

A sweet romantic adventure

# The Heirloom Ranch



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## *Chapter One: Kenzie*

**A** jarring screeching sound fills the kitchen as the kettle boils on the stove. I place it on a different burner and switch off the stove before rubbing my temples, trying to soothe the matching scream of stress echoing in my mind. The tea that I'm about to make probably won't dull the volume by even a little.

I can hear my family murmuring quietly in my living room, while the familiar drone of New York City's constant chaos sings outside. I had gotten used to the excitement of the city, but nothing can prepare me for today.

To anyone else but my family, today is my thirtieth birthday, the start of another decade of life. I should be celebrating with a strawberry Bavarian cake and a margarita later, but instead, I'm face to face with my judgment day.

Because before PapPap died, he wrote out a will that has more twists and turns than a mystery book. Me, my older sister, Leigh Ann, and my older brother, Chase, are all included and are in line to receive a part of his inheritance on

our thirtieth birthdays. That may seem straightforward, but he included a little catch.

There were conditions to us getting our inheritances. Leigh Ann and Chase went through the wringer to get theirs, and that just left me. Would I get sent to Europe or have to marry before getting what was handed down to me?

I was always close to PapPap, who was a kind and fairly eccentric man. He was always about life lessons and making sure his family was grateful for what they had but also determined to fight for more. When he passed, my life lost some of its glow.

This is the last piece of him I have. What he left to me. However, given the extreme nature of Leigh Ann's and Chase's conditions, I can't help but be nervous for mine.

A light knock sounds behind me, dragging me out of my thoughts. I turn to see Leigh Ann entering the kitchen with a small smile on her face.

"Hey, you. Doing okay?" she asks as she approaches me.

I breathe in deeply through my nose before shrugging.

"Yeah, I guess. It's just a lot having everyone under one roof again," I reply with a small smile.

Leigh Ann glances behind me at the doorway that leads to the living room.

"I know. Mom and Dad haven't been around each other in forever," she says as she tucks a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, "But this is the last part of the will. They feel



like they need to be here for the official reading,” She’s always been marveled at for her beauty. Meanwhile, Chase is smart and good with people. I’m... I don’t know what I am. I mean, I’m a media coordinator in New York who enjoys my job and where I live. I’m close with my siblings, but I’m not too close to my parents, who divorced years ago.

At thirty, I thought I’d figure out more about myself at this point.

“I’d rather it be me, you, and Chase. We’re the ones affected,” I admit as I start pouring multiple cups of tea. There’s more pressure when our parents are around.

Leigh Ann steps up to my side to help, flashing me a sympathetic look.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad. Maybe you’ll get the easy way out,” she says. “You were PapPap’s favorite.”

I give her a pointed look, because everyone knows *she* was his favorite. But as the baby of the family, PapPap did spoil me rotten.

“I don’t even know what to do with the money once I get it. I don’t have a family of my own to spend it on. I rent this tiny place. I don’t even have a pet!” I tell her, my face starting to grow hot.

Everything changes once the lawyer reads the will. Am I ready for that?

“We don’t have to do this today, Kenzie,” Leigh Ann tells me.

I shake my head. As much as I'm dreading this, everyone is already here, and I don't want to deal with the anticipation of waiting all over again. This is a bandage that I just need to rip off.

"I just want this done," I sigh as I arrange all of the mugs full of steaming hot black tea on a tray.

Regardless if I'm ready or not, I hear the doorbell ring, making my heart rate spike. The lawyer is here. My hands grip the sides of the silver tray with bruising strength, shaking slightly.

"I've got this. You can answer the door," Leigh Ann says as she takes the tray from me.

I nod, giving her a small, grateful smile before walking out of the kitchen. I can't even make it through the living room to get to the foyer before my mom jumps to her feet and hurries her way there. I have to keep myself from shaking my head.

She always has to be in the middle of everything. PapPap wasn't even her dad! She wants to be in our business, while my dad would never think of prying. He already got remarried and moved on. I suppose he's just here for support since it's the last time. After this, I'll only see him on the occasional holiday.

"Mr. Palmer, welcome," my mom greets the lawyer as she ushers him inside of my house.

Mr. Palmer looms tall with his thin body and high cheekbones. His hair is short and light brown, nearly matching

the color of his stiff suit jacket. He carries a leather briefcase in one hand and shakes everyone's hand with the other.

"Nice to see everyone again. Shall we begin?" he asks as we all take a seat in the living room on the leather sofa and loveseat.

I sit between Chase and my dad, perching on the very edge of the couch cushion as Mr. Palmer digs around in his bag for the paperwork.

Chase pats my knee.

"Breathe," he reminds me. "You're stressing out over something most people dream about." His eyes follow the lawyer. "That man is about to tell you that you are rich. This is a good problem to have. In fact, I wouldn't classify it as a problem."

I turn and look at him, noting how much better he's looking these days now that he's married.

"Wow, your wife's positivity has really rubbed off on you." He just smiles and shrugs. Chase is rolling in money and happiness. Hopefully, I'll meet the same fate as my siblings.

Even if things ended well for them, I'm still nervous about what's written in the will. They both had to go through a lot, a long winding journey, to get to where they're at now. What if I fail and lose everything I was supposed to get?

"Sorry to drag you back into this," I tell him with a sheepish look, knowing that he has better things to do.

Chase smiles and shakes his head.

“Don’t be sorry. I just want to be here for you,” he replies.

I smile back before shifting my eyes to my dad, who is typing away on his phone. He’s probably texting his wife, complaining about having to be around my mom again, who is looking for any small reason to chastise him or make a snide comment.

“Alright, we’re addressing the section of your grandfather’s will that pertains to what Kenzie will inherit from him,” Mr. Palmer announces as his eyes sweep around the room.

“Brian!” my mom hisses at my dad.

My dad puts his phone down and tenses his jaw, lifting his free hand to wave her off.

I grimace slightly at the tension before receiving a sympathetic look from Leigh Ann, telling me to ride out this wave. I don’t want to make things any more tense than they already are.

“Anyway, per your grandfather’s request, Kenzie will be granted an undisclosed sum along with one of his properties. A place called ‘Tall Oak Ranch’ in southern Georgia,” Mr. Palmer tells me.

My eyes grow wide in shock. More mystery. What do I do with a ranch?

“PapPap had a ranch?” Chase asks, looking as confused as everyone else.

“How... dirty,” my mom mutters, shuddering in disgust.

“So, what’s the catch? What do I have to do?” I ask Mr. Palmer, knowing that’s coming next.

Mr. Palmer clears his throat before continuing.

“To be granted your inheritance, you must spend six months at the ranch. Not a day less,” he says, reading from the will.

My stomach twists as I stare at him in shock, running his words through my head again. I have to live on some random ranch down south for six whole months.

“That’s so long,” I tell him. “What do I do with my place here? I have clients I’m still doing work for.”

“Those are the terms. If you don’t oblige, you will not receive your inheritance,” Mr. Palmer replies.

“Kenzie? On a ranch?” my mom asks, shaking her head. The motion makes her short, blonde hair bounce. I don’t know why she got a bob cut, but I suppose it pairs well with her white dress pants and fancy, pink blouse.

“You must report to the ranch on Monday. If you have any questions, reach out to me,” Mr. Palmer tells me before reaching his hand out to me.

I shake his hand, my head still spinning. When he leaves, my living room explodes with conversation.

“Are you having to tend to this ranch? With all those barn animals?” my mom asks, wrinkling her nose.

“I don’t think it’s going to be that bad, Mom. It’s probably a beautiful property,” Leigh Ann tells her as she tries to bring

peace to the situation.

“We’re not a family of ranchers. Did you know that your dad owned a ranch?” my mom yells at my dad.

My dad scoffs.

“Maybe my dad didn’t tell us every little thing about his life,” he replies.

My mom rises to her feet and glares at him.

“You sure kept a few secrets of your own, Brian,” she says pointedly.

“Alright, let’s calm down,” Chase speaks up, getting to his feet with everyone else.

All I can do is sit there and watch them bicker and argue, their voices sounding muffled in my head. They get to sit there and fight, while I have to figure out how to uproot my entire life for six months. I work remotely for clients, so my job isn’t the biggest issue. However, I’ll have to leave my apartment for six whole months, along with the few friends I have in New York.

I’ll essentially disappear for months, but at least I’ll have some quiet time on a ranch to use to figure out what to do with the rest of my life.

“There’s tea,” I say, gesturing mindlessly to the tray on the coffee table between all of us. “I can call a cab for any of you. I should probably get packing.”

My mom huffs and places her hands on her hips.

“We just got here, Kenzie. We should talk,” she tells me.

I shake my head, not wanting to hear her judgmental comments.

“There’s nothing to talk about, Mom. I’m going to the ranch for six months. It’s what he wanted,” I reply. I have no idea why he wants me to live on the ranch for so long before giving it to me. Maybe to appreciate it or something, but no one truly understood PapPap. His mind was unlike anyone else’s.

“I don’t think you’re suited for ranch life,” my mom says, looking unsure. She doesn’t believe in me. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out.

“If anyone can handle it, Kenzie can,” Chase tells her before giving me a comforting smile. “Maybe you’ll like it.”

I don’t know about that, but I’m going to make the most of this situation. It worked out for Leigh Ann and Chase, so I’m going to ride this wave and see where it takes me. Maybe I need a change in my life anyway. Things have been moving so slow in my life that it feels like I’m standing still.

“If you’re fine, honey, I’m going to head out,” my dad says as he walks over to me. He hugs me in a stiff manner before doing the same to my siblings.

My mom just rolls her eyes as he hurries out the door.

“Well, I hope you’ll at least call and let us know how your stay in paradise is,” my mom tells me.

“I will,” I sigh as I rise to my feet, not expecting a hug from her. She’s never been an affectionate mom. She gave us what

we needed to survive and thrive, but there was never much affection along with that. It felt like we were more of a chore for her to handle rather than kids to raise.

Once our mom leaves, I turn to Chase and Leigh Ann.

“Tell me this won’t be as hard as it seems,” I say, needing them to give me a confidence boost because the path ahead looks all twisted up. I have no idea what to expect.

Chase and Leigh Ann share a look before plastering smiles on their faces for my benefit.

“It won’t be as hard as it seems,” they tell me.

I wish they meant that.

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## *Chapter Two: Cole*

I jolt awake from a restless sleep at the sound of crying. My skin is hot to the touch, sweat glistening on my forehead. Sure enough, I hear a familiar sob from down the hallway of the ranch house, prompting me to throw my sheets off and stumble out of bed.

I hurry down the hallway to the next bedroom, pushing the cracked door all the way open to see my eight-year-old daughter, Harper, panting in her bed with tears streaming down her flushed cheeks.

“Hey, honey. You’re okay,” I tell her as I sit next to her, brushing her brown hair away from her forehead.

Harper sniffles as she leans against my side.

“I had a nightmare,” she tells me.

I rub her back, faint morning sunlight peeking through the blinds of her bedroom windows. It’s almost six in the morning, around the time I’d get up anyway.

“About what?” I ask her.

Harper shrugs and shakes her head.

“I don’t remember, but it was scary,” she pouts, shaking slightly.

I frown and hug her against my side. It makes my heart ache seeing her like this. Frightened and confused. People never truly explain how frightening parenthood is. It’s just something I’ve had to experience myself, and it’s ten times harder doing it alone.

When Harper was only three, her mom passed away from breast cancer, being stolen away from her family far too soon. Harper didn’t fully understand what happened, but I took the blow like a punch to the stomach. The only thing that kept me functioning and getting out of bed was the reminder that I was still a parent to a little girl who needed someone.

I still don’t think I’ve fully caught my breath since then.

How can someone recover from losing a spouse? A part of me was cut out, leaving me broken and struggling to pick up the pieces. I miss Tess dearly, and I wish she was still around to watch our daughter grow up.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “It’s not real.”

Harper sighs as she sits up straight.

“I know, Daddy,” she replies.

The corner of my mouth turns up slightly. Of course, she knows. She’s the smartest kid I know, always wanting to read or have me look up stuff for her on the Internet. She’s endlessly curious, and I think growing up on this ranch has

helped fuel that. There's nothing quite like being around nature all the time.

"But I know they can still make you sad or nervous," I say.

Harper chews on her bottom lip as she peers up at me.

"Have you been having nightmares too?" she asks.

That hits me like a kick to the chest. I had been doing everything in my power to stay relaxed and calm around her, but I've been stressed about today for a week now. I can't believe the day is already here, and I have to face it head on without worrying my daughter.

My stress probably spurred her nightmares!

"I'm fine, baby. I just want to make sure you're okay," I tell her, switching the subject as fast as I can. She's so perceptive for her age that it's hard to hide anything from her. Then again, it's just me and her on this ranch. We're in tune with each other.

"I'm okay," Harper says, starting to relax more as I continue rubbing her back and grounding her to reality. I won't let anything hurt her or scare her here.

"Alright, let's rise and shine then," I reply, kissing the top of her head before rising from her bed. I open her blinds, letting more sunlight cast over her zoo-themed room, complete with green wallpaper, stuffed animals of big cats, multiple figurines, and white bedsheets with animals printed on them.

Harper swings her legs out of bed and goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

When she leaves the room, I sigh to myself, rubbing my hand over my face. My stubble is slightly more grown out than I prefer it to be, but I've been so busy getting the ranch ready for the guest that's coming today. I don't know much about her besides the fact that she's Mr. Langford's granddaughter, and she's going to be staying at the ranch for six months. He owned the ranch before passing away years ago.

I'm just the caretaker of this place, but it's become like home to me. I have a lot of memories here. So, I take care of the animals, tidy everything up, maintain the land, and keep this place operational. Nothing will fall apart on my watch.

Plus, Harper likes it here.

Years ago, I didn't see myself looking after a ranch because I had other goals in mind, but I also didn't see myself as a single dad. Life throws curveballs at us like that, so I just try to make the most of it and keep up with my responsibilities.

I head to the kitchen once I stow away my thoughts of self-pity. I only have so much time today to be wary about this new guest, who should be arriving soon. So, I whip up some scrambled eggs and buttered toast for Harper and get her situated at the dining table.

The ranch house is a rectangular-shaped building with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, large windows, and a fresh coat of white paint on the exterior. It's pretty big for just me and Harper, but Mr. Langford invited us to live on the property so that I can properly care for it. I've always liked this place, so it was easy to give my answer.

“Bus is coming soon!” I call to Harper as the clock continues to tick. Mornings are always the busiest.

“Okay!” Harper shouts back before putting her plate in the sink and hurrying to her room to get dressed in a pair of white shorts and a pink t-shirt.

I grab her backpack and her lunch box and set them on the dining table, moving as fast as her. It’s more peaceful tending to all of my daily chores on the ranch rather than racing the school bus. Harper and I meet in the bathroom where I help her brush her hair.

It took me a few weeks to really master fixing her hair, but she’s patient with me. We’ve watched more YouTube videos than I can count on how to do ponytails and braids, which I’ve mastered at this point. We decide to do a braid down her back today, and my fingers twist the strands all the way down to the middle of her back.

“Alright, you’re good to go. Looks good?” I ask her as I hand her a small, pink handheld mirror so that she can check it out.

Harper peers at the reflection and gives me a big thumbs-up.

I never expected that to be such a confidence booster. I felt like I was doing everything wrong during my first few months as a single parent, but I’ve found that instinct kicks in at a point. I just do what I can to keep my daughter happy, safe, and healthy.

We hurry back to the dining room, grab her things, and step out onto the porch just as I hear the school bus coming down the road. We walk down the driveway to the edge of the road, waiting for the bus to pull up and open its doors.

“Bye, honey. Have a good day,” I tell her as I place her lunch box in her hand.

“Bye, Daddy,” Harper replies, giving me a hug before clambering up the steps to get inside the bus.

I take a step back and watch the bus drive off down the road, remaining on the spot until it disappears from sight. I check the time and see that I probably have thirty minutes left before my guest’s destined arrival. I wonder why in the world she has to be here for six months.

It seems a bit extreme, but it’s not like I have a choice in the matter.

My boots thud against the grass and damp dirt as I make my way to the fence that keeps the horses in their own section of the huge field. I have four of them, two brown Morgan horses and two sorrel American quarter horses.

“Hey, Butterscotch,” I greet one of the quarter horses as she slowly walks toward the wooden fence. With a small smile, I reach out and run my hand along the side of her neck. She’s short and stocky, but she’s a beauty.

Now, this is peaceful. The sunrise is glowing and colorful, painting the sky strokes of orange, yellow, and blue. At first, I wasn’t sure about taking on the ranch and all of its

responsibilities, fearing that I'd mess up or not enjoy the world. However, I've grown to realize that there's some sort of beauty in taking care of the horses and other animals. They depend on me, and I can wake up every morning with a purpose outside of just being a father.

I'm stolen out of my thoughtful mindset when a car tears up the driveway toward the ranch house. I turn and grimace at the sight of a newer red Camry. This must be my guest.

I start to walk toward her, but I pause when she parks and pushes open her door. She sticks out one leg, her foot adorned with a black heel, which makes me scoff. She really wore heels to a ranch?

The woman steps out of her car and peers up at the ranch house with her hands on her hips over her black pencil skirt and tucked-in, white blouse. Her dark blonde hair streams down her back in gentle waves, making her look like she's prepared for a business meeting rather than a visit to a ranch.

She takes out her phone and snaps a picture of the ranch house, which I guess I can't blame her for. It's a nice house. However, she blindly walks up the gravel driveway, eyes glued to her phone to take another picture. Her heel slips on a loose piece of gravel, sending her tumbling to the side in the dirt, which just happens to be a bit wet from last night's shower.

"Ugh!" she gasps.

I sigh and head over toward her to help her to her feet. This isn't a great introduction to the ranch for her.

“There’s probably manure everywhere,” she groans as she flicks some mud off her fingers. “Gross.”

I grind my teeth a little, not appreciating her bad-mouthing this place already. She hasn’t even made it to the porch!

“Are you okay?” I ask once I reach her, extending my hand out to her.

She peers up at me with surprised eyes.

“Oh, I guess so,” she replies before taking my hand so that I can pull her to her feet. She looks down at her blouse, which is already stained brown from her fall. “I just washed this.”

“Yeah, that’s just how it is being on the ranch,” I tell her, figuring she would already have that expectation in mind. It seems like it’s already disappointed her, and I can just sense the arrogance of city folk on her.

“I’m Kenzie,” she replies as she brushes herself off. “Sorry for dropping in on you so suddenly. This definitely wasn’t my plan.”

Then why is she here? I don’t want to push myself into her business, though. I have things to take care of, and I’m sure she’s dying to change her clothes and get the “manure” off her.

