. The back of my knees stinging, but I don’t care. This is it for me. Right here. My hands hold her steady as my heart hammers inside my chest, watching the love of my life halt her breath as another eruption grips my cock tight, forcing that wave of heat to storm over me.

We cling to each other, and then I let go.

I fill her with my load, a release that grabs hold of every muscle in my body and shakes me to the core. Fingernails prick my shoulders as I concentrate on the bouncing of her

perfect breasts, hearing her come down the other side of another orgasm alongside me.

We lay together, fingers threaded and hands gripped tight.

Three months ago, my life was a disaster.

Now, with my fiancé at my side and a thriving business at home on Wildheart Ranch, a business that has well and truly paid back the debt to one asshole businessman, I'm not sure I could be any happier.

THE END... For now.

This was Zachary and Amanda's story. If you thought this was sexy, it's got nothing on my other series, *Falls Creek Falcons*.

If you love naughty, rough men, curvy sunshine girls and a sexy dose of sports romance, I know you're going to love Axel and Maya's *enemies to lovers* story in *Bad Boy's: SHUT OUT*.

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Book One: Falls Creek Falcons - A Sports Romance Series

CHAPTER ONE

Maya

I slam the draught tap off, drumming my finger on the side to the beat of the jukebox playing in the corner of the room. Avoiding the heavy gaze of the man in front of me, I tilt the cold glass to rid the rim of the heavy froth and slam it on the bar. “That’s five dollars, please.”

The man in a suit plucks a ten dollar note from inside his jacket. He winks at me, looks down at my chest and his brows shoot up. He slides the cash across the bar and says, “The rest is for you, darlin’... Just as long as I get a phone number in return.”

I force a fake smile. I’m getting pretty fucking good at it. I’ve spent my entire life feigning happiness and ever since I

took this job at *Staggered and Slurred* in Falls Creek, I've perfected the craft even further.

Cringly men. All slimy and drunk. They're all the same, it doesn't matter where in the world you are.

Even though I've escaped to Falls Creek... Far, far away from my father and his stupid business associates, there is no escaping creeps disguised as respectable businessmen. It doesn't make a difference if you're in the bright lights of New York City or the dusty streets of a small town like this.

But I've seen beyond the flash tie, crisp shirts, and tailored suits.

I *was* one of them.

I was on track to become something huge. Promised the world and a promotion to get the job in the fastest growing IT company in the entire United States. My *father's* company. I had the knowledge and the connections. Heck, my father built the company from the ground up and now he's listed in *Forbe's Magazine* as one of the world's wealthiest billionaires.

I had it all. The world was at my feet.

That's until my dad's associate decided I was yesterday's girl. He wanted our relationship to be kept quiet, and for six weeks, I played along happily. But I wouldn't just sleep with him. I wasn't *that* kind of girl. I needed a commitment first. I didn't want to hide in the background and not tell anyone about our relationship. But he wasn't willing to do that.

Then, just like the suit in front of me would if I handed my number over the bar, he stopped returning my calls. He avoided me at the office and at work events. At the drop of a hat, I became nothing to him.

The day my dad dragged me into his office and laid me off, after some ‘suggestions’ from his team of directors, was the most humiliating day of my life. I might have been one of the brightest young women on the tech scene in New York City, but to my father’s right-hand man, I was supposed to be just another number in his little black book.

So when I wouldn’t give in to him, he had me fired. By my own father.

I moved as far away as I could. Falls Creek isn’t just where I ran out of gas and withdrew the last check from my bank account. My oldest friend just moved here, and she’s been a real-life saver helping me find a new place to live. Now, Falls Creek is the place I call home.

The suit in front of me sips at the cold beer, flashing his gold watch at me like I’m supposed to be impressed. Being the daughter of a billionaire, I’ve seen it all. And in the words of Shania Twain, *That Don’t Impress Me Much*.

Curling my lips and fluttering my lashes at the suit, I hit the button on the register and pull his change from the drawer. I slide it across the bar, tilting my head so my platinum blonde hair falls around my shoulders seductively.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I drawl sarcastically, pushing my glasses back up my nose. “I’m worth more than that, aren’t I?”

He smirks and plucks the five dollar note and shoves it back in his pocket. He looks me up and down, contemplation gripping his pale face. I'm curvy. A plus-size nerdy looking girl with black-rimmed glasses. And despite the deep cleavage the uniform I have to wear at my new job shows off, I know men like him prefer their girls to be stick thin.

The door of the bar bursts open and he spins on the spot, greeting another man in a suit and never looking back. *They never do.*

"Um, hello?" A voice pulls me from my trance and when I look over my shoulder, I see the bright eyes of my only friend in Falls Creek. "What does a girl have to do to get a drink in this joint?"

"Olivia! What are you doing here, babe?" I skip across and grab my best friend her usual – a peach spritzer – and slide it across the bar. I look around for Olivia's usual sidekick, her daughter. "And where's Ava?"

Olivia flashes her mocha-coloured eyes at me. "I finished up early. Game day so they shut down the office early. Ava's with her dad and they're watching the game together."

"Game? What game?" I frown, turning to the guy standing beside Olivia and taking his order.

"Um..." Olivia hums, sipping her drink. "Have you been living in a hole or something? The Falcons... They play tonight..."

I feel my eyes flicking around in my head. The man patiently waiting for his beer is staring at me like I've got something hanging out of my nose. He reaches for his back pocket and pulls a pamphlet out and shoves it towards me.

A team wearing bright red jerseys are all lined up, gripping hockey sticks with mean, nasty looking expressions. The men are scowling at the camera and a shiver rolls down my spine.

Vicious. Rebellious. *Cruel.*

Avoiding the two sets of eyes staring over the bar at me, I flip through the pages for the player profiles. They're all tattooed, ripped with huge muscles and powerful chests. I feel a deep warmth filling my belly and when I turn the page, one man in particular catches my eye.