“Cole Boseman. Welcome to Tall Oak. I’m the caretaker here. You can head on inside if you want. Got any bags you want me to get?” I ask her as I gesture to her car.

Kenzie waves her hand dismissively.

“It’s fine. I got it,” she replies.



Silence falls between us as we stare at each other. It's obvious she doesn't care to chit-chat, and I don't really see us being BFFs. I'm sure she's here on some sort of business for her grandfather. I just hope she's not here to screw things up because this place is my home now.

To her, it's just some dirty, gross place. Something about city folks makes them unable to appreciate places like this. I know them well because I used to live in a city, Denver, for a short while. It just didn't fit for me.

Like this place doesn't fit for her.

“Alright. I'll be around if you need me,” I tell her.

Kenzie nods before hurrying inside.

My eyes trail her for a moment before I shake my head. A complete stranger is on my ranch, even if it's not technically my ranch. Actually, she has more claim to it than I do since she's related to the actual owner. Something about that doesn't settle well with me.

I believe things are about to get shaken up, and I'm far from okay with that.

### *Chapter Three: Kenzie*

I wake up slowly the next morning, my eyes gradually opening and then squinting against the sunlight streaming in through the window. At first, it feels like I'm in my house back in New York City, but I soon realize that it's too quiet. There aren't any cars honking. There aren't people shouting or talking.

All I hear are... birds.

My eyes shoot wide open as I quickly sit up in bed, taking in my surroundings and realizing that I'm in the ranch house's guest bedroom. I'm very far away from home.

"Oh, no," I murmur as I bury my face in my hands, grogginess filling my head.

I didn't sleep well last night, but how could I? My entire life was uprooted! Now, I'm stuck on this ranch that's in some tiny, ancient town.

I miss New York and all of its people, activities, and even noise. I've never been in a place like this before, and I just

don't understand why PapPap would condemn me to this place for six whole months. I get staying here for a week at max, but six months is so overdoing it.

However, I don't exactly have a choice, so I've decided to try to make the most of it. Since I'm a media coordinator, it seemed like a good idea to document my time on the ranch on my Instagram account. I can look back on the memories when I'm through with this place and remember all that I endured.

Because this isn't paradise like the European adventure that Leigh Ann was sent on. She got to travel to beautiful places full of culture, but I get a muddy, hot wasteland that's seeped into my bedroom. My clothes stick to my body from how much I sweated last night!

Something has to change so that I don't sweat to the point of dehydration every night, but that'll require talking to the caretaker of this place, Cole. It's very obvious that he doesn't like me just telling from our stiff interactions. He's not exactly a ball of sunshine either, so I just minded my business yesterday and got settled.

I suppose I can try striking up a conversation with him and seeing about getting some sort of AC unit in this room. Maybe he's a nice guy under that rugged exterior of his, but I'm not holding my breath. I just want to get through these six months as quickly and painlessly as possible so that I can get back to my life in New York.

I get out of bed and change my clothes, picking out a pair of blue jeans and a black tank top. I guess I should've packed

more casual clothes, but I don't exactly have ranch clothes just laying around. I didn't have time to go buy any either because I had so many affairs to take care of before I left.

All in all, my visit here has already been pretty rough, but maybe today will be better. I'm determined to make it better and forge through this!

I fixed my hair up in a ponytail before stepping out of my room, my eyes shifting up and down the hallway. No sign of Cole yet. I hope getting him to fix me up with some AC doesn't become a big deal. I know he's busy.

And maybe I overreacted a little yesterday when I fell and all. It's been stressful getting situated here, including living with a complete stranger who isn't all that welcoming. He has to understand that.

I soon hear clinking and thuds from the kitchen, prompting me to draw in a deep breath before heading that way. I peek my head in, my eyes widening in surprise at the sight of a little girl eating breakfast at the dining table instead of the stony caretaker.

"Oh, hello," I greet her with a smile.

The girl looks up at me, immediately perking up.

"Are you Kenzie?" she asks.

"You've heard about me?" I reply as I take a seat at the table. I don't remember seeing her yesterday, and I can only guess that she is Cole's daughter. I suppose I can't blame him

from hiding his daughter from the random stranger, but we were bound to meet eventually.

She nods as she scoops another bite of Cocoa Krispies into her mouth. Once she's finished with that bite, she turns to me again.

"Daddy told me about you. That you're staying here for a while," she says.

I nod.

"This was actually my PapPap's place. He wanted me to visit," I tell her.

"I really like it here. The animals are nice," she replies. "Have you seen them?"

I shake my head. I remember seeing some horses, but I haven't really explored outside yet because it's so sweltering hot. I thought New York had some sticky humidity, but this is on another level, and it's nearly suffocating me.

"Not yet," I tell her. "I bet they're really cool, though."

She smiles.

"I'm Harper," she introduces herself. "I'm in third grade."

I gasp, exaggerating a little to make her smile wider. With her braided pigtails and toothy smile, she's a really cute kid. Her hair is the same color as her dad's, who is admittedly fairly handsome.

His hair is slightly shaggy and wavy, some pieces covering his ears and his forehead. I remember seeing him pushing his

hair back from his forehead while in thought, putting his blue eyes, dark stubble, and strong jaw on display. He's definitely a hard worker, telling from how fit he looks.

"Wow, third grade? I bet you're super smart," I say.

Harper laughs, tilting her chin up in a proud manner.

"Daddy says I am. I got the science award in my class last year," she boasts.

"That's awesome!" I say as I lift my hand up, giving her a high five. I don't have kids of my own and probably won't any time soon since I'm single, but I like her. She's the kind of kid I would want to have.

Harper finishes up her cereal and puts her bowl and spoon in the sink before sitting back down, apparently still wanting to chat. Not that I mind. She's easier to talk to than her dad, but maybe we just got off on the wrong foot.

"You're really pretty," Harper states as her eyes move over me. "I like your earrings."

"Oh, these things? They're actually just clip-ons. I'm too nervous to get the real deal because I'm scared of needles," I admit with a light laugh as I touch my crystal drop earrings. "Do you want to try them on?"

Harper nods enthusiastically as she leans forward so that I can gently clip the earrings on her earlobes.

"You look so pretty!" I tell her before grabbing my phone and pulling up my picture app. "Smile!"

Harper beams at the camera. The earrings are a little big for her small face, but she looks so happy and radiant.

I snap a picture of her before turning my phone around for her to see.

“See?” I say, hoping she knows how beautiful she looks.

As a tween and teenager, I struggled with self-esteem issues, especially since my older sister seems to glow because she’s so beautiful. Boys have always worshipped the ground that she walks on, but I’m so glad that she finally stumbled upon the right guy.

“I love them!” Harper exclaims as she admires the picture. She gently touches her fingertips against the earrings.

I smile at her, a warm glow building in my chest. At least there’s a really great kid on the ranch that I can talk beauty stuff with.

“Hi, Daddy. Do you like my earrings?”

I snap out of my thoughts and widen my eyes as Cole steps into the kitchen.

“They’re just clip-ons,” I tell him, not wanting him to think that I somehow pierced his daughter’s ears without permission.

Cole’s tense shoulders relax, and he gives his daughter a warm smile as he stands by her side.

“You look really pretty, honey,” he says as he gently pats the back of her head in an affectionate caress.

I even find myself smiling a little as I watch him interact with her. This is certainly a different side to him than I saw yesterday, and I definitely like this side more.

“Thank you,” Harper replies before leaning back toward me so that I can put them back on my ears.

I clip them on before looking up at Cole.

“Good morning,” I greet him politely, hoping that maybe we can start over. It’ll be really difficult getting through these six months if we’re going to be at odds with each other.

“Morning. How did you sleep?” Cole asks as he rests his hand on his brown leather belt. He’s wearing jeans tucked into brown boots, a worn, faded red baseball cap, and a white t-shirt. Though it’s simple, the outfit still looks good on him.

“I slept... okay. It got pretty hot in my room,” I tell him with a sheepish look. I’d rather not step on his toes today, especially in front of his sweet daughter.

Cole lifts his eyebrows a little.

“There’s an old portable air conditioner in the shed. I can dust it off and get it running for you,” he offers.

My eyes grow wide in surprise. I didn’t expect it to be that easy, and I didn’t even have to ask!

“That would be amazing,” I reply with a nod.

Cole nods back.

“Alright, mind helping me with some of the daily chores first? Since you’ll be here for so long, I figure you can help me



out a little,” he asks, immediately smirking a little when a nervous look crosses my face. “Don’t worry. I won’t give you more than you can handle.”

I guess it’s only fair that I help out since he’s letting me stay here. It’ll be my property soon, but he’s living in the ranch house. If I sell, wouldn’t he and Harper have to move? Guilt churns in my stomach, but I have six months to figure out what to do with this place. Eventually, Cole and I would have to talk about the future of this place.

I just want to make the right decision, and something tells me that PapPap has a “right” decision in mind that he wants me to make. Why else would he send me here for six whole months before I received ownership of the ranch?

“Sure,” I say with a small smile.

“Alright, Harper, I’m going to be right outside. Come get me if you need me, okay?” Cole tells her.

Harper nods and hops to her feet.

“I’m going to play in my room,” she announces before turning to me and waving. “Bye, Kenzie!”

I smile and wave back as she takes off.

“She’s great,” I tell Cole, who grins a little and nods.

“Yeah, she’s awesome. I don’t know how I got so lucky with such a great kid,” Cole replies. He then crosses his arms over his broad chest, making his biceps become more defined. “So, are you ready to get started?”

Do I really have a choice?

Then again, I'm always up for a challenge.

“Let's do this.”

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## *Chapter Four: Cole*

**A**lrigh, maybe City Girl isn't so bad. I have to admit when I saw her smiling and chatting with Harper, it made some of my dismay about her being here fade away a little. I can't remember seeing Harper smile that big in a long while, so maybe it won't be too bad having Kenzie around for a little while if she keeps getting along well with Harper.

I lead her out to the stable, which is just past the section of field where the chickens and goats are kept. We'll get to them later.

"So, we need to feed the horses first. I've already got some hay out that we need to give to the horses," I tell her as I gesture to a wheelbarrow full of hay outside of the stable.

Kenzie nods, her eyebrows furrowing slightly.

"Do we just... hand feed it to them?" she asks.

I have to withhold a laugh, reminding myself that she's used to city life, not ranch life. We're from two different worlds, so it'll be something for both of us to get used to.

“No, we just lay it out in here for them to eat from,” I reply as I push the wheelbarrow over to the entrance of the stable.

“Oh, right,” Kenzie says with a nod before following me. Her eyes sweep around the tidy stable, which has an elevated roof and six stalls. All four horses stand in their own stalls, their eyes trailing us. “Wow.”

“Have you been around horses before?” I ask her as I start to dump the hay outside of the stalls so that the horses can lean down to eat it.

Kenzie shrugs.

“I mean, I’ve seen them from afar, but not this close. They’re pretty,” she tells me before taking her phone out and snapping a picture of them.

I’ve noticed that she takes quite a lot of pictures. Some people hate pictures, while others can’t stop taking them. I’m part of the first group of people, so I make sure to get out of the way.

“My new neighbors,” Kenzie murmurs as she types away on her phone.

I can’t help but snort.

“Neighbors as in neigh?” I ask her. “What are you doing?”

Kenzie cracks a smile and nods, obviously pleased that I caught her little joke. I guess it’s a little funny. Maybe a little cute that she’s so giddy about it.

Even if she ground my gears a little with her unimpressed attitude yesterday, I have to admit that she's a beautiful woman. I don't think I've seen any woman around here lately look as good as her, but I guess that's due to high standards in New York. Everyone tries to look perfect there.

"I'm going to document my time here on my Instagram," she tells me. "To help me remember my time here."

Is she the same person as yesterday? It sounded like the version of her yesterday would consider this a nightmare she never wants to think about again in the future. Maybe she's starting to realize that this place has some charm to it.

"Come help me spread this hay out," I say as I start leveling out the piles of hay so that all of the horses can reach it.

Kenzie tucks her phone away and joins my side, her eyes shifting over to me so that she can copy my movements. She's definitely not from around here, but at least she's trying.

"So, did you know PapPap well?" she asks.

"PapPap?"

"That's what we called my grandfather," she says while trying to free the hay from the rake.

I shrug a little.

"A bit. We didn't get to know each other much, but he trusted me enough to take care of the ranch," I tell her. "But I remember him being a good man. Kind."

Kenzie smiles a little and nods.

“We were really close. Him and me and my siblings,” she replies. When we finished spreading the hay, she grimaces a little at the leftover film on her hands and tries her best to wipe it off on her jeans.

“Siblings?” I ask her, motioning for her to follow me with a nod of my head.

“Leigh Ann and Chase. They’re my older siblings,” Kenzie replies, pausing before she speaks again. “What about you?”

“Only child,” I tell her. “It would’ve been nice to have a younger sibling, though.”

“To torment?” Kenzie teases me.

“To look after,” I reply as I walk out of the stable to grab another wheelbarrow. I then pause and glance over at her, my mouth curling up slightly. “And to torment a little.”

A warm expression fills her face as she laughs a little.

“What’s next?” she asks.

“We have to muck out the stalls,” I tell her as I grab two forks hanging on the outer wall of the stable. I hand her one before pushing the wheelbarrow inside.

“Muck out?” Kenzie asks slowly, looking a bit nervous as she stands behind me.

“Clean out the dirty bedding,” I reply as I open Butterscotch’s stall and walk inside with the fork. I pause to pet Butterscotch’s neck, hearing silence from behind me for a few seconds.

“What makes it dirty?” Kenzie asks in a stiff voice like she’s afraid to ask and find out the answer. She definitely won’t be happy with it.

“Manure,” I reply before scooping up a portion of dirty straw and dumping it in the wheelbarrow.

Kenzie freezes in place, watching me work with wide eyes.

I turn to look at her over my shoulder.

“This will go much faster if we’re both shoveling,” I inform her. I’m sure she’s going to want to blast through these chores as quickly as possible now.

Kenzie grimaced a little before joining me in the stall. She tentatively started shoveling, and I could tell that she was trying to hold her breath as much as possible. If she kept it up, she would pass out.

“You get used to it,” I tell her.

“Really?” Kenzie asks, her voice full of disbelief.

I smirk a little to myself, wondering how long she’s going to last. I have to give it to her... she’s being a trooper. I know this isn’t the most fun thing to do in the world, but she’ll realize that it’s necessary the more time she spends here.

Once we finish with all of the stalls and replace the bedding, I decide to take mercy on her. She did good helping me out, and I don’t want to send her running for the hills so quickly. She really isn’t as bad as I thought she was. I guess she was just having an off day yesterday. We all have them.

“Thanks for the help. You can head inside and wash up,” I say as we stand outside of the stall.

Kenzie sighed in relief, smiling a little now that she knows she can leave. She starts to reply, but her phone starts to ring. She gives me an apologetic look before taking her phone out to look at the screen.

“Sorry, it’s my mom. I should probably take this,” she tells me.

I nod my understanding.

“Go ahead. I’ll be here,” I reply.

Kenzie walks around the corner of the stall as she answers her phone.

“Hey, Mom,” she says.

I busy myself with putting the forks back up, able to still hear Kenzie’s voice.

“It’s definitely a nastier job than I imagined. I’ll admit that,” Kenzie sighs.

I pause and frown as I listen to her. I know that I shouldn’t be eavesdropping, but I can’t help it. I know that mucking out a horse stall isn’t all that pretty, but I thought things were going alright. She was taking pictures and talking about personal things.

Now, she’s going to bad-mouth this place again?

“It’s so hot here too. I keep sweating, and the smell here... I thought the city had an odor,” Kenzie continues.



I grind my teeth slightly, shaking my head. I don't understand why she's still here if she hates this place so much. She's all smiley to my face, but she's going to complain so much behind my back?

"It'll be a long six months. That's for sure," Kenzie says. "I'll give you guys a call if anything new happens. Bye."

I put my back to her once she comes around the corner again, hiding my glare for the time being.

"Sorry about that. She was just asking how I was," Kenzie tells me.

"Ah, okay," I say, remembering her harsh answers. Maybe they weren't a personal attack on me, but no one likes it when someone comes in and bashes their whole lifestyle. It's grating.

Kenzie lingers for a moment.

"So, about the air conditioner..." she starts to say.

"I'll get to it after I finish my chores for the day," I tell her as I start to move the wheelbarrow back to its rightful place.

Kenzie watches me closely.

"Oh, okay. Great. When do you think that'll be?"

I can't help it. I snap.

"When I get done!" I bite out as I whip around to face her.

Kenzie stares at me with wide eyes, in shock at my sudden outburst. When I hold her gaze, she glares at me.

"Well, sorry. I was just asking a question!" she snaps back.

I'm surprised to hear her raise her voice like that. Maybe I shouldn't have snapped, but how can she complain one minute and then ask me to do something for her the next?

"Well, adding amenities to your temporary bedroom is at the bottom of my list. I have to take care of this nasty place first," I tell her with a faint sneer.

Kenzie's jaw drops.

"Oh, come on! You know that mucking is gross!" she argues before crossing her arms over her chest. "And why were you listening to my phone call?"

"How could I not hear? You were just around the corner!" I tell her.

Kenzie scoffs.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Sue me for ranting a little to my mom about how different this place is to me," she bites out.

To her, it's just that, but I like this place. It's my life. My responsibility.

"You obviously hate this place. I don't understand why you'll be here for so long," I reply, my jaw tensing.

"Trust me, I'm trying to figure that out too," Kenzie grits out. She holds my gaze for a moment before huffing and storming back to the ranch house.

Confusion rings across my face as I watch her hurry off in an angry flurry. She doesn't know either? What in the world

was going on?

With a grumble, I get back to putting everything up and preparing to check on the chickens, trying to shove the thought of Kenzie to the back of my mind so that I can focus. However, she lingers in the front of my mind, catching my attention against my will.

I pegged her as just a bratty city girl, but she also showed me another kinder side to her. So, who is she? And why is she infiltrating my life for the next six months?

I wish I had some answers, but I'm not up to doing a Q&A session with her any time soon. For now, I'll be kept in the dark, trying to fight my way back to the light where things are easier. I just hope I can make it there.

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## *Chapter Five: Kenzie*

I still haven't cooled off from the spike of anger I experienced earlier today. I can't believe Cole snapped at me like that! I'm not personally bashing him or anything. I just... don't belong here. I don't know how to exist in a place like this, and it's made me so uncomfortable that I even confided in my own mother.

And that's a feat.

I've been in my bedroom for the rest of the day, peering out of my window as the sky darkens from the approaching evening time. It's only gotten hotter as the hours ticked on, and I'm about at my limit. It doesn't help that I'm still irritated with Cole.

I really tried to get to know him and at least have us be friendly acquaintances while I'm stuck on this ranch. Because it's not like I want us to argue or fight. I'm trying to find the silver lining here, and the only one I've found so far is Harper, who's gone a lot for school.

It's become clear to me that no matter what, Cole is probably going to hate me. He doesn't like that I don't care for this place, and I don't know why he's taking it to heart so much. It's not like the property is his.

Unable to take it anymore, I jump to my feet off my bed and leave my bedroom, storming through the house. I need a break from this place and the heat lingering within the walls. There has to be some air-conditioned restaurant or shop in this tiny town that I can hide out at for a little while before dragging myself back here.

I go out to my car only to gasp at the sight of a flat tire. When in the world did that happen? And that's my spare! I pinch the bridge of my nose and shake my head, wondering what did I do to create all of this misfortune? Why is karma snapping at my heels like a rabid dog?

I sigh and look back toward the house, still not wanting to go back inside. I doubt Uber runs around here, so I'll just have to go old school with a regular cab service. I pull out my phone and search for one of the local cab services, calling its number and waiting for someone to pick up and save me from this place for a few hours.

No answer.

"Oh, come on," I sigh as I try a number from another cab company.

No answer.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mutter, wondering how all of the cab companies in town are somehow busy. Where is everyone in this tiny town trying to go?

Despite this place being small, it’s virtually unwalkable. The ranch is on the outskirts, so it would be a fifteen to twenty-minute walk just to get to the center of everything. If there’s anything of interest, it’ll be there.

I chew on the inside of my cheek thoughtfully, trying to figure out some sort of plan. I’m not going back inside or walking around the ranch because I don’t want to run into the grumpy caretaker. I’m so desperate to get out of here that I’m going to do the riskiest thing and see if I can hitch a ride with someone.

Living in New York City has encouraged me to learn a few self-defense moves just in case I need to fight someone off. I haven’t actually tried them on anyone yet, but I’ve practiced them on a body pillow. That’ll have to be enough training for right now.

I walk down the driveway, wearing black tennis shoes this time, and stand on the side of the road that goes into town. My eyes shift left to right, surveying the empty, quiet road. All I can see from here is flat land and some houses on them in the distance. No cars.

But I’m determined, so I stand there until my feet ache. I sit in the grass, scratching my legs every so often. I hate feeling so itchy, but I’m just hoping I get used to all of this so that it doesn’t bother me so much.

Wishful thinking, right?

Soon, I start to hear the sound of a vehicle, but it's behind me. I turn and sigh at the sight of Cole driving his black truck down the driveway toward me. Bunching my knees up against my chest, I look away from him, staring out at the road.

As expected, Cole stops next to me and rolls down his window, peering out at me.

“What are you doing out here?” he asks.

I don't say anything, knowing he's just going to make fun of me or say something else mean. Besides, I'm still mad at him for all he said earlier.

Cole lets out a faint sigh before opening his door and hopping out, his boots hitting the ground with a thud. He crouches down next to me, tilting his head.

“Trying to escape?” he asks.

I roll my eyes before turning my head to look at him. I didn't realize how close he is, so the short distance makes my heart rate spike for a second. Up close, I can really make out how blue his eyes are and how he has a light dash of freckles across his nose from being out in the sun.

Why does this grump have to be handsome?

“I wanted to go into town for a little bit, but I have a flat tire,” I reply.

“Where are you trying to go in town?” Cole asks.

I narrow my eyes slightly.

“Why do you want to know?” I ask him.

Cole shrugs.

“Because all four of my tires are good, and I can take you there,” he replies.

An amused smile threatens to cross my lips, but I do what I can to keep it at bay. He’s not off the hook just yet.

“You sure you want to do that?”

Cole smirks.

“I guess. Are you going to get in before I change my mind?” he says as he gestures to his truck.

It’s a nice gesture, so I take him up on it.

“Fine,” I murmur. “Thanks.”

Cole rises to his feet and holds his hand out to me.

I reach up and grab it, something stirring in my chest at how big and warm his hand is around mine. I try to push past the weird sensation and go around to the passenger’s side of his truck, but he’s already beaten me there and pulled the door open for me. Oh, now he’s a gentleman?

“Thanks,” I tell him, giving him the side eye as I get inside.

Cole shuts the door behind me and gets in on the driver’s side, not pulling onto the road just yet. He slips a pair of sunglasses on and glances over at me.

“So, where are we going?” he asks.



I shrug, not having a certain place in mind. I actually don't even know what's around here to visit, but I'm sure he'll know of a place or two.

"I don't have anything specific in mind. Do you have any recommendations?" I reply.

Cole thinks for a moment and nods.

"Yeah, I got somewhere in mind," he says before putting his truck in drive.

I turn and look back at the ranch house as it grows smaller and smaller until it disappears from view.

"What about Harper?" I ask.

"She's staying at a friend's house," Cole tells me, tapping his fingertips against the steering wheel. His eyebrows knit together slightly as a small frown crosses his face.

"Are you nervous about her being over there?" I ask, figuring that's why he doesn't look so stoked. He seems like a pretty protective dad.

Cole glances over at me like he's surprised by my question.

"Yeah, a little. I mean, I've met the parents and they seem nice. Her friend is nice and well-behaved," he replies. "I just hope she has a good time and doesn't need me for something urgent. I don't want anything to go wrong while I'm not there."

Awe glints in my eyes as I peer at him. Past that tough exterior, there's a protective, kind man in there, but I seem to

grind his gears at times. I think we're just really different, bound to clash.

"I bet everything will be just fine," I assure him.

Cole nods.

"Yeah. Hopefully," he murmurs.

I note a decent amount of pessimism from him. He's broody for a reason, and curiosity soon breaches my mind.

"Is Harper's mom still in the picture?" I question him. No one has mentioned her since I've been here.

Cole visibly tenses at my question, his knuckles growing white as he grips the steering wheel tighter.

"No, she's not," he says before leaving it at that.

I take it that's my sign not to ask any other questions on the matter. I'm guessing there was a messy divorce and a tough battle in court over custody. That's usually how these things play out. I assume that he's got primary custody since he's so protective over her and his world revolves around her.

There are quite a few negative things that I can say about him, but the best thing that I've noticed about him is that he's a great father.

"My parents got divorced a while ago. My dad remarried and is starting a whole new family from scratch, so my mom is particularly bitter about that," I tell him, shifting the pressure off him since he seems so stiff.

"Did you see it coming? The divorce?" Cole asks me.

I nod.

“Yeah, I saw it coming from a mile away. It’s for the best,” I tell him. “Sometimes, hard decisions are the most necessary ones to make.”

Cole hums thoughtfully under his breath.

“Yeah, you’re right about that,” he says.

I smile a little, noticing that he’s not white-knuckling the steering wheel any longer.

“I’m usually not that insightful,” I admit, coaxing a small chuckle from him.

“I think everyone has their moments,” Cole tells me. “But I’ll definitely remember that.”

I stare at him for a moment, taking in some of his features. The colorful beaded bracelet around his wrist that I assume Harper made for him. The way his t-shirt sleeve hugs his bicep. There are quite a few nice aspects of him to look at.

“So, where are we going?” I ask him.

Cole grins a little and shrugs.

“It’s a surprise,” he says.

I give him a pointed look that makes his grin broaden.

“Seriously?” I reply.

Cole nods.

“Sit back and relax, city girl. I’m going to show you what this town is all about.”

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## *Chapter Six: Cole*

**M**aybe I'm kind of tossing Kenzie into the deep end by taking her to the Buffalo Pit, but it's a staple in town. It's the most popular bar around town that everyone has been to at least once, so I think it's the perfect place to take her for her first trip to town. Plus, I think we can both use a drink.

It's been a day.

I've cooled off since this morning a little, and it seems like she's relaxed a little too. We clash so hard, but when things are smooth and peaceful between us, it's not bad talking to her. There's a nice woman beneath that bratty city vibe. I'm doing my best to seek her out more.

"People might look and try to chat with you, but they're all nice folks," I assure her as I lead her inside.

The Buffalo Pit looks like any bar on the inside. There is a long bar with a whole shelf of different liquor bottles and a bunch of taps for beer. There are plenty of tables and booths littering the place for patrons to sit, and there is also a pool

table in the back corner. A few televisions are mounted on different walls, either playing sports games or the local news.

As expected, it's packed tonight like it usually is around this time. People like to finish off their day with a cold beer or a strong cocktail. I lead Kenzie over to two free seats at the bar, immediately feeling someone patting my back.

"Cole! I was wondering when I'd see you around here again."

I turn and grin at Teddy Davis, the head of the town's agricultural commission. Thanks to him, the town's main industry is thriving, giving a lot of these good people jobs. Everyone knows him and likes him for one reason or another.

"Good to see you, Teddy," I greet him, shaking his hand.

Teddy is in his late thirties, but he takes care of himself and looks younger than his age. He's average height with neatly cut, dirty blonde hair and usually wears blazers over anything he puts on.

Teddy grins and pats my shoulder.

"How are you doing?" he asks.

He always asks that. A lot of people ask that. They know about my wife and some other fragments of my past that I don't like to bring up. I definitely don't want him to say anything about it in front of Kenzie.

"Doing just fine. I have someone here that I think you'd like to meet," I say, shifting the subject as I lean back and gesture

to Kenzie, who gives me a surprised expression. “This is Kenzie, Mr. Langford’s granddaughter.”

Teddy’s jaw drops.

“Oh, really? It’s so nice to meet you, dear. Your grandfather was such a good man,” he says as he reaches over to shake her hand.

Kenzie offers him a polite smile.

“It’s nice to meet you. How did you know him?” she asks.

“Well, I’m head of the agricultural commission in this town. When he bought the ranch, we met and chatted about the land and his plans with it,” Teddy explains. “That man was incredibly insightful.”

Kenzie nods in agreement.

“He was. Did he say anything about what he wants for the ranch?” she asks with a hopeful look on her face.

Teddy shakes his head.

“He just mentioned giving it to the right person,” he replies before peeking up. “Since you’re here in town, I assume that’s you.”

A sheepish expression fills Kenzie’s face as she shrugs.

“I think so. It’s being handed down to me in six months, so I guess it’s up to me to figure out what to do with it,” Kenzie says.

Some of the puzzle pieces are falling into place for me now. So, she is being given the ranch, but what does she plan to do

with it? I worked so hard to find my place here, to keep it in my life. I don't want it stripped away if she decides to sell to some jerk who kicks me to the curb.

"Well, if you ever want to chat, let me know," Teddy tells her.

"Thank you," Kenzie replies, giving him a nod of gratitude. She then looks at me. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet."

I nod to her.

"It's a big decision," I say. I don't want to push her in one direction too hard. What I want to do is have her realize how great the ranch is. That it's not just some gross place that's hot and has an earthy odor. That'll be a feat, though.

Kenzie lowers her gaze to the bar, looking conflicted.

It's time for a drink.

I lift my hand to flag down the young bartender, who strides over in jean shorts and a tank top, her black hair cut short above her shoulders.

"I'll take any local brew," I say before looking at Kenzie. "Get whatever you want."

"Thanks," Kenzie replies. "I'll just do a Manhattan."

I can't help but smirk a little.

"Miss the big city that much?" I ask her.

Kenzie gives me a pointed look.

"What do you have against the city?" she replies.



I shrug as I rest my forearms on the bar, getting relaxed.

“I used to live in Denver for a little while. I was in law school there,” I tell her, keeping my words vague. I don’t want to dump my life history on her, but I suppose she should know a little about me.

Kenzie’s eyes grow wide in surprise.

“Wow, really? What happened?” she asks, seeming to lean toward me slightly out of interest.

“Life. It just wasn’t right for me, so I came back here,” I tell her.

Kenzie nods a little. I can tell it’s not the answer she wanted, but it’s the only one I want to give her right now.

“So, city life rubbed you wrong,” she says.

I nod my thanks to the bartender once she places our drinks in front of us. I take a sip of my beer, licking my top lip to wipe away the foam.

“The people here are so kind and welcoming. They check in on you. Care about you. In all these big cities, everyone is just rushing through life, not even paying attention to other people,” I reply. “They never stop and just appreciate the moment they’re living in.”

Kenzie takes a sip of her drink before speaking.

“I guess I can see where you’re coming from. It’s chaotic living in the city. Everyone is chasing all these huge dreams, just trying to catch up with everyone else,” she tells me. “I

can't tell you how long it took for me to just get a regular client base and live comfortably."

"What do you do?" I ask, realizing that I really don't know much about her at all.

"I'm a media coordinator. Mostly on social media, but I can do just about anything my clients need when it comes to video, photos, and that sort of thing," Kenzie explains, angling her body toward me slightly so that we can face each other better.

"All that picture taking makes more sense now," I say with a wry grin. It's literally her job.

"I'm guessing you're picture shy," Kenzie laughs.

I scoff a little.

"I'm not shy about it... I just don't think they turn out all that well when I'm in them," I tell her. Maybe I just don't know how to smile or something, but I seem out of place in pictures. It's even worse in videos like I forget how to be human.

Kenzie cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Okay, take a picture with me then. I need to add another photo to my Instagram," she says as she takes her phone out.

I immediately lean away and shake my head.

"I don't think it'll turn out well," I reply, not wanting to look awkward on her profile for so many people to see.

"So, you are picture shy!" Kenzie says. "You shouldn't be. You're... you know..."

A confused look fills my face as I tilt my head at her.

“I’m what?” I reply, wondering why she trailed off. And why her face is slightly tinted red.

Kenzie laughs awkwardly.

“Not a bad-looking guy,” she says before busying herself with sipping on her drink. Quite a few sips.

My heart thuds heavily for some reason. Is she pretty much saying she finds me attractive?

“Well, you’re still pretty out of my league. I think I’ll bring down the value of your profile if I’m on it,” I reply.

Kenzie gently pushes at my arm in a playful manner, shaking her head.

“Oh, come on. My followers would love the whole rugged rancher look,” she says as she gestures to me.

A snort breaks from me as I chuckle, my face heating up slightly. I think the drinks are helping us relax a little. Before I can reply, someone turns on the jukebox, playing some slow, swaying country love song that invites a group of people to an open area of the bar to dance.

“If you don’t take a picture with me, I’m sure I can find someone else to,” Kenzie tells me, cocking an eyebrow at me.

I know that she’s playing around with me, testing me.

“Alright, who’s dancing with me?” a familiar voice calls out.

I grimace as I turn and see Jason Howard, one of the three Howard brothers that I don't particularly care for, walking around the bar. He's around my age with dark brown hair that's styled in a crew cut. He always wears army pants and tight t-shirts, acting like he's in the military. Everyone knows that he couldn't even make it through basic training, though.

His younger brother, Kyle, chuckles at the table in the back that they're sitting at. He's not as obnoxious as Jason, but he's already following his two older brothers' footsteps by being a menace around here. They often get into arguments with other people and act like they're better than everyone else. They don't belong in a calm town like this, but no one likes standing up to them because they're not afraid to swing first.

Tyler, the eldest brother, is too busy chugging his third beer to pay much attention.

Much to my dismay, Jason's eyes fall on Kenzie.

"How about you, darlin'?" he asks as he walks over to her, holding his hand out with a charming grin on his face.

Of course, he's going to beeline over to her. She's the most gorgeous woman in the bar.

Kenzie looks unsure at first, but everyone's eyes are on her. The pressure is enough to make her take his hand and let him whisk her away to the makeshift dance floor. She places her hand on his shoulder, letting him hold the other one as they sway.

I grind my teeth slightly as I watch them move together. It doesn't help that she starts to smile and get more into it as he holds her close. She has no idea that she's dancing with a complete jerk, who has broken more girls' hearts than I can count. He doesn't care about anyone else but himself and his equally terrible brothers.

Jason slides his hand around to the small of Kenzie's back, pulling her body against his.

Kenzie tenses up at the sudden move, a frown breaking through her smile. She tries to pull back, but he holds her tighter, not letting her budge an inch.

"Okay, I think I'm done now," she says.

"Song isn't over yet," Jason tells her, towering over her.

I immediately get off the barstool and start to walk over to them, my jaw tightening so much that my teeth ache.

"Hey! She's done dancing with you," I tell Jason in a firm voice.

Jason doesn't let go of her as he smirks at me, his eyes glassy from having one too many drinks.

"Mind your own business, Cole," he replies.

Kenzie pitches a panicked look over her shoulder at me, still trying to pull away.

Something sparks in me, prompting me to pry Jason's hand away from her back so that she can stumble away from him. I

wrap my arm around her, catching her and pulling her close as Jason tightens his fingers into fists and glares at me.

“You’re going to pay for that,” Jason threatens me as he steps toward me.

I pull Kenzie behind me, facing Jason with a challenging glare on my face. I’m not afraid of him, even if he wants me to be, and he’s not laying another finger on Kenzie.

“I told you to let her go. You didn’t listen,” I say through gritted teeth.

“That your girlfriend or something? Move on that fast?” Jason asks as he nods to Kenzie, trying to dig his way under my skin.

It doesn’t work, though. He’ll say anything messed up to get me to swing first, but I’m not stooping down to his level. As a dad, I have to be a bigger man than that.

“Walk away,” I tell him, holding his gaze. I don’t want this to get any worse, especially since I feel Kenzie’s hand on my back. She’s scared.

Jason leans forward.

“Or what?” he growls.

I draw in a breath through my nose.

“Or you’re going to regret coming here tonight,” I say.

Jason laughs in my face before grabbing the front of my shirt and yanking me forward.

“Cole!” Kenzie gasps.

I duck under Jason's swing and shove him back a few steps, putting space between us. I hear noise behind me, making me look over my shoulder to see the other Howard brothers getting up from the table. My heart rate starts to pick up as I face the possibility of an unfair fight, but a few other bar patrons block the brothers off.

The people of this town look after each other.

I whip back around as Jason lunges at me. Moving quickly, I sidestep him, making him miss and fall to the ground. I'm on him in a second, knocking my fist against his cheek.

Jason grunts in pain, unable to push me off and get up.

I grab the front of his shirt and deal one more punch before stumbling off him, making sure that he's down for the count. Adrenaline courses through me, making the aching sensation in my hand feel dull for now. I'll feel it later, though.

"Are you okay?" Kenzie asks as she rushes to my side, tentatively wrapping her fingers around my hurt hand.

I grimace a little and nod. With my good hand, I reach into my back pocket and slap a bill on the bar to pay for our drinks.

"We should go," I say, feeling eyes on us. I have no doubt that everyone here believes I'm in the right, but I'd rather get out of here before the other Howard brothers get bold enough to try to come after me.