“Oh... Wow... Look at the colour of his eyes...” I pull the pamphlet closer and observe the darkest grey coloured eyes I've ever seen. They're cold, but the way they're hooded and mysterious makes my belly flash with a rapid wave of heat.

“Oh, Axel Lewis...” Olivia nods, peeking over the top of the page with lust filling her gaze. “As if you're looking at his eyes... Did those perfect pecs evade your attention?”

She's right. *Holy hockey muscles.*

I look down the image of the Herculean-like figure. His cut abdomen rips into his body like a carved statue of a Greek god. I'm sure my nipples harden just at the sight of the 'V' in the centre of his hips and I feel my tongue swelling in my mouth.

“Oh, ha ha... Yeah, yeah... I guess they did.”

I try nervous laughter, but it doesn't work. Olivia's rolling her eyes and she shares a look with the man.

“And you think you can call Falls Creek home...” Olivia sucks on her straw and shakes her head. “That settles it. I have two free tickets and you're coming with me tonight.”

I slide the beer that's been overflowing while I gawked at Axel Lewis across the bar. When I look up at the man and pass him his pamphlet back, he's gawking at Olivia with wide eyes. “Free tickets! Are you for real? That game sold out months ago!”

Olivia has a smug smirk on her face, “Well, I guess that's the perks of working at the club.”

“You work with the Falcons?” The man's clearly a fan and for the first time I notice the emblem on his polo top: a red graphic of a powerful bird with ‘*Falcons*’ sprawled in fancy text below it. “Oh, man... You must see some shit. Are those guys really as bad as the papers say?”

“Nah, they're not that bad,” Olivia says lazily.

“Bad? Why are they bad?” I ask curiously, flicking my hair back.

“Not that bad?” The man scoffs harshly, switching his gaze between me and Olivia. “I guess you didn't see the write up about the captain. Apparently, Axel Lewis is mixed up in a gang or something... And don't even get me started on Kane ‘*The King*’...”

“Well, they have been dubbed the ‘bad boys’ of the hockey league. I guess we’ll see.” Olivia smiles at the man and he skips back to his friends shaking his head. When I look back at Olivia, she’s still wearing that same smirk. “So, you coming?”

I let out a sigh. “*The Bad Boys of Falls Creek?*” I raise my brows and can’t help but picture those eyes... Those dark grey eyes... “I wish I could, but I have to work. I need the money.”

“Maya! Maya!” My boss calls out from behind me. I spin and he’s hunched down on his knees, his head half in a cabinet with hundreds of gas lines zigzagging in every direction. “Help! Help!”

Stewart Briggs owns the bar in Falls Creek. I owe him the world right now. I ran into his trolley at the supermarket while he was muttering about needing new staff to his wife. He was completely distracted when I collided with him, and he came with all the apologies and offered me a job on the spot.

Some might call it clumsy; I call it destiny.

“What’s wrong?” I ask urgently, kneeling down to hear a hissing coming from the cabinet where my boss’s head is lodged.

There’s another loud hiss and then a bang that startles Olivia off the barstool. Stewart jerks up and hits his head on the top of the cabinet. “Ow! Fuck!”

“Shit! Stewart! Are you ok?”

My boss ducks out and leans back against the cabinet, rubbing the back of his head. “They’ve been a pain in the ass

to change ever since they shoved everything in here.” He looks at me and smiles before looking across the near empty bar. “Shit... Quiet night tonight... Must be that hockey game taking away the crowd.”

“Yeah,” I say, guiding Stewart to his feet. He’s still rubbing his head and I step over to wrap some ice cubes in a tea towel and pass it to him. “Olivia was just telling me about the new team...”

Stewart looks at Olivia and bows his head, greeting her with a smile. “They’ve certainly made an impact on the town, that’s for sure.”

Olivia pins me with raised brows, folding her arms across her chest. “On some of us, maybe... Your colleague here doesn’t even know who they are. That’s why I’m trying to drag her ass along for the game tonight...”

Stewart’s eyes spread wide, “Oh, Maya! You should go!”

I shake my head and shoot Olivia a warning-fuelled glare. “No, really. I’d rather stay here. I need the money and hockey really isn’t my thing...”

Sexy grey eyes are your thing though...

Stewart tosses the towel to the sink and steps across to grip me on the shoulder. His smile is authentic, he’s honestly one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. The way he’s helped me since I moved here has been amazing.

“Take the night off. Go to the game and enjoy yourself.” He steps over to the register and plucks a fifty-dollar note from

the till. “Buy yourself a drink and just relax. You deserve it.”

He passes me the money and I close my fists tighter. “I don’t want your money, Stewart. I can buy my own drinks, but... Thanks.”

I can basically hear Olivia’s excitement behind me as Stewart frowns and shoves the crisp bill at my closed hands. “This isn’t for your drinks. I want the new polo shirt and a giant foam finger, please. Now get going.”

I grab the money and roll my eyes at Stewart’s lopsided grin.

Olivia claps her hands together and gives an excited yelp, “Yay! You never know... Maybe you’ll be able to tame one of those sexy hunks...”

I pin her with a look that says that definitely won’t be happening. After my experience with men in suits, I’m not about to go looking for trouble with a rough hockey player. Especially with ones that have grown reputations that seem to have the entire town talking.

They can keep their sticks to themselves, and I’ll go about starting my new life in peace.

Just so long as Axel Lewis keeps those sexy grey eyes to himself.

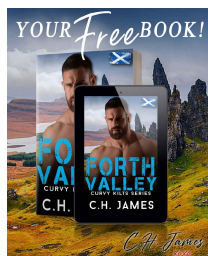
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