Kenzie nods and remains by my side as I grab her hand and lead her out of the bar.

## *Chapter Seven: Kenzie*

**M**y heart refuses to stop racing as Cole and I stand in the master bathroom of the ranch house, dealing with the aftermath of the fight. His hand is red and slightly swollen from the punches he landed.

“You need to put some ice on it,” I tell him as I gingerly press my fingertips against his knuckles.

Cole grimaces.

“I know. It’ll be a pain doing the daily chores now,” he mutters under his breath.

I frown as he draws his hand away.

“Who was that guy?” I ask him. I only danced with him because he seemed nice and fun at first, but then he got weird and too touchy for my comfort. When he wouldn’t let me go, I started to panic.

Cole runs his hand under the cool water in the sink for a few moments.



“Jason Howard. He and his brothers are a known pain around here. Bullies in high school. Terrors after graduation, which they barely qualified for,” he tells me.

I brush my fingers through my hair, looking as sheepish as I feel. I had no idea he was such a bad guy until he showed his true colors.

“It seems like you’re pretty well liked around town. People jumped to help you,” I point out.

Actually, there were a few instances of people seeming fond of him. Teddy was fond of him. The bar got a little quiet when we entered, and people nodded to him in greeting like they at least knew him. Then, they rose from their seats to defend him from Jason’s brothers, who were looking to join the fight.

“That’s what it’s like around here. We look out for each other, and we know who to avoid,” Cole replies as he shuts off the water. He shakes his hand a little, grimacing in pain. “That’s how we avoid situations like what happened tonight.”

Ouch. The sting echoes throughout my chest as I look away from him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” I murmur quietly. I get he’s in pain and upset about being in a fight, but how was I supposed to know I was dancing with a jerk?

“Because you have to care enough to get to know this place and the people in it, which I doubt you’re willing to do,” Cole replies as he moves to stand in the doorway of the bathroom, looking tired and disappointed.

Where is this attitude coming from? The anger that I try to swallow down comes roaring back up.

“I just got here! I’m sorry I don’t know all of the secret rules around here,” I say, having to once again jump to my own defense.

“Your grandfather learned pretty fast, but he actually seemed to care about this place,” Cole tells me. “What are you planning to do? Dump this place on the first person who wants to buy it for a good price?”

My jaw threatens to drop as I stare at him in pure bewilderment. Why does he care so much? We’re so hot and cold, going back and forth so much that it gives me whiplash. Every time we start to get close, something happens that hits a sensitive spot.

“It’s none of your business,” I grit out. “It’s not my fault that I was given this ranch. Or that I’m not used to a place like this.”

“Exactly. You don’t know what’s best for a place like this,” Cole replies, making me feel more and more like an outsider in this place.

“And you wouldn’t last a week where I come from. Stop acting like you’re superior just because you don’t like the city and enjoy a simple small-town life,” I bite out before I can even process the words. They come out far harsher than I mean for them to, but the point still stands.

Cole blinks at me, his eyes narrowing a degree more.

“Well, it’s pretty clear that we’ll never agree on much of anything,” he states as he crosses his arms over his chest. “I think it’s best if we just... stay out of each other’s way until your six months is up and you figure out what to do with this place.”

I don’t expect his words to hit me like a punch to the stomach. Things felt so different between us earlier at the bar when we were joking around and talking about ourselves. Like there was a silver lining. Now, I believe I was mistaken. We were just trying to be polite, to ignore our obvious differences.

Maybe it’s time to stop pretending now and make things easier on each other.

“Fine. What do you want me to do around the ranch? I need to stay busy so that time moves faster,” I say.

Cole scoffs a little at my comment.

“You can feed the animals in the morning and do some chores around the house. I’ll do the rest,” he replies. “We’ll figure it out.”

I bite on the inside of my cheek as we stare at each other like we’re waiting for the other to give in and apologize. I’m not going to be the one to do that, though. What did I do wrong besides accidentally dancing with the wrong guy?

“So, that’s it?” I ask.

Cole pauses for a moment, his expression wavering briefly before it hardens.

“Yep. That’s it,” he says.

An ache echoes through my chest as I realize that the possibility of us being anything close to friends isn't likely. There are things about him that I really like, but we're from two different worlds. We have two different minds that just can't connect.

It's a shame.

"Goodnight," I tell him, having to force the word out. I walk past him out of the bathroom, our arms brushing. My skin hums with warmth from the brief touch, but it quickly becomes cold.

I don't bother looking back behind me as I head to my room. What else is there to say? He's made it clear that he thinks I'm some tornado tearing my way through his life, causing destruction and trouble that he doesn't want to deal with. So, maybe it is for the best that we stay out of each other's way.

I crawl into bed and bury myself beneath the covers, squeezing my eyes shut as a wave of exhaustion and sadness crashes down on me. I've been trying so hard to make the most of my stay here, but I stick out so badly. And it seems like everyone notices that or knows that now.

Eventually, my exhaustion takes over me, dragging me down into the depths of sleep. But it's not all darkness as I slip into a dream. It's all hazy and hard to make out, but I can make out the front porch of the ranch house with its windchimes and wooden porch swing.

I'm seated on one side of the porch swing, prompting me to look to the right. My eyes widen at the sight of PapPap sitting next to me, wearing a white Polo shirt, khaki pants, his favorite brown loafers, and his signature straw trilby hat.

"PapPap?" I say, unable to believe that he's sitting right next to me.

PapPap smiles at me.

"Isn't it beautiful out here?" he asks as he gestures around.

I swallow hard and nod, so many questions popping up in my mind.

"Why am I here?" I ask him. "I just don't understand why you want me to have this place. I don't fit in here."

PapPap pats my knee.

"Because you're not trying, sweet pea," he replies.

My heart aches at the sound of that pet name he always used to call me. I haven't heard it in so long and getting to hear his voice again brings tears to my eyes. He cared about me so dearly, but I've felt so miserable here. He had to have known that I wouldn't like this place as much as he did.

"I am. I've tried getting along with Cole and having fun, but nothing is working out," I tell him as more tears well up in my eyes. Everything keeps falling apart, and the whole situation keeps getting worse.

"Things aren't as hard as they seem. Discomfort invites you to try new things. To open your mind up to things that you

thought you'd never experience," he replies. "Every experience adds to who you are as a person."

Of course, he's always been the philosophical type, able to find some sort of lesson in every situation. I don't want a lesson, though. I want an explanation!

"I don't think I can do this," I admit as I shake my head.

PapPap gives me a comforting smile.

"You can. I know you can," he says. "I sent you here out of love. Not to punish you."

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask him, needing him to guide me because I feel so lost here.

PapPap looks out at the front yard of the property, watching a few birds fly by.

"Let love guide you. Stop holding back because you're scared or unsure. You just might stumble upon something precious that'll change your life," he tells me.

I give him a confused look, trying to decode his words. What love is he talking about? The only love I have is for my family, and they aren't here. It's just me here stuck with a caretaker who hates my guts.

"I don't know..." I murmur.

PapPap pats my cheek in an affectionate manner.

"Try," he replies. "Don't give up."

My throat goes tight as I gaze at him, not wanting to disappoint him. He so graciously wrote me into his will and

handed down this place to me of all people. The least I can do is try to appreciate this place like he does. He must've seen something in this place to make him buy it.

“Okay, I’ll try,” I say.

PapPap leans over and kisses the top of my head.

“Let in love,” he tells me.

I part my lips to ask him what that means, but he starts to fade away. Everything starts to give away to a growing darkness that gradually eats away at everything in front of my eyes. Within seconds, I disappear in its clutches, and everything is gone.

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## *Chapter Eight: Kenzie*

*Three months later*

Steam curls up from my cup of coffee as I lace up the work boots that I bought at the town's boot store. In a few minutes, I have to go out and tend to my daily chores, which have become second nature to me at this point. Anything becomes a habit after doing it every day for a few months.

I can't believe three months have already passed since I first arrived at the ranch. I'm only halfway through my stay, but I know the second half is just going to fly by, and I still don't know what my future looks like. I've grown used to ranch life, and I've even found a few spots around here that I enjoy on a daily basis.

There's a tree behind the chicken coop that casts a lot of shade around its trunk, so I started sitting on the ground under the cover of the leaves and writing in a journal. One day I noticed a carving on the backside of the trunk with a heart surrounding the initials CG+AA. I started tracing that heart with my finger every day, and then journaling made-up stories



about the couple that carved it. I still update my Instagram, but I have so many thoughts and experiences to share that I don't want to just put in a long caption. I've decided to start a blog.

Harper actually gave me the idea because she told me about the diary that she writes in. I chat with her every morning before my chores and before she has to go to school, and I see her a lot on the weekends. We play around with the makeup I brought here, and I've taught her how to braid her own hair. Every so often, we play fashion show.

So, things aren't too bad around here. It's taken some time, but I've gotten settled in this place for the time being, finding my silver linings. I can't believe how much my attitude about this place has changed since the day I arrived.

I guess the only thing that's not as great as I want it to be is my relationship with Cole. We've gotten to a place where we can have small talk with each other, but we mostly stick to ourselves unless we're having dinner together. He cooks on the weekends and invites me to join him and Harper.

It was a nice gesture, and he makes a few of those every so often like doing one of my chores or making a pot of coffee in the morning and leaving it for me so that I don't have to fix one. I've started doing little things too like throwing his clothes in the washer with mine or volunteering to take Harper to the bus stop in the morning so that he can get an early start on his chores.

Things can be worse, but I wish that we'd get a little closer. We've said some hurtful things to each other, but our lives

have pretty much melded together. There's a silent respect for each other between us now, and I've gotten to know him more not through conversations but by watching him from a distance.

He's hardworking, caring, and thoughtful, but we both have a darker side to us. We get upset and uneasy, but we've stopped taking it out on each other. I think we just needed to get used to each other.

I take a few sips of my coffee once I make sure it won't burn my tongue, taking in the caffeine that I'll need to get through the morning. The daily chores are a lot of work, but once I'm done with them, I do a little cleaning in the house, and then I can do what I want.

I usually journal, read, take a walk, play with Harper when she's around, or volunteer to help Cole with dinner or other things that need to be done around the ranch. Sometimes, I'll go into town since Cole got me a replacement tire. I make it a point to stay busy, and I've been thinking about trying some new hobbies out soon. I thought Harper would like to take archery lessons with me but her dad vetoed that idea.

Since I have little to do but observe things around here, one thing that's hard to miss is how tender and caring Cole is toward the ranch. I know he's the caretaker, but it's like this is his place. Or he has some sort of deep connection with it. He has so much pride for it, and I can't help but admire that side of him.

After finishing my coffee, I head out to where the chickens are kept. They're all roaming around the field where they're fenced, and Cole is already out there preparing their food. I walk up to him, catching his attention.

"Good morning," I tell him.

Cole nods to me.

"Morning," he replies, but he doesn't directly look at me. He seems distracted as he moves around, mindlessly moving to scoop chicken feed into a bucket. But he keeps putting more and more feed in.

"Whoa, that's a little too much, right? Our chickens are going to be fat and rolling around if we feed them that much in a day," I comment with a light laugh.

Cole blinks in surprise like he's coming out of a daze. He looks into the bucket and cracks a sheepish grin.

"You're right," he says, sounding impressed.

I place my hands on my hips.

"Well, don't sound so surprised," I tell him. I've had months of practice.

Cole tilts his head at me, his grin turning into a challenging one.

"How much chicken feed do we give them?" he asks.

I lift an eyebrow at him, realizing that he's testing me. Well, I'm going to pass with flying colors.

"A quarter of a pound per day," I reply with a hint of sass.

Cole chuckles and nods.

“Alright. What’s the main ingredient of their feed?” he asks.

“Grains. Duh,” I say.

“Look at you. A ranching expert,” he tells me.

I shrug.

“I guess I’ve learned from the best,” I quip, our eyes meeting. Tension crackles between us for a moment. It’s so fast that I hardly notice it, but it’s intense. This is the first time in a while that we’ve played around with each other, and admittedly, it feels good.

“Mind testing out your skills and milking Betty?” Cole asks.

“Betty?” I question him.

Cole motions for me to follow him.

Wariness fills me as I walk after him, leaving the chickens behind and heading over to the three goats that we have. I don’t do much of anything for the goats since he mostly takes care of them.

“This is Betty. She’s ready to be milked,” Cole tells me as he gestures to a grey goat.

“I’ve never milked anything before,” I admit.

“I’ll show you. I’m the best, right?” he asks, brushing past me with a playful wink.

I smirk and shake my head, realizing that he’s trying to show off a little. I guess I don’t mind because it’s pretty fascinating watching him. And it’s a bit of a guilty pleasure

watching his shirt stick against his body when he's sweaty and working.

Or maybe I'm just that lucky.

I haven't had a boyfriend in a while because I worked so hard to make my job secure that I put my social life on the back burner. That meant hardly any friends and no relationship. So feeling lonely is common for me.

However, I haven't felt lonely lately. I'm constantly around people and when I go into town, people go out of the way to greet me or strike up a conversation about something like the weather or whatever is going on in town at that time. I don't feel so isolated, which is a nice change.

Cole smooths his hand along Betty's back as he sets a short stool on the ground next to her and then a metal bucket beneath her.

"So, you're going to take the top of her teat with your thumb and forefinger and pull downward. Just make sure you don't pinch her," he says.

That sounds easy enough, I guess. I take a seat on the stool, and Betty immediately starts to shift like she's uncomfortable. I look up at Cole with an unsure expression.

"Go ahead," Cole invites me with a subtle grin on his face.

I turn back to face Betty and tentatively reach out toward the closest teat. The moment my fingers close around it, Betty jumps and kicks her feet, making what sounds like an irritated

sound. A shocked scream breaks from me as I stumble away from her, running right into Cole.

Cole manages to catch me, but he loses his balance and falls backward into a spot of mud behind us. A breathless groan breaks from him, followed by a laugh.

“I had a feeling she would do that,” he says.

I look down at him as I lay on top of him, his arms wrapped around my waist to hold me against him.

“You knew?” I ask, my tone sharp.

Cole chuckles.

“Maybe,” he says.

“Jerk!” I gasp, pushing at his shoulder, which just makes him laugh harder. I can’t help myself and start laughing too, mud caking my arms and one of my knees. I don’t get so grossed out by mud as I used to, and at least I’m not as dirty as he is.

When our laughter dies down, we smile at each other for a few seconds. His hands move an inch up my back before he pulls them away.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod, feeling my face burn. I can’t believe I’m just laying on him like this. Admittedly, I miss feeling his hands on my back, but I push the thought away as quickly as I can and climb off him. I can’t be thinking those things about *him*.

But it's hard at times, especially during moments like these. When he smiles, my stomach flips, and when his arm brushes mine when we walk past each other, my skin tingles. It's hard to describe how I feel in those moments, but I know that I like those feelings.

Even if they're confusing.

"I'm fine," I assure him as I reach down to help him up to his feet. "What about you? Sorry about falling on you, but you did kind of deserve it."

Cole smirks as he steadies himself.

"I guess you're right. It was funny, though," he says, nudging me.

I smile a little and nod.

"Fine. Just a little," I admit. "We're dirty now."

"Come on. We'll wash off with the hose," he says before leading me over to the side of the ranch house where the garden hose is. He turns it on and changes the setting to a light shower spray. "Hold your arms out."

I stick my arms out, turning them every which way so that he can wash the mud off. I then hold out my leg so that he can spray off my knee.

"Alright, your turn," I say, taking the hose from him. "Turn around."

Cole eyes me before putting his back to me.

Only his back is dirty, but I spray the back of his head instead, making him flinch.

“Kenzie!” he protests.

I laugh and move the spray down to his back.

“That’s what you get,” I tell him, gaining a chuckle from him. The sound of his laugh makes my heart skip. He has a really nice, deep laugh.

After we wash off and turn off the hose, Cole faces me.

“After we finish up with the chores, want to grab some lunch? I’m already getting hungry,” he asks.

My face warms up as my excitement spikes. Today is already proving to be a really good day, and I’m glad we’re getting along well. I just hope we stay on good terms like this because this will really make my days that much better if I can have a friend in him.

I take my phone out to check the time, but the sound of a truck pulling up the driveway distracts me. I look up and cringe slightly, the time having slipped from my mind.

Cole’s eyes narrow as the latest model of a Ford F150 rolls toward us.

“What is Ron Dalton doing here?” he asks.

I swallow hard. I forgot to tell him about this earlier.

Ron Dalton owns a ranch nearby. I guess they’re sort of rivals, but I don’t know the full backstory or the details. I just know they aren’t that fond of each other, but Ron reached out



on Instagram one day. We just got to talking, and when I mentioned that I wanted to learn horseback riding, he offered to give me lessons for free. It was an offer that I couldn't bring myself to turn down.

"He's going to teach me how to ride a horse," I explain to him. "I meant to tell you earlier."

Cole's annoyed expression turns into one that's more... disappointed.

"I could've taught you," he tells me.

Guilt floods me as my eyes grow wide.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know and I didn't want to bother you," I say. Plus, I didn't think that we were at a point where I could ask him to do such a big favor for me.

"Kenzie!" Ron calls out to me once he rolls down his window.

"Just a second!" I shout back before facing Cole again. "I'm sorry. Can we do lunch together another day?"

Cole nods as he rubs the back of his neck.

"Sure. You know, you don't have to take lessons from him. I don't know if he offered you something or whatever," he says.

I frown, knowing he doesn't want me going off with Ron since they're rivals. I feel bad like I'm betraying him or something, but it's just horseback riding lessons. I'm not going to spill any secrets or anything.

“He didn’t. He just wanted to be nice,” I reply. “I won’t be gone long.”

Cole doesn’t say anything else as I walk away. However, I can feel the tension the entire time I head over to Ron’s car and get inside.

“Thank you again for this,” I tell Ron, who is a stockily built man with thin, black hair and a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. He’s wearing a white button-down shirt tucked into jeans with a brown belt that has a large buckle.

Ron grins at me, his eyes sweeping over my legs that aren’t covered by my jean shorts.

“My pleasure, honey,” he replies before pressing his foot against the gas. “Let’s go riding.”

My eyes shift to the side window where I can see Cole in the reflection. He’s still standing there with a frown on his face, and I wonder if I’m really making the right decision or not by going with Ron.

I suppose there’s only one way to find out.

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## *Chapter Nine: Kenzie*

**W**hen we arrive at Ron's ranch, I can't help but lean forward to admire the huge plot of land through the windshield. The machinery and buildings that I can make out from the driveway are obviously newer than anything at PapPap's ranch. It's very apparent that Ron has a lot more money.

I can even make out people in the field working on things and tending to the animals. When we get closer, my stomach twists in nervousness at the sight of the Howard brothers repairing one of the hay balers. The last thing I want is to be anywhere near them.

Thankfully, Ron drives in the opposite direction of them, pulling into the grass in front of the horse stables. He shuts off his truck and looks over at me.

"Excited?" he asks.

I put on a smile and nod, trying to get myself to relax. I'm so used to PapPap's ranch that I feel out of place here.

However, I remind myself that I'm just here for lessons.

“Let's go,” Ron says before getting out of his truck and leading me over to the stables. “I have some of the finest horses in the state. They're all thoroughbred horses.”

“They're beautiful,” I say once we walk inside and I can see them. He has about ten of them, and they're all big with sleek coats and healthy bodies. “Your ranch looks nice.”

“I have things running like a well-oiled machine here. I have the best machinery. The best helping hands,” he tells me, tilting his head up in pride.

He's certainly less humble than Cole. Cole treats the ranch like it's a living being. Tending to all of its needs. Caring about its condition. He lives and breathes it, while Ron just sees his ranch as a business. The difference is night and day.

A fluttering sensation erupts in my chest as I think about that caring side of him. Anyone would love to be cared for like that. That's what makes him such a great father and a reliable work partner.

“This is Artemis. She'll be your riding horse,” Ron says as he gestures to a dark chestnut horse.

“She's beautiful,” I reply as I peer up at the horse, trying to ignore the feeling of intimidation that haunts my mind. I hope this all works out well and I don't embarrass myself.

“I paid a good little fortune for her,” Ron tells me as he gestures to one of his workers to get Artemis ready for riding.

It seems like he enjoys boasting about how much money he has. Or maybe he's just proud of how far his ranch has come along. It can be hard to tell, and he's been nothing but kind to me. Maybe I'm just used to encountering people like him back in the city.

Once Artemis is ready to be ridden, we go out to the field and stand next to her left side. I pet her neck gently, trying to get her comfortable with me. It would suck to get injured during my first lesson.

Ron places a mounting block at my feet.

"We'll start easy today. Let's just get you used to getting on her and sitting on her," Ron says. "Face her tail and then place your left foot in the stirrup while holding the reins in your left hand."

I follow his instructions, going step by step until I catch up with his directions. Nervousness tingles through me, but I breathe through it, reminding myself that this is a good thing for me to learn. I can go back to New York with all of these different memories to look back on, and I'll definitely journal about this later when I get back to the ranch house.

"Now, push up with your left foot and swing your right leg over her back. Sit down as slow as possible," Ron tells me, placing his hand on my lower back.

My skin crawls for a second, but I remind myself that he's just trying to help steady me. I take in a deep breath before pushing up and throwing my leg over Artemis' back, easing myself down right in the saddle. I tighten my grip on the reins

to steady myself, my heart dropping into my stomach until I balance myself out.

“I did it!” I gasp.

Ron chuckles and pats my leg.

“You sure did, honey. Look at you,” he says as he grins up at me. “Comfortable?”

I situate myself a little, sitting up straight and holding the reins in both hands.

“Yes,” I say. “Now what?”

“I’m going to lead her around a little so that you can get used to her moving,” Ron replies before grabbing the reins and guiding Artemis forward.

The gentle bumping of her walking makes me tense at first, but I gradually relax as I get settled. This actually isn’t so bad. I find myself smiling as Ron leads Artemis in a few circles, letting me get used to the motion of riding her.

“This is really fun,” I tell Ron as I look down at him with a smile on my face.

Ron looks pleased.

“I knew you’d be a natural. Next lesson, I’ll teach you how to guide her yourself,” he says.

The thought of that is a bit daunting, but I’m determined to give it my best shot.

“That sounds great. I think I’ve gotten the hang of this,” I tell him.

Ron nods in agreement.

“It’s pretty hot today, so let’s not stay out here too long,” he says before tilting his head at me. “How about we go to the Buffalo Pit and have a drink to cool off?”

My smile wavers a little as I feel a bit unsure about going out to the bar with him. This is my first time meeting him in person, but he’s been nice enough to give me lessons for free. I suppose getting a drink with him is innocent enough.

“Sure,” I reply.

Ron helps me off Artemis and has his worker put her up. He leads me back to the truck, and I hurry up and get inside before any of the Howard brothers can spot me. We spend the ride to the bar talking about his ranch and how he’s looking to improve things even more. He wants to grow as big as he can get.

I think his ranch is already great, but I suspect that he’s trying to make his ranch better than my grandfather’s. I don’t say anything about it, letting him talk about how he wants to invest in some longhorns.

When we get to the Buffalo Pit, there aren’t as many people there as usual since it’s closer to the early part of the evening. We take a seat at the bar and order two beers since he insisted that I must try a local brew. I’m not a big beer drinker, but it tastes fairly decent.

“There’s another local brew that you need to try,” Ron says as I get through my second beer. He flags down the bartender

and orders me another one.

I don't want to drink that much, but he's nice enough to pay for it. I guess it's no big deal to have a few beers. I don't have anything else to do today.

"Thank you," I say.

Ron angles his body toward me, his leg brushing mine.

"My pleasure. You make nice company," he tells me.

I smile in a grateful manner. I sense a bit of flirtiness from him and wonder if this is how he gets women hooked on him. I'm not attracted to him in the slightest, but I figure there's no harm in having a few drinks with him and then keeping things between us strictly about the lessons. Before I know it, a big plate of nachos lands between us.

"The lesson was great today. I'm looking forward to the next lesson," I say

Ron nods and takes a messy bite of nachos.

"So, what do you think of your grandfather's ranch?" he asks.

"Oh, it's nice," I tell him.

"Pretty big?" he asks.

I nod.

"Yeah, he has quite a few acres," I reply.

Ron taps his fingers against the table.



“Since he’s passed... may he rest in peace, is the ranch going to you?” he questions me.

My eyebrows knit together slightly as confusion hits me. Why is he so curious about the ranch? His questions don’t seem to be from the mindset of a competitor.

“Yes, I’ll inherit it,” I tell him.

Ron straightens up, intrigued by my answer.

“And what will you do with it?” he replies.

Why does he sound like he’s interested in obtaining the ranch? He already has a great ranch that can fit everything that he’s envisioning. I don’t understand why he would also want my grandfather’s ranch too. That would be overkill.

“I’m not sure yet,” I say.

Ron narrows his eyes in thought. He leans closer to me, placing his hand on my knee.

“When do you inherit it?” he asks.

I lean back a little, discomfort crawling across my skin. It doesn’t feel like he’s sticking around me and buying me drinks because he wants to be nice. I can sense that there’s an ulterior motive, and I want to leave before he doubles down on the questioning. I doubt that he’ll let me leave, though.

“In a couple of months,” I tell him before clearing my throat and getting off the barstool. “Sorry, I need to use the restroom.”

Ron's face twitches like he's disappointed, but he nods and sips on his beer.

I get off the barstool and stumble slightly as I make my way to the restroom. However, I pause at the door, making sure that Ron is occupied before hurrying out the door of the bar. I feel bad for ditching him like that, but I just want to go home. I had too much to drink, and I don't want him to somehow persuade me into doing something I don't need to be doing.

I walk down the sidewalk through the darkness of night and around the corner in case Ron comes out looking for me. I want to avoid that awkward encounter. The bad thing is that he drove me here, so all I can do is hope that one of the cab companies in town isn't busy for some reason. I call the first one listed, breathing out a sigh of relief when someone actually answers.

"Hi, I'm in front of Sweet Creamery," I tell the dispatcher.

Within ten minutes, a yellow cab pulls up next to me, and I quickly pile into the backseat and give the driver the ranch's address. Drawing in a deep breath through my nose, I relax against the seat and close my eyes, my head spinning slightly.

I had a feeling that going with Ron was a mistake. Lesson learned. Just not the one I expected.

When I get back to Tall Oak, Cole's car is gone and I feel relieved that he and Harper won't have to see me like this. Once inside, I stumble upstairs and pass out in my bed.

## *Chapter Ten: Cole*

A series of thumps and clattering jars me out of sleep, my eyes flying open. I sit straight up and listen for a few seconds, hearing more noise from what sounds like the kitchen. Quietly, I creep out of bed and leave my room, heading down the hallway and into the kitchen to see the fridge door open. Light pours out of it into the dark kitchen.

With a tense body, I flick on the light, preparing myself for whoever is hiding behind the door.

The second the light fills the room, Kenzie jumps back from the fridge, stumbling slightly.

“Oh, whoa. You scared me,” she breathes out as she places her hand over her heart. She then laughs a little, her eyes looking a bit glassy.

It soon dawns on me that she’s tipsy.

“What are you doing up?” I ask her as I walk toward her.

“I went to the Buffalo Pit with Ron and had too much to drink,” Kenzie replies with a sheepish smile. “I woke up

starving...” She rubs her eyes and looks at the microwave clock. “Oh my God, is it 2 a.m.?” Her eyes then drop down to my bare chest, staring for a few seconds as her cheeks turn crimson.

I lift an eyebrow at her, wondering what that reaction was all about. However, all I can think about next is what in the world was she doing with Ron at the bar. I guess I can’t be too surprised since Ron is a known ladies’ man around here.

Something heated flares through me, and I can only assume that it’s jealousy. I don’t want her going out with Ron. I don’t want her dancing with Jason. I know I don’t have any right to think like that since she’s not my girlfriend, but there was some sort of connection between us today.

Maybe there’s a chance for us to be closer, and a part of me wants to explore that. We had fun today, and her laugh and smile made my heart race in a way that it hasn’t done in a very long time. I missed that feeling.

Plus, it’s nice seeing Kenzie so in tune with the ranch now. I think she’s finally starting to see how nice it is and how peaceful it can be. And on top of that, she’s amazing with Harper, who has come to love spending time with her. I know that’s risky since Kenzie’s six months is about up and she’ll be leaving soon, but I can’t bring myself to separate them when they’re both so happy together.

This ranch feels more... complete. It’s hard to describe, but it feels even more like home. And I’m terrified of losing it.

And of losing the connection growing between me and Kenzie.

“How many drinks did you have?” I ask her.

“Three,” she says as she holds up three fingers. She looks super sheepish now.

I sigh and turn on the coffeemaker.

“Let me make you a cup of coffee. What were you looking for in the fridge?” I ask her.

“A snack,” Kenzie says.

I crack a small smile and reach into the fridge to grab her a cup of strawberry yogurt. As she eats that, I fix her a cup of decaf before leading her out to the porch so that we can talk without waking up Harper. Once we sit on the porch swing and get settled, I look over at her as she sips on her coffee.

“So, how was your date?” I ask.

Kenzie smirks and shakes her head.

“It wasn’t a date. We were just talking. He kept asking questions about the ranch,” she tells me.

I withhold a scoff, knowing why Ron is asking about the ranch. He’s always wanted to buy it for his own greedy purposes, even if he’s been told no before. He’s like a dog with a bone, refusing to back down, especially once he sinks his teeth into something that he wants.

“He’s always had his eye on the ranch,” I tell her.

“Yeah, he was boasting about his ranch all day,” Kenzie mutters before taking another sip of her coffee.

“Did he teach you something about riding horses that I couldn’t show you myself?” I ask her, giving her a gentle nudge.

Kenzie laughs and bumps me back with her shoulder.

“Okay, okay. I get it now,” she says. “You can teach me how to ride a horse.”

A warm, satisfied feeling lights up my chest, making me feel much lighter than before. That shouldn’t make me so happy, but it does. I want to show her things. Teach her things. Spend time with her.

If every day can be like today, I’d be really happy, especially with her being around here.

“I have a question for you, Cole,” Kenzie says, leaning toward me enough to where our arms press together.

“Yes, Kenzie?” I ask with a smile on my face. She smells good. Like lavender.

“Why do you care about this ranch so much?” she asks me.

I breathe in deeply through my nose, trying to figure out what to say. Admittedly, there are some parts of the truth that I’ve been keeping from her. I don’t feel great about it, but I’ve just never been one to bare my soul like that. Though, I do like talking to her.

“My wife died of cancer when Harper was little,” I tell her, making her eyes grow wide.

“Oh, Cole... I’m so sorry,” Kenzie says as she places her hand over mine.

I look down at our hands, finding myself turning mine so that I can hold hers. Honestly, I don’t mind the support right now.

“After she died, I didn’t have anything left but Harper. Your grandfather saw that I was struggling and drowning in all of my sorrow. He gave me a life raft by hiring me as caretaker of this place,” I explain to her.

I left out a few key details, but they’re not important right now. The point still stands. I needed this place.

Kenzie’s face softens as she gives my hand a squeeze.

“I’m glad he did that for you,” she says. “You’re pretty much running this place, but what would you do with the place if you had the power of being the owner?”

I’ve thought about that possibility so many times. That’s what I originally wanted all along, but being its caretaker was close enough.

“On part of the land, I want to establish an animal sanctuary. You know, a place for abandoned animals to live and be safe,” I tell her. I look after all the animals here like they’re my kids because their lives mean a lot to me. They’re my responsibility, and I know of so many animals that are

abandoned and left all alone to fend for themselves. It isn't fair.

Kenzie nods as she listens to me, her fingers gradually threading between mine.

“And I want to invest in better equipment and housing. I do what I can with what's already here, but all the repairs are expensive and a lot of work for just me,” I say. “So, I'd probably hire a helping hand or two.”

“What else?” Kenzie asks, seeming to sense that I have more ideas. She leans toward me slightly, our eyes locking.

My heart rate immediately kicks up, but I push myself to continue speaking, even if I'm distracted by how big her brown eyes are and how soft her lips look.

“I want to start a garden. A huge one. There's a local farmer's market, and I think it would be great to grow a bunch of fruits and vegetables and sell them at a cheap price,” I tell her.

I care about this town a lot. If I can help the people here, who I've known all my life, I will do whatever I can to do so. They've supported me and raised me, especially after my dad passed away from illness in his old age. So, I want to give back and make this ranch everything it was envisioned to be.

I have to pick up the torch that was left behind.

Kenzie sighs and sets her empty coffee mug down near her feet before leaning her head against my shoulder.



“I love every single one of those ideas,” she says. “You really do love this place.”

I nod and rest my cheek against the top of her head.

“I never want to leave. I just feel like I belong here,” I murmur. I don’t want to pressure her into making a certain decision, but the best one for me and Harper would be for her to keep the ranch and let us stay and take care of it.

An even better outcome would be if she stayed, but I don’t see her giving up her life in the city for us. Me. That’s crazy for me to ask when we’ve only known each other for so long.

“I’ve grown to really like this place,” Kenzie admits to me. “I can see why PapPap liked it. It’s like a peaceful adventure, and he was all about stuff like that. With a dash of craziness every so often.”

I chuckle as a warm feeling blooms in my chest. She finally has grown to appreciate this place, and I honestly couldn’t be happier. Ever since she made those harsh comments about this place, I’ve wanted her to see the true beauty of this ranch. Finally, she sees it.

Will that influence her decision?

“What about its cranky caretaker?” I find myself asking before I can even process the words. My heart stops. What in the world did I just say?

Kenzie laughs and lifts her head to meet my gaze.

“Yeah, I like him a lot, even if things got off to a rocky start for us,” she says in a soft voice.

My eyes remain locked on hers, pressure sitting on my chest as anticipation and desire grip me. All I want to do is lean forward and close the distance between us, to feel how soft her lips are. I'm sure they're even softer than they look.

Kenzie must be thinking the same thing because her eyes break from mine to trail down to my lips.

I can't take it anymore. I cup her cheek and move toward her, pressing my lips against hers in a gentle kiss. We both stop breathing for a second, suspended in the intense moment as our lips lock.

Gradually, Kenzie's lips move against mine, brushing and touching in soft motions that make my head spin. Her lips are as soft as I imagined.

When her hand slips around to the back of my neck, my heart starts to hammer wildly, my adrenaline rushing. I can't believe I'm kissing her, finally giving into the desires that have been lurking in the back of my mind. What a rush.

But it comes to a quick end.

Kenzie suddenly jerks back with large eyes, looking stunned like she just broke out of a daze. Her fingertips touch her lips as she leans away from me. Before I can ask her if she's okay, she gets to her feet and hurries into the house, leaving me on the porch with a confused and worried look on my face.

Did I go too far?

I don't want to lose her just like that! That kiss was... amazing. All I wanted to do was hold her close and not let her

go, but she's gone! As much as I want to go after her, I force myself to sit there and leave her alone. I don't want to overwhelm her even more and dig myself into an even deeper hole.

I run my fingers through my hair and sigh, shaking my head. I might've messed everything up. Just when things were getting good between us.

For a second there, when our lips were locked and the rapid beating of our hearts were in sync, a flash of a fantasy appeared in my mind of us living here on the ranch together. Kissing on the porch. Laughing as we did our daily chores together. Watching movies with Harper.

A pure fantasy that scares me because I never imagined myself wanting that after my wife passed away. I didn't think that I would ever consider moving on or starting something new with someone else.

But Kenzie is the first woman that puts that thought in my mind, and it scares me to death and warms me at the same time. What in the world have I gotten myself into?

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## *Chapter Eleven: Kenzie*

I stir slowly the next morning, my body feeling heavy and slow. I can tell by the sun that it's later than my usual wake-up time and I've probably missed breakfast with Harper. I gaze up at the ceiling for a few seconds, letting my mind catch up as I fight a headache.

Suddenly, a memory from last night pops up in my mind, making my eyes widen.

Cole and I kissed last night.

My lips seem to tingle just at the thought, warmth seeping through my body as I run the memory of that sweet kiss through my mind once more. He was so tender, so passionate. My heart races just by remembering it, and I find myself smiling.

I really enjoyed that kiss. Maybe I shouldn't have. I have no business getting in a relationship with him, especially since I'm going to leave the ranch in a few weeks. I can't start

something that I'll have to abandon. Especially something as alluring as being with him.

Liking him is a guilty pleasure, a hidden desire. I can't help it! He's incredibly handsome, and he's a good man with a kind heart and a protective nature that makes me melt. Plus, hearing him talk about what he would do with the ranch just made me like him even more.

Honestly, his words were inspiring, and I bet it's what PapPap would've wanted for this place. I have a few weeks left here, so maybe I can make the most of the time I have left. I can help Cole flesh out his ideas and maybe lean into the connection that we have.

It's unlike anything else I've ever experienced before. That's why it's so hard to bring myself to cut it off. What if I never feel this way toward someone again?

I decide to just take things day by day. I don't have to make any huge decisions right now, including what to do with the ranch once these last few weeks are over. I just want to enjoy what time I have left here before I have to pick back up my life in the city.

After getting dressed, I head to the kitchen and I'm pleasantly surprised to find Harper in the kitchen drinking a glass of orange juice.

"Good morning," I tell her, hearing the shower running from the master bedroom. Cole must be getting ready for the day. "I'm running a little behind schedule this morning, even though it's Saturday. What is it your dad likes to say?"

“There are no weekends on the ranch!” we recite in unison in our best Cole voices.

Harper giggles and holds her glass of orange juice close to her face like she’s trying to hide behind it.

“Is everything okay?” I ask her, knowing that something has to be on her mind.

She merely smiles at me, but it’s not a normal, innocent smile. It’s a guilty one.

I pause and give her a perplexed look.

“I woke up last night and heard you and Daddy talking outside. I went to the door and...” she trails off with a giggle.

I do my best to keep a horrified look from appearing on my face. I had no idea that she saw us kiss! Concern creeps up my neck like a chill as I worry about what Cole will say about this. He’ll probably be upset because he doesn’t want Harper to get confused.

“Oh, well, we were just really happy. It was... kind of in the moment,” I explain to her, soon realizing that I’m doing a terrible job.

“Daddy likes you,” Harper tells me with a gleeful look on her face.

My face warms up as I try not to hook onto her words too much. She’s just a kid and doesn’t know how complicated things are for adults. However, there’s definitely something sparking between Cole and me. I just don’t know what to do about it yet.

“I think he’s a very good man. And a wonderful dad,” I say.

Harper’s expression brightens as she nods.

“He’s the best,” she tells me with full certainty. She looks up to her dad, and I can’t think of a better role model for her.

“Yeah, he is,” I reply, my heart fluttering for a second. I then clear my throat and glance around. “How about we cook breakfast and surprise him when he comes out of the shower?”

“Yes!” Harper chirps in an excited manner.

“Awesome!” I say, rubbing her upper arm affectionately before opening the fridge to grab an unopened pack of bacon and the carton of eggs.

Harper grabs the bread and puts three pieces in the toaster.

I get started on the bacon and eggs, placing them in two separate pans and kicking the stove on.

“Want me to show you how to flip an egg?” I ask her as she stands right by my side, peering into the pan full of eggs with interest.

Harper nods enthusiastically.

“Alright, let’s season them first. Sprinkle some on top of the eggs,” I tell her as I hand her the pepper shaker.

Harper shakes the pepper over the eggs, giving them a nice coating before I follow her with the salt.

“When do we flip them?” she asks.

“When they turn white,” I reply before checking on the bacon. After a minute, the eggs turn from clear to white.

“Alright, ready?”

Harper nods and moves closer as I grab the spatula.

I wrap her fingers around the handle of the spatula and keep my hand around hers. Carefully, I slide the spatula under one of the eggs and turn our hands, flipping the egg right over.

“We did it!” Harper cheers, peering up at me with a victorious look on her face.

“Good job!” I tell her, giving her a high five before helping her flip the other eggs.

We finish preparing breakfast together, chatting about what she’s been doing in school. She’s a super smart kid with a huge interest in science. I can see her being a zoologist or veterinarian when she’s older. Something with animals.

As Harper hands me plates, I load them up with fried eggs, bacon, and toast. We set them out on the table just as Cole walks into the kitchen with clean clothes on and damp hair. I can’t help but remember how good he looked last night without a shirt on. His body is toned and muscular in all the right places from years of ranch work.

I have to snap out of my dreamy thoughts and smile at him to let him know that things are good between us since he peers at me with a slightly worried look on his face. The only reason I ran back into the house was because I was scared. I leaned into him and his comfort and lost my sense of control and common sense for a moment.



I can't help but worry about getting too attached and then having to rip myself away from him and Harper. From the ranch. Everything here is growing on me with each passing day, and part of me is worried about that because my stay here eventually has to come to an end. I can't just leave my life in New York behind on a whim.

Cole visibly relaxes and looks over at Harper.

"What's all this?" he asks as he gestures to the dining table with a smile on his face.

"We fixed breakfast for you!" Harper announces with a proud look.

Cole sweeps her up in a hug.

"Wow, it looks great! Thank you," he tells her.

Harper hugs him back before he sets her down so that everyone can get seated at the table. She digs in, while Cole and I share a warm look with each other from across the table. Harper must be really hungry because she doesn't say anything about seeing the kiss.

"How are you feeling?" Cole asks me.

A sheepish look fills my face. I remember having one too many beers yesterday, which has me not feeling in tip-top shape today. I'm fighting through it as much as I can, though.

"I'm doing alright. I'll probably just take a Tylenol before we start on our chores," I reply.

"I can take over your chores today," Cole offers.

I shake my head, not wanting to slack off today. There's so much to do around the ranch just in a day that I want to help out.

"It's okay. I can do it," I tell him.

Harper perks up.

"I can help!" she volunteers with a pleading look on her face as she peers at her dad next to her.

Cole nods.

"Alright, that'll work. We'll work as a team today," he says, shooting me a grin.

Warmth blooms in my chest as I smile back. Honestly, it sounds great working with both of them today. Like we're... a family. The warm sensation inside of me turns into an ache of pain because I know that I probably can't have that.

That's a fantasy.

Once we finish up breakfast, we all rise from the table and put up our dishes, falling into the usual routine we have. It's nice to have routines with other people. I'm so used to living alone and venturing through a quiet apartment. Now, I have two other people to talk to and share little moments with.

I didn't realize how much I missed that until lately.

"Go get dressed in pants and a shirt, okay? And your boots," Cole tells Harper before kissing the top of her head.

Harper takes off to her room to get ready.

Cole looks over at me, stepping closer.

“Is everything okay with us? I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” he says as he places his hand on the side of my arm.

My skin immediately tingles at his touch.

“No, it’s fine. I just... I was overthinking and stressed myself out over nothing,” I reply, not wanting him to worry. Honestly, I regret running off. I probably freaked him out.

“What were you thinking?” Cole asks, his expression softening. “I was thinking a lot too.”

“It’s just... I’m leaving soon. I don’t want to complicate things,” I tell him, wishing I could word my thoughts better. “Or confuse Harper. She saw us kiss last night.”

Cole’s eyes grew big at the news.

“What did she say? Was she upset?” he asks.

I shake my head and touch his wrist.

“No, no. She was fine,” I promise him. “She seemed... happy.”

Cole sighs softly and nods.

“I get what you’re saying,” he says. “But I don’t regret that kiss.”

I can’t help but smile, glancing away out of bashfulness.

“Yeah, it was nice,” I tell him.

Cole moves even closer to me, his eyes slipping down to my lips.

“I might do it again,” he says before turning away from me just as Harper bounds into the room.

I nearly melt on the spot, my heart thumping heavily from his words. Such a tease. I so desperately want to draw him into a passionate kiss, to remind myself of how good the last one felt. But we’re on the same page about not wanting to confuse Harper, so I merely smile and follow them out of the ranch house.

Harper runs ahead of us, making a beeline toward where the animals are.

Cole chuckles and shakes his head.

“I’m surprised I can keep up with her,” he says.

“She’s a happy kid thanks to you,” I tell him as we walk side by side. I don’t miss how our hands brush every so often, and I don’t think it’s totally by accident.

Yesterday changed everything for us. It was proof that we’ve come far since the beginning. We fell into a routine with each other, essentially experiencing the same day and living the same life. Our differences don’t seem so big anymore, and I’ve found that we have quite a few things in common.

We love fall. We love learning in all sorts of different ways. We enjoy a strong cup of black coffee, but we also love sweets. And we live for the little moments.

I’ve grown to really like the person I’ve met, and the spark between us keeps burning brighter. It’s all-consuming, making me feel happier than I’ve felt in a while. Maybe ever.

“She’s even happier because of you,” Cole replies as we watch her approach the chickens.

I look over at him, a strong, swelling sensation growing in my chest as we stand so close together.

“I’m sorry I was so negative about this place when I arrived,” I tell him, now knowing why that hit him so hard. This place is a part of him.

Cole’s fingertips brush against my palm in a subtle manner.

“It just took you a little while to realize how great this place is. It’s really special,” he replies.

I smile and glance around at the ranch, enjoying the faint breeze and bright blue sky. This place has etched itself a spot in my heart. It’s the most unexpected thing ever, but I don’t try to uproot it. Even if I may have to soon.

“Yeah, it really is.”

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## *Chapter Twelve: Kenzie*

**T**he next few weeks fly by faster than I'm prepared for. It's like I blink and another day passes. I want to dig my heels in and slow time, but I know that life doesn't work like that. Things are always more complicated than I wish.

However, the last few weeks have been some of the best of my life. I start the day with a smile and end the day with an even bigger smile after spending time with Cole and Harper. Cole and I have also started talking more about his ideas and fleshing them out more. They're too good not to put into action.

I helped him research more about building the animal sanctuary and figuring out how to find some funding. When I get my inheritance, I want to put some of the money into the development of the ranch. Whether I decide to keep it or hand it over to someone else, I still want the place to thrive with new ideas and upgrades.

The pressure of the decision that I need to make haunts me more and more, though. Part of me wants to keep the ranch

and let Cole stay there since he and Harper are so happy there. However, I don't know anything about owning a ranch. What if someone else can do it better? And it would be hard to own something that I'm hundreds of miles away from.

Maybe I can sell it to Cole if he actually wants to take it over. If I give it to him, can I really walk away from this place, though? From him?

There's no clear answer on what the best choice is because there are complications to every single one.

“Kenzie?”

I snap out of my thoughts and look up at Cole as I sit at the base of my favorite oak tree, my journal resting in my lap. It's full of entries that I've written nearly every day, and I can't wait to format them into a blog documenting my time here.

“Hey,” I greet him with a warm smile.

Cole sits down next to me, hiding from the sun in the cover of the leaves above us.

“I bet your blog will be a hit,” he tells me.

I smirk a little and shrug. I don't expect many people to read it, but that's okay with me. It's mostly for me anyway.

“We'll see,” I reply.

“Am I mentioned in any of your entries?” Cole asks.

In just about every single one, but I don't say that out loud and embarrass myself. Now, I feel like a teenager with a crush who writes about it in her diary.

“Maybe a few,” I say as I crook an eyebrow up at him.

Cole chuckles as he bumps his shoulder against mine.

“Just a few? Do I mean so little to you?” he teases me.

Truthfully, he’s come to mean a lot to me. I think about him often when we’re not together, and when we are together, my heart can’t seem to beat normally. My cheeks refuse to remain at a normal temperature. He affects me in a way that I’m not used to.

“Maybe I don’t want to share you with a bunch of readers. I want to keep you to myself,” I tease him right back, wanting to make him as flushed as I am.

Instead, a charming grin crosses his face as he nods.

“I can understand that. I’m all yours right now,” he points out, gesturing to the quiet field in front of us. Harper is on the bus heading home right now.

“For a few minutes,” I laugh.

Cole shrugs as he tilts his head at me.

“I’m sure I can think of something to pass the time,” he replies.

I feel myself melting on the spot, and it isn’t long before we start leaning toward each other. Before our lips can touch, the sound of the bus approaching from down the road breaks us apart, drawing sighs from both of us.

Cole briefly brushes his fingertips against my cheek.



“I’m sure we’ll have another few minutes free some other time. I’ll let you get back to journaling,” he says, winking at me before heading toward the road to pick Harper up from the bus.

I remember to breathe again after a few seconds. I can’t believe that we were about to kiss again, and it felt so natural like we did it all the time. Maybe I wish we did.

I need to talk to someone.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and call Leigh Ann, listening to the phone ring a few times before she picks up.

“Hey! How are you hanging in?” Leigh Ann asks, sounding hopeful.

I had only called my family a few times since coming here, and most of the calls were at the beginning of my time here. So, my calls were mostly complaints and full of desperation at the time. I can’t blame Leigh Ann for being worried about me.

However, things are much better now.

“They’re actually pretty good. This place has grown on me,” I admit as I stretch my legs out in front of me, leaning my back against the oak tree’s trunk.

“Oh, wow! Really? Any specific reason for that?” Leigh Ann asks, genuine surprise in her voice.

I pause for a moment, my lips automatically curling up. The main reason for that is pretty obvious.

“Well, I noticed how beautiful this place is, and I like being around the animals. Besides this really mean goat named Betty,” I tell her, hearing her laugh. “And I like the caretaker and his daughter.”

Leigh Ann stops laughing.

“Wait... are you talking about Cole? The guy you were arguing with nonstop?” she asks.

We’ve certainly come far, which I’m happy about. I can’t imagine how things would be if we didn’t start getting along quite well.

“We just kept getting closer. We actually kissed,” I tell her.

Leigh Ann gasps.

“No way! Was it good? Do you like him?” she asks, the questions pouring from her.

“Whoa, slow down,” I laugh. “I do like him, and it was the best kiss I’ve ever experienced.”

Leigh Ann shrieks in a happy manner.

“I’m so happy for you! Are you guys going to go official?” she replies.

I don’t know how to answer that. In a perfect world, I’d love to be his girlfriend and explore things with him. However, things are more complicated, and I don’t really know how to navigate our unlabeled relationship.

“I’m not sure. I’m about to head back to New York soon, so I can’t really start a relationship with someone miles away,” I

point out.

“People do long distance all the time,” Leigh Ann reminds me.

I sigh as I gaze up at the leaves rustling above me from the gentle breeze. It’s perfect on a sunny day.

“I know, but I want to be with him,” I tell her.

Leigh Ann is quiet for a few seconds.

“I know it’s kind of crazy, but have you considered staying there?” she asks.

I lower my eyes, anxiety swirling in my stomach. The possibility of that has crossed my mind, but I can’t possibly do that. I have a whole life in New York that I can’t just abandon. That’s beyond crazy.

“I can’t,” I reply. “My life is in New York.”

“Do you even miss it?” Leigh Ann asks.

I want to say that I miss it so much that it hurts, but that would be a lie. Honestly, besides reminding myself that I can’t move here because I live there, I don’t really think about New York all that much. I’m so focused on the new life that I’ve started living here, and I think I’d miss this place more because I’ve made so many memories and I’m so attached to Cole and Harper.

“I mean... kind of,” I murmur.

“Yeah, I figured,” Leigh Ann replies. “Think about it. What’s really keeping you in New York?”

“The apartment I rent there,” I say.

“Use the inheritance money you get to break the lease and call a moving company,” Leigh Ann replies right off the back.

I think for a second before pitching another reply.

“My friends are there,” I tell her.

“Okay, are they better company than Cole?” she asks.

“No,” I say quietly, already knowing that answer immediately. My friends and I haven’t even talked all that much since I left. I guess we all moved on with our lives, which I’m a little sad about, but I’d be devastated if I lost contact with Cole and Harper.

“Just keep thinking about it, okay? Do you know what you’re going to do with the ranch once it’s signed over to you?” Leigh Ann asks.

I hop up to my feet and start walking around the tree while we’re talking.

She keeps asking me questions that are hard to answer, but I have to give her something. Maybe speaking my mind out loud will help me figure things out.

“I’m not sure. I either keep it or sell to someone who can run it properly,” I reply. “I care about what happens to the place now.”

I mindlessly trace the outline of that heart that’s carved into the trunk.

“I’m really happy to hear that you’ve gotten attached to this place. Remember, it’s for a reason,” Leigh Ann reminds me.

Many reasons.

“Thanks for talking with me,” I tell her, feeling a degree lighter now that I’ve spoken my thoughts instead of just keeping them trapped in my head.

“Call more! I miss you,” she says.

I smile a little, feeling the same way. We’ve always been close, and I find myself wanting to show her around the ranch. I know that she’d really like it here.

“I miss you too,” I reply. “I should go soon, though. We always all have an afternoon snack after Harper gets home from school. Any words of advice?”

“Don’t overthink things. Just enjoy them. The answer will come to you,” Leigh Ann promises me.

I hope that’s true. All of this uncertainty is driving me crazy on the inside.

“Thank you. Love you,” I say as I watch Cole walk to the front porch with Harper by his side. I’m already itching to be right there with them.

“Love you! Update me!” Leigh Ann calls out before I hang up.

A sigh drifts from me as my thoughts and feelings clash. If only things were a little easier, but I’m still going to have a good time while I’m here.

“Hey, wait up!” I call to Cole and Harper.

They both turn toward me and when I reach them, Harper wraps her arms around my waist in a tight hug.

I smile and place my hand on the back of her head, feeling warm all over. Getting to know her and developing a close relationship with her has been one of the best things that has happened while I’ve been here, and I can tell it makes Cole really happy. I often find him watching us interact, and he always has a grin on his face.

“Did you have a good day at school?” I ask her.

Harper lets go of me and peers up at me, nodding her head enthusiastically.

“My teacher said I did really good on my homework this week,” she says.

I remember helping her understand her homework the other day. I’m glad she was able to figure it out and get a good grade, but I’m definitely not surprised. She’s always been on top of her schoolwork.

“That’s great!” I tell her. “So, what are you feeling for an afternoon snack? Want to split a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

“Yes! Lots of peanut butter,” Harper quips with a beaming expression.

“Let’s get to it,” Cole says as he opens the door for us.

As I start to walk through the doorway, I feel Cole's hand gently caress the small of my back. Every time someone has touched me like that, I've grimaced or wanted to pull away. However, when it's his touch, I revel in it. I want more.

"Extra peanut butter for you too?" I ask him as I briefly pause in the doorway.

"I like it sweet," Cole replies, his eyes flickering to my lips for a short moment.

My face burns as I head to the kitchen, smiling to myself as I grab the peanut butter, jelly, and bread. Harper is already seated at the dining table, waiting to eat a little something to give her enough energy to get through homework and be ready for dinner in a few hours.

As I spread peanut butter on the bread, I find myself not minding doing this work nearly every day. I feel like I'm needed here, like my presence is appreciated. I don't feel that way in New York. I feel like I have to beg to even be noticed, and I'm tired of that.

I want somewhere where I feel like I belong, but is that place truly Tall Oak Ranch?

## *Chapter Thirteen: Cole*

Sweat gleams on my forehead as I finish checking on the horses under a hot, gleaming sun. It's another day of hard work on the ranch, but with Kenzie around, it's much easier to get everything done. Since she's been here for so long, it's hard to imagine my days without her. I was certain that they would feel empty. Quiet. Cold.

I'm dreading this coming Friday, though. That's when her six months are up, and she has to leave and go back to New York. She says that this place has grown on her, but it must not be enough to get her to stay. It hurts because both Harper and I have gotten so attached to her, but I can't make her stay.

And I can't make her keep the ranch.

I feel a bit powerless, unable to take control of my future how I want to. I want to be selfish and ask her to stay on the ranch with us, but I can't bring myself to tell her that. I can't make her give up everything for us.



All I can do is wait for her to make a decision and act afterward.

I walk away from the stable just as a familiar white Highlander rolls up the driveway. I lift my hand to wave at my mom, as she parks in front of the ranch house.

“Hey, Mom,” I greet her once she steps out of the car, having to hop a little since she’s a short, petite woman.

“Hi, sweetie,” she says as she reaches up to hug me.

I embrace her, having not seen her in a few weeks. She comes and visits the ranch every so often, and I’ll go into town to swing by her house. However, since Kenzie has been here, I’ve just gone over to her house whenever she has the time. She’s usually busy attending her book club or having brunch and mimosas with her friends.

“Sorry, I’m all sweaty. I wasn’t expecting you,” I tell her once we pull away.

My mom waves her hand dismissively.

“I just wanted to come by and see you and the ranch. It’s looking very nice,” she says as she peers around.

“I’ve had an extra set of helping hands,” I tell her.

“The owner’s granddaughter?” she asks.

I haven’t told her too much about Kenzie. Just a few details. Talking about Kenzie doesn’t do her justice compared to how great she is in person. I want my mom to meet her before she has to leave.

“Yes, her name is Kenzie. Want to meet her?” I ask.

My mom beams and nods.

“Of course. Is she pretty?” she replies.

I shoot a pointed look at her.

“Mom,” I say in warning, not wanting her to say anything. She’s been trying to get me to start dating again for a while now, but I haven’t budged because no one has caught my eye.

Until now.

I lead her into the house, hearing Harper and Kenzie talking in the living room.

“Kenzie,” I call out, giving her a warning before walking into the same room as her with my mom right behind me.

Kenzie looks up from the floor where she’s playing with a few animal figurines with Harper. She spots my mom and seems to already figure out who she is, prompting her to jump to her feet.

“Hello, I’m Kenzie,” she introduces herself, offering her hand to my mom.

My mom eagerly shakes her hand.

“Call me Susan, dear. I’m Cole’s mom,” she says before stepping back to get a better look at Kenzie. “My goodness, aren’t you a doll?”

Kenzie visibly blushes and smiles.

“Oh, thank you,” she says.

“Grandma!” Harper gasps excitedly, pushing herself to her feet so that she can hug my mom.

“Aw, hello, sweet girl. Are you having fun?” my mom asks as she pets Harper’s hair.

Harper nods.

“Kenzie is my best friend,” she quips, making my heart warm up. “Daddy likes her too.”

My mom raises an eyebrow at me.

“Oh, really?” she asks. “I have noticed he’s seemed happier lately. I think I see why now.”

I can’t exactly glare at my daughter, so I just chuckle my way through it. Kenzie does the same to lighten the mood. Of course, we like each other, but we’re not at the point to talk to other people about that yet.

“Anyway, Kenzie has been helping me whip this place into shape. We have a lot of ideas we want to implement,” I say.

“They’re your ideas,” Kenzie tells me, placing her hand on my arm as we automatically smile at each other. “You’re the mastermind.”

“Your help means a lot, though,” I reply, wanting her to know that she’s motivated me a lot lately. She may not be around to put all of the ideas into motion if things work out, but it’s still nice of her to help me plan them out.

“See?” Harper says to my mom, who smiles knowingly at me.

“Mom, do you want something to drink?” I ask her, moving the conversation along before Kenzie and I get even more embarrassed.

“Some sweet tea would be lovely,” she tells me.

I nod and head into the kitchen, trying to hurry because I can hear my mom already chatting up Kenzie while I’m gone.

“I truly haven’t seen him like this in forever. You must have a spell over him,” my mom laughs in a happy manner.

“Your son is... amazing. He’s taught me so much about the ranch, and we’ve just grown really close over the last few months,” Kenzie replies.

I smile a little as I pour my mom a glass of sweet tea. Like everyone else in the world, it’s nice hearing someone I care about say such kind things about me. And that we’ve gotten close.

“And what are your plans for the ranch? You know, this place has so much history. It’s really important to us,” my mom tells her.

That sends me nearly running back into the living room, tea threatening to slosh over the sides of the cup.

“Here you go,” I announce as I hand my mom her cup of tea. “So, are you going to Teddy’s party, Mom?”

“I can’t make it, unfortunately. Paula and I will be out of town that night,” my mom replies before sipping her drink. Paula is one of my mom’s close friends who is always dragging her to senior seminars and courses.

“A party?” Kenzie asks me.

My eyebrows suddenly shoot up.

“His birthday party. You should come!” I tell her before lowering my voice slightly. “With me.”

A warm expression fills Kenzie’s face as she nods.

“I’d love to,” she says.

“How sweet. You’ve got yourself a wonderful date, son,” my mom tells me as she pats Kenzie’s back in a joyful manner. “Tell me all about yourself, dear.”

My mom spends the rest of her visit chatting with Kenzie, asking about her job and her family. She’s a fairly nosy person, but I can tell she really likes Kenzie.

Thankfully, Kenzie doesn’t seem overwhelmed. She’s relaxed as she answers all of my mom’s questions and laughs at her random stories.

As I put my mom’s empty cup in the sink, I overhear their conversation in the foyer as they prepare to say goodbye.

“You make him very happy, Kenzie. He’s... experienced a lot of loss in his life. His wife. His father,” my mom says. “He shut people out besides Harper. You’re the first person he’s let in close. That means something.”

“Thank you for telling me, Susan. He’s made my time here as wonderful as possible. I treasure what we have,” Kenzie replies, sounding genuine.

My heart threatens to race as I leave the kitchen to join them in the foyer. Harper is still in the living room with her toys.

“Need anything before you go, Mom?” I ask her.

Their conversation shifts once I come into the foyer. I suspect they didn’t expect me to be able to hear them, but voices travel well in this house.

“I’m fine, honey. Thank you,” my mom replies as she leans forward to hug me and peck me on the cheek. She then turns to Kenzie and takes her hands. “It was so lovely meeting you. I hope to see you again soon.”

“Of course, I’m so glad you came by today so that I could meet you,” Kenzie tells her as they squeeze each other’s hands before embracing.

We walk my mom out to the porch and watch her get in her Highlander and drive away, leaving us alone together.

“Sorry about the interrogation,” I tell her, knowing she was asked more questions today than at any other point in her life.

“It was the kindest interrogation ever,” Kenzie replies with a bright smile on her face. “Your mom is really nice.”

“She’s great. She definitely likes you a lot,” I say, but I’m pretty sure Kenzie picked up on that pretty quickly.

“I’m glad,” Kenzie replies as we face each other, only a foot of space separating us. “And thank you for inviting me to the party.”

“It’s on Thursday, so... a day before you leave,” I tell her with a slight frown on my face.

Kenzie steps closer to me, taking my hand and holding it tightly.

“I’m going to miss you and Harper a lot,” she says. “The two of you... I’ve never met better people before.”

*Then stay*, I want to tell her so badly, but all I can do is cup her face and close the distance. My lips press against hers tenderly, our eyes fluttering shut.

Kenzie winds her arms around my neck, allowing me to pull her closer by her waist. Our lips meld together perfectly like it’s meant to be.

Maybe it is.

I slide my hand into her hair, caressing the back of her head and enjoying her lips against mine for a few more seconds until we break away from each other.

“We’re going to miss you too,” I whisper as we still hold each other.

Kenzie smiles at me, but it’s a bittersweet motion.

“I’m excited for the party,” she says with a cheery look on her face.

I know that I’m going to dread how quickly these last few days with her pass. A heavy sensation settles in my chest, crushing my heart. Deep down, I know that I don’t just like her.

I think I'm falling for her.

The thought of not having her here with me aches so badly that I can't breathe for a second. She's become part of my routine, my life. I look forward to seeing her every morning, and I enjoy every little moment we share together.

It has to be love, and it's frighteningly thrilling to feel it again.

When she leaves, it's going to crush me. There's no doubt about that, but I refuse to pull away, to miss out on my chance of enjoying my time left with her as much as possible.

"Me too. We'll party the night away until we have to relieve the babysitter," I chuckle.

"Speaking of her, I should go back in. We were in the middle of an adventure," Kenzie tells me, shooting me a playful wink. She pecks my cheek before heading back inside, leaving me on the porch with hardly any oxygen in my lungs.

What a woman.

What am I going to do without her?

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## *Chapter Fourteen: Kenzie*

I had to enlist Harper's help for the party tonight. I realized that I had no idea what to wear to this party, and I didn't want to stick out in a bad way. I figured if anyone could help me decide on my outfit, it would be Harper. Plus, I wanted to dress nicely for Cole since we're attending the party together.

"Perfect," I say as I stand in front of the standing mirror in my bedroom, twirling around in the soft, flowy red dress that I bought at a local boutique. Harper and I went shopping, and when I saw that quarter-sleeve dress that stopped right above my knees, I knew it would be the perfect outfit paired with my black heels and gold hoops.

"You look amazing!" Harper gasps as she stares at me with wide eyes.

I smile at her and carefully crouch down so that we're at eye level with each other.

"Thank you for helping me," I tell her. "Think your dad will like it?"

Harper nods enthusiastically.

“A lot!” she replies.

I hope she’s right. I can’t wait to see what he looks like tonight, and I’m looking forward to seeing his expression when he first lays eyes on me. I hope I blow him away and we have a great night because tomorrow makes six months.

Mentally, I’m dragging my feet, not wanting to leave. But what choice do I have? I have to go back to New York for one last meeting with the lawyer so that the ranch can be signed over to me and I can get the inheritance money that was set aside for me.

Then, do I sell or not?

I withhold a sigh and try to focus on what’s right ahead of me, not wanting to overwhelm myself before I even get to the party. I finish up the last details, greet the babysitter who usually watches Harper, and head to Teddy’s house. The nervousness that I already feel doubles when I see more people than I can count parked along the street in front of the two-story, brick house with a beautiful, freshly trimmed lawn.

There are even people chatting on the porch like the guests are spilling out of the house because it’s so packed inside. I park down the street and walk to the house, my eyes sweeping over all the people to try to find Cole. I make my way through the foyer, but I don’t reach the end before someone calls my name.

Uh oh.

I spin around and see Ron walking toward me with a glass of champagne in his hand. Guilt and embarrassment flood through me as he cocks an eyebrow at me. He definitely hasn't forgotten what happened last time we were together.

"I never heard of a bathroom break that takes weeks," Ron states, his hand sliding down the dark red dress shirt he's wearing.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, not knowing what to say to him. I didn't expect to see him again after that, so I don't have some sort of excuse prepared.

Ron waves his hand dismissively.

"You look beautiful," he says as his eyes sweep over my entire figure.

My skin crawls slightly under his intense gaze, but I keep myself standing tall.

"Thank you," I reply, our eyes meeting in an intense stare-off.

Ron suddenly chuckles as he glances around.

"I suspect you ran off because I was talking about your grandfather's ranch," he says. "I'm sure Cole has told you that I'm interested in it."

"He mentioned it," I reply, eyeing him as he steps closer. I didn't expect to talk business tonight, but it has become very apparent that it's all he cares to talk about.

Ron nods as he leans closer to me.

“Well, I did a little digging, Kenzie. You’re a New York girl. You have been for a while,” he comments, looking quite wry like he uncovered something important.

“And what about it?” I reply, wondering what he’s trying to get at. I just wanted to come here and enjoy my time at the party with Cole. Not have some businessman try to analyze me.

Ron cracks a grin.

“Ranch life isn’t for you, darlin’. I’m sure you’re dying to run back to the city and enjoy your life there. Don’t you feel like you’re slumming it here?” he asks.

He’s trying to plant emotions in my head and words in my mouth. The fact that he thinks he knows me so well just from his little bout of research grinds my gears, which makes me wonder where he gets the audacity to act this way.

“I’m not slumming it here,” I tell him with a sharp tone. Maybe I would’ve thought that during the first few days I was here, but the ranch is its own form of paradise. I’ve come a long way in terms of my attitude toward it. “I like the ranch.”

“Yes, it’s a charming little place, but it requires a lot of work to maintain it,” Ron explains to me as he places his hand on my shoulder.

He’s talking to me like I’m a child who doesn’t know anything. Sickened by his manipulative behavior, I step away from him so that he can’t touch me.

“I know that. I’ve been working on the ranch for months now. I know what all it entails,” I say in a pointed tone, hoping he thinks about shoving his foot in his mouth.

Ron’s expression twitches a little as I continue to argue with him, not afraid to show him that he’s wrong.

“There’s more to it than daily upkeep. Have you thought about handling the property tax? Insurance in case something goes wrong?” Ron asks, pushing me more and more to try to get me to break.

I get that it’s a lot of work. I’m not an idiot. I run my own media coordination services and deal with my own finances. This guy must really underestimate me, and the anger boiling from that helps me finally make a decision.

“I’m not selling to you, Ron. I’m keeping the ranch under my name. My grandfather wanted me to have it,” I tell him in a firm voice, standing my ground.

PapPap chose me out of my siblings to give the ranch to, and I believe he sent me here for so long because he knew it would take me a while to get used to it and see its true value. Now, I know it’s too special to sell. Especially to someone like Ron who just wants to turn it into another way for him to make cash and become even richer.

All he cares about is the money. He doesn’t care about the land. The animals. The benefits a ranch can have on the town. He only cares about what all of that can do for *him*.

It's pure selfishness, and even I can do better at figuring out how to run the place. It'll take me a little while to figure out things, but I'm determined. I would rather put in the work than hand over the ranch for him to destroy.

Who knows what he will truly do with it?

"Don't be rash," he warns me. "You can't run a ranch all the way from New York. It deserves someone who's here. Who can look after it on a daily basis."

I'm not falling for that act. He's nowhere near as caring as he claims to be. It wouldn't even be him looking after the land. It would be all the people he hired, but he would take the credit for all of their work.

"I know someone here who can take care of the ranch. And he's already done a wonderful job of it. Now, excuse me, I want to go find him," I say firmly before turning to walk away.

Ron suddenly grabs my arm and pulls me back, making me face him.

"Let's talk about the caretaker. Cole, isn't it?" he asks as he leans close.

My entire body tenses as I glare up at him. He can underestimate me as much as he wants. It doesn't hurt my feelings, but if he starts talking bad about people I care about, then we're going to have a problem.

"It's none of your business," I grit out.

Ron chuckles.

“So, you’re all hooked on the caretaker. Are you keeping the land for him? To make him happy so that he’ll like you back?” Ron taunts me.

Unfortunately, it works, sending anger flaring through me as I step forward to invade his space.

“He’s just the caretaker. Nothing else! If you think I’m stooping that low for attention, you’re sorely mistaken!” I snap at him.

I don’t even mean half of those words because Cole is so much more than just a caretaker to me. He’s the man who makes my heart race, who helps me see the beauty in things I wouldn’t have noticed before. But Ron just made me so mad, and I don’t want to seem desperate in front of him when he’s preying on *my* ranch!

Ron suddenly glances behind me, smirking subtly.

“Uh oh,” he murmurs.

I whip around to see Cole storming through the foyer toward the front door. My heart immediately sinks. Did he hear what I just said? I didn’t mean it!

“Cole, wait!” I call out, stepping his way to run after him and explain myself.

Ron grabbed my arm again to stop me.

I push his hand off me with a scowl.

“Stop grabbing me!” I shout at him, drawing the attention of some of the people nearby. I don’t care, though. He has no

right to be yanking me around like that!

Ron doesn't seem fazed in the slightest by my outburst. He merely smiles at me and leans close like he's about to tell me a secret.

"Do you really believe that someone can be so caring and dedicated to a cause just because? With no ulterior motive?" Ron asks me.

I frown as I narrow my eyes in confusion, having no idea what he's talking about.

"What do you mean?" I question him, a heavy weight settling on my stomach and chest.

Ron shrugs as he moves away from me.

"Maybe you should ask him what his devotion to that ranch is really about," he says.

The sound of my heavy heartbeat thuds in my head, blocking out all of the other noises that are around me. All I can think about is Cole and what's running through his mind right now. And what is Ron talking about? Is Cole hiding something from me?

A sharp pain stings my chest as I hurry out of the house, needing to get home and talk to Cole before his mind continues to wander toward a dark place. I can feel a rift growing between us, threatening to split us apart when all I want to do is be close to him.

I can't leave for New York without settling things between us. Without having some sort of plan for what to do next. I



want him and Harper to be in my future in some capacity. I don't know how that will all work out, but I'm determined to try if he is.

But I can't have him turn against me. Not now.

Because I need him now more than ever.

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## *Chapter Fifteen: Cole*

**F**ire burns in my mind, clouding my head with conflicted thoughts. I can hardly think straight! Kenzie's harsh words keep echoing between my ears over and over again, and I can't get the noise to turn down no matter what I do. It's bad enough that she said those things about me in the first place, but what makes it even worse is that she said those things to Ron of all people, who already looks down on me.

I feel like an idiot! I opened myself up to her and bared my soul, letting her know things about me that I don't tell most other people. I'm a private guy, but I lowered my walls for her because I trusted her.

I... fell for her.

Now, when I think about her, I just get angry, embarrassed, and sad. The rush of all of those emotions nearly dizzies me as I storm up the steps of the ranch house, my chest aching with each heavy thought. I should've known better than to open my heart up to someone.

There's a reason why I avoided that for so long. The grief of losing my wife felt like it was killing me, and I didn't want to put myself through any more pain. Now, I'm feeling crushed under the weight of it all over again.

Joanna, a sophomore in college and Harper's usual babysitter, walks into the foyer with a polite smile on her face.

"Harper is asleep, sir. She had a big day helping Kenzie get ready for the party," she tells me.

Just the sound of Kenzie's name makes my stomach churn so harshly that it makes me sick. However, I plaster on a fake smile and nod to Joanna.

"Thank you. You can go ahead and go on home," I say, needing time to myself right now to just think.

Or maybe that's the last thing that I need to do.

Joanna nods and grabs her things before leaving the ranch house.

I head into the kitchen to get a glass of water, trying my best to cool down because I hate feeling angry like this. It drains me. Saddens me. I don't want to feel like this!

And I wish Kenzie didn't think so low of me, especially when I put her on a pedestal in my mind. She was so special to me. Does she not even care about that?

I hear the front door open again, prompting me to step into the foyer to see if Joanna forgot to grab something in the house. Instead, I come face to face with Kenzie, whose eyes are already glimmering with tears. She knows I heard her.

When she called out to me earlier at the party, I ignored her because I didn't want to face her. I didn't feel strong enough yet, and I don't have the willpower still.

"I don't want to talk," I tell her.

Kenzie still walks right up to me, trying to take my hand, but I step back out of her reach.

"Please, Cole. I didn't mean anything that I said! I was just so angry, and he was acting like I was only making decisions to make you like me," she says, the words spilling from her at a desperate speed.

I shake my head and walk past her to go to the front porch, not wanting Harper to hear us. Plus, the fresh air will probably be good for me because my head is so tense that it feels like it may explode at any second.

Kenzie follows me, tears now spilling down her face.

"I'd never do anything to hurt you, Cole," she insists.

I want to believe her. I do, but I can't. She's made it a habit of speaking her negative thoughts, and I didn't realize that I was lumped into them. I suppose it's for the best that I know now rather than later.

"I can't believe I thought you actually care about me," I bite out as I shake my head, putting my back to her. I can't even look at her right now because it stings so badly. "But you don't. You're probably just using me. Getting me to prepare this place for Ron to swoop in and take it over. You smiled and kissed your way right into my good graces, didn't you?"

“Using you? Are you kidding? I’d never do that to you! I care about you!” She raises her voice.

I turn and look at her, seeing her eyes narrow in defiance. She can argue all she wants. It makes sense. She was going behind my back to Ron, badmouthing me and conspiring about the ranch. She’s probably going to sell it to him!

And the first thing that he’s going to do is kick me and Harper out of the ranch house.

“I knew you were going to blow up my life. The moment you stepped foot on this ranch... I just knew everything was going to change,” I grit out.

Kenzie almost seems to flinch at my words, but she hardens her expression and her stance.

“I’m not coming after you, Cole. I didn’t want to be here. I didn’t like the ranch until you showed me how to enjoy this place! So, maybe I wasn’t enthusiastic about being here before, but I’d never do anything to put this place or you in jeopardy,” she swears to me.

It feels like I keep being kicked in the chest or a brick keeps falling on me every other second. All I know is it hurts, and I wish I didn’t get so hooked on her. Why did I have to fall for someone who can hurt me so badly?

“Well, everything is in jeopardy, Kenzie! And it’s all resting on your decision,” I snap, the stress getting to me. I’m nervous about what’s going to come next for me and Harper. Will we

have to scramble to find a new home? I'll have to find a new job, and we'll have to start over.

I don't want us to have to go through that, but it's down to Kenzie, and I don't think I can bring myself to believe that she has our best interests at heart. She's from a place where they only think about themselves, and she'll probably toss the ranch aside and pocket the money.

I don't want to believe that. That doesn't sound like the Kenzie I've come to know, but can I really trust that version of her after what I heard her say to my rival at the party? If I didn't hear those words, would she keep up her lie around me for a little longer?

Kenzie glares at me as she steps closer to me.

"Tell me something, Cole. Are your intentions pure when it comes to the ranch? What are you hiding from me?" she asks.

My heart rate spikes as I wonder why she's asking that. My reasons for being so devoted to the ranch don't even matter in the grand scheme of things, and that involves more soul baring, which I no longer want to do in front of her because I'm not sure I trust her anymore.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Did Ron say something?" I ask her. "Do you listen to everything that comes out of his mouth?"

Kenzie scoffs at me as she crosses her arms over her chest.

"You're ridiculous," she huffs. "He seems to know you pretty well."

“He’s a snake, Kenzie. He feeds people lies and sneaks around to find out information. You can’t trust someone like that,” I tell her as our eyes meet. It’s not magical and warm like usual. It’s tense and uncomfortable.

“Well, he seemed to insinuate that you’re not one to be trusted,” Kenzie states, pursing her lips slightly.

I laugh in a cold manner and shake my head.

“Wow, you’re one to talk,” I reply. “What were you even doing talking to him in the first place? Did you dress up all nice for him too?”

Kenzie looks like she just got slapped. She swallows hard and backs away from me, her hands resting on her midsection.

“No, I dressed like this for you!” she snaps. “I did everything... for you.”

My heart stops for a second as we stare at each other, our anger melting into somberness. She did it for me?

A tear breaks from Kenzie’s eye and trails down her cheek until she hastily wipes it away.

“But it doesn’t matter, right? You’re already set in how you feel about me. My six months is up, and so are we,” she tells me in a sharp, quick tone like she’s trying to get through her words before she breaks down. She whips around and storms into the house, leaving me on the porch with a look of shock written all over my face.

Part of me wants to run after her, to bring her back out here to talk, but I think her mind has been made up. The hope I had

for us shattered right in front of my eyes, and all I can feel is sadness and dread. All of the words I said ran back through my head, and I already regret so many of them.

What if she was being honest? What if she didn't mean those words and actually cares about me?

All of that affection is probably gone now, and I doubt that I can bring it back. Before it really had a chance to begin and thrive, our love story had its pages ripped out and burned. How can I repair burnt pages?

How can I fix something that we both ripped to shreds?

All I can do is sink down and sit on the porch, my eyes growing hazy as I fall back into my troubled thoughts. I don't know if I made the right moves, the right decisions. I don't think I've ever felt so lost before, unsure of what direction to even turn toward.

Maybe I'm destined to be stuck in place. I've lived that way for years. Maybe moving forward with my life with someone by my side just isn't in the cards, and I was setting myself up for heartbreak the moment I imagined something serious with her.

I drag my fingers through my hair, my black suit jacket feeling constrictive around my body. The thing is... I dressed up for her too. I planned to kiss her again, to whisper the truth of my feelings to her against her soft lips.

Instead, I'm ending tonight feeling absolutely hopeless, and I don't think there's a fix for that.



~\*~

At six the next morning, I hear a thud from the foyer, making me stumble out of bed half-asleep. Dread eats at every cell in my body as I hurry out of my room and go to the foyer only to see no one there. My heart thuds heavily as I glance around, wondering what that noise was.

Harper's door is still cracked, so I know it's not her moving around. No one has ever broken into the ranch house, so it's not an intruder. It has to be Kenzie up doing something, and that makes me nervous and even more uncoordinated than I already am.

It doesn't help that I hadn't been able to sleep well last night and only just managed to fall asleep an hour ago, making my eyes ache and feel heavy from exhaustion. Last night had been one of the worst nights I experienced in a while, but I'm determined to try to smooth things over before Kenzie leaves to go back to New York.

Even if we're both upset and unsure about things, we can't leave things like this. Not after all we had been through. She has to think the same thing, right?

My question is answered when I hear a car engine starting outside. My eyes grow wide as I hurry to the front door, throwing it open just as Kenzie's car tears down the driveway and turns onto the road heading out of town. I run out onto the porch, but it's too late.

I'm too late.

“Kenzie...” I breathe out, my heart sinking as her car disappears from sight.

Just like that, she’s gone from my life, and I don’t even know if I’ll ever see her again. I suppose after the terrible things I said to her last night, she doesn’t want to be near me again. Can I really blame her? She tried to explain herself, and I shot her down at every turn.

If I can go back to that moment, I would’ve calmed down. I would’ve had a better discussion with her until we were both comforted and positive about what to do next. Instead, we yelled at each other and pointed fingers at each other, burning away the trust and affection we shared for months.

It’s all gone, leaving me feeling empty. Lost. Broken.

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## *Chapter Sixteen: Kenzie*

I only invite Chase and Leigh Ann to the final reading of PapPap's will. It's not even a reading. The lawyer should just mail me a envelope. I'm not sure why this guy has to make a ceremony out of everything. Probably to pad his bill. I'm glad my mom's not here. I just can't handle any negativity or judgmental comments that she may make about the ranch or my time there. I'm already on the verge of my breaking point, and my siblings can easily notice how tense I am.

We grew up together. We can read each other in silence, able to note the way our expressions twitch or our eyes glaze over when we're in thought. Honestly, I'd rather be all alone right now in my apartment in New York, but I'm ready to get this final reading over with.

I'm tired of wills. Expectations. Inheritances. My life being uprooted should've produced better results than what ended up happening. What happened to my happy ending? Chase and Leigh Ann found the love of their lives and got to keep them. I met mine, and I lost him.

Despite everything that happened, I do still love Cole. I'm distraught over everything that happened a few days ago between us. All of the miscommunication. The secrets he won't share with me. The blame being passed back and forth. That's not us.

What happened to us?

My eyes burn with tears as I stand in my bathroom, staring at my reflection in the mirror. Chase and Leigh Ann are in the living room, waiting for Mr. Palmer to show up with the will. I don't mean to abandon them for so long, but I just need a moment to myself.

I release a shaky breath, my eyes squeezing shut. I can't help but wonder what Cole is doing right now. Does he miss me? Does he regret our stupid fight?

Or is he relieved that I'm finally gone and not screwing up his life?

A gentle knock sounds on the bathroom door.

"Kenzie? Mr. Palmer is here," Leigh Ann says softly.

I sigh and run my hands over my face and into my hair, wishing that I had a few more minutes. I don't feel ready for this, but I can't reschedule. I have to breathe through this and figure out what to do with my life now.

I'll have more money than I know what to do with, and I'll have a ranch that I still don't know what to do with. Maybe it'll be less painful if I just sell it to someone random and cut

all contact off with everyone from that town. Maybe I can pretend like the last six months didn't even happen.

If only things were that easy.

"Coming," I reply as I open my eyes. I draw in a steady breath before walking out of the bathroom.

"Are you okay?" Leigh Ann asks in a quiet voice while Chase talks to Mr. Palmer in the living room.

I shake my head.

"I lost him, Leigh Ann," I murmur. "I shouldn't have left so suddenly, but I was so hurt. The thought of looking at him or Harper made me break down. I thought some distance would help, but it just hurts me even more knowing how far away we are from each other."

Leigh Ann frowns and pulls me into a hug, rubbing my back in a comforting manner.

"I know. I'm so sorry," she tells me. "It doesn't mean things have to be over, though."

I bury my face in her shoulder.

"I don't know if we can salvage what we have. I don't know if he even wants to," I murmur.

"Would you put in the work to fix it?" Leigh Ann asks me.

I think for only a second before lifting my head as we break apart.

"Yes," I reply. I want him to be honest with me, but if he's willing to do that, then I can see a flicker of hope for us.

But he hasn't even reached out to me. His silence speaks volumes to me, and I don't want to go crawling back to someone who doesn't even want me back. Part of me regrets not saying goodbye to Cole and Harper, but I know it would've been too painful. I did what I could to limit the pain at the time, even if it still stings now.

Leigh Ann gives me an encouraging smile.

"Don't give up just yet, okay?" she says.

I nod, but my level of hope is still very low. Not much has happened to encourage me to be more hopeful. I haven't heard a peep from him, and we left things on terrible terms. Maybe it really is over.

I struggle to keep my tears at bay as Leigh Ann and I walk into the living room to greet Mr. Palmer.

"Let's get this over with," I murmur, not having the strength to be all that welcoming today. The quicker this is over with, the better for me.

Mr. Palmer nods, always ready to get right down to business. He takes out my grandfather's will.

"As per your grandfather's request, at the end of a six-month period, you will be granted access to a value of \$500,000 and ownership of his ranch," Mr. Palmer tells me.

I nod, knowing all of that. I have to wait a little while to actually receive the money, but at least I know it's coming. Now, I'm a ranch owner as well. All of this should've made

me happy, but all I feel is a heavy weight on my chest. When I think about the ranch, all I can think about is everything I lost.

Mr. Palmer then reaches into his bag and pulls out an envelope with my name scribbled on the front in PapPap's handwriting.

"He also wanted you to have this," he says.

I narrow my eyes in confusion as I take the envelope from him. I can only assume it's a letter, but I have no idea what he would write to me.

"Thank you," I reply before placing the envelope on my lap, deciding to read it later when I'm alone and can process it better.

Mr. Palmer nods before zipping up his bag.

"I'll stay in contact with you during the process of getting your inheritance money to you. We'll also get started on putting your name on the ranch's deed," he tells me.

I rise to my feet and shake his hand. I wish this process was already over, but I know it takes a long time. Eventually, I'll be free from this whirlwind and can move on with my life, even if I have no idea what that looks like now.

Once Mr. Palmer leaves, I sit back down on the couch. Leigh Ann sits next to me, and Chase occupies the loveseat. Both of them stare at me, waiting for me to speak.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about the ranch," I admit.

If I sell it to Cole, I'll have to talk to him in person, and I don't know if he'll want that. If I keep the ranch, I'll have to go back there and get some affairs in order. Of course, I wouldn't kick Cole and Harper out.

However, there's also the option that I sell it to someone else and cut ties with that place completely. I just don't know which one is the best option. Nothing is clear to me anymore.

"I know it's a hard decision," Chase tells me. "But you don't have to decide immediately."

"You should take your time," Leigh Ann encourages me with an agreeing nod.

I sigh and shake my head, raking my fingers through my slightly tangled hair. I need to brush it and shower and clean my house. Everything just feels so hard lately, even the little things.

"I should've already made a decision by now," I reply. "I can't wait too long. Once it's in my name, I have to act on it."

"That'll take a little time," Chase reminds me. "Just breathe and sleep on it. Remember what I told you six months ago about having problems that are not really problems?"

What is even talking about? This has nothing to do with my sudden windfall. I feel like I'm stuck in the middle of a terrible nightmare. Am I doomed to be trapped here forever?

"It's not supposed to be this hard," I murmur, mostly speaking to myself.

Leigh Ann places her hand on my shoulder.



“We’re here for you. We can help you decide,” she offers.

I give her a grateful look, but I shake my head.

“I need to make this decision myself,” I tell her. “I just don’t know what the best move is.”

I want to be happy, but I want Cole and Harper to be happy too. Is it possible for all of us to be happy, though? That’s the question that I can’t clearly answer.

“Maybe this will help me decide,” I say as I hold up PapPap’s letter to me.

Chase and Leigh Ann both nod.

“Maybe it will,” Chase replies. “He was always good at giving advice.”

“Even if it was a little crazy,” Leigh Ann adds with a light laugh.

A hint of a smile crosses my face as I nod my agreement. He was an eccentric, thoughtful man, who I was lucky to have had in my life. His loss struck me hard, and it’s bittersweet going through this will process. Reminders of him are everywhere, and we talk about him so much, even if he’s now gone.

“There’s a lot about him that I don’t understand. Like why he gave me this ranch,” I tell them. “But I know that he loved us.”

“He only wanted the best for us,” Chase replied. “Your moment is coming.”

He must be talking about the moment when Chase and Leigh Ann both realized how incredible their lives had become thanks to PapPap's help. I hope that I experience that moment too, but I'm admittedly not that optimistic at this point.

"We'll see."

After Chase and Leigh Ann go home, I sit in my bed and stare at the envelope, feeling nervous to even open it. I don't know what advice PapPap is going to give me, but I really hope that it helps because I've never felt so lost before. How do I find my way back to where I'm supposed to be?

Is that the ranch? Is that in New York?

After drawing in a deep breath, I slide my finger under the seal to open the envelope. I pull out a folded sheet of lined paper and straighten it out, my heart stopping briefly at the sight of PapPap's slightly scribbled handwriting in black ink.

I focus enough to have the lines and curves form letters, and I start reading.

*Kenzie,*

*It's hard to put all that I want to say in one letter, but I'm sure you're wondering why your crazy old PapPap gave you a ranch when your siblings received something so different. I know that only you will appreciate the ranch like I want you to. You've always searched for a sense of home. A place where you belong.*

*I know you think it's New York. Maybe it is, but sometimes to realize where you belong, you have to be in the wrong*

*places too. All I want is for you to find that place, so I think you'll benefit from being pushed out of your comfort zone.*

*It's out of love. I promise. You may find the things you've been looking for in the unlikeliest of places, so keep an open mind. And open yourself up to love that you aren't expecting to find. It very well may be the piece missing in your life.*

*I love you, kiddo.*

*PapPap*

I don't realize that I'm crying until a sob breaks from me. I place my hand over my mouth to stifle the sound as my vision blurs. His words turn into hazy shapes that I can no longer make out. I wipe my tears and read over his letter again, hearing his voice speaking those words in my head.

He knew me more than I know myself. He's always been observant. Patient. There are things missing in my life, and he noticed those with ease when I didn't realize them or ignored them. But now I have to face the fact that there's a lot of love missing in my life.

I get it from my family, but I'm missing the love that Chase and Leigh Ann experience in their lives with their partners. I believe I found it in Cole, but it seems lost now. All I can think about is the fact that I messed up and disappointed PapPap when he was just trying to help me.

I ruined it all, and I can't help but feel like I don't deserve the ranch any longer. It's such a painful reminder now of what

I lost and how I failed, and PapPap thought he could trust me with it. Turns out he was wrong.

As tears continue to roll down my face, I fold the letter up and place it on my nightstand before curling up beneath my blankets, wanting to disappear. New York is supposed to feel like home, but my mind travels back to the ranch and all of the happy moments I experienced there.

It pains me to know that I didn't know the last happy moment I had there was indeed my last one. I replay those memories over and over again in my head. The laughter. The smiles. The kisses. The fantasies of a happy life with Cole and Harper.

All of it. Gone.

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## *Chapter Seventeen: Cole*

**T**he ranch has never felt so empty and quiet before. I go through the morning tasks in complete silence, dragging myself along with an empty feeling in my chest. I can't get Kenzie out of my mind, and I can't shake the regret and guilt I feel over how we left things.

I should reach out. I should call her. But she made it clear that she didn't want to talk to me when she snuck out of the house and booked it back to New York without a goodbye. She didn't even say anything to Harper, who bawled when she found out that Kenzie suddenly left. She truly believed that Kenzie would stay.

I wish that she did.

I haven't heard anything about the fate of the ranch, so I keep going through the daily motions until I hear news. I'm on the verge of being a nervous wreck every day because I'm just waiting to be told that Harper and I have to leave this place behind. I fought so hard to get here. I can't just leave.

But what choice will I have?

She'll most likely sell the place, especially after our fight. It's not like I can blame her. I ruined her perception of this place, and it'll probably just be a bad memory that leaves a sour taste in her mouth now. Things certainly feel different around here now that she's gone.

I continue working, stuck in my head, until I hear a car pull up the driveway. I peek around the ranch house to see my mom's Highlander, prompting a sigh from me. I told her what happened yesterday because she called to invite me, Harper, and Kenzie to dinner over at her place. Needless to say, she's not happy.

My mom gets out of her car and walks over to me with a somber look on her face.

"She's really gone? You haven't heard from her?" she asks me.

I wish I could tell her something different, but she'll only hear the truth from me. I'm too tired to lie.

"No, she's gone," I reply.

My mom sighs, her shoulders sinking. She then reaches out and pulls me into a hug.

"I'm sorry," she says as she rubs my back. "Come on. Let's go inside and talk."

I nod and lead her into the house to the living room. Harper is in her room. She doesn't play as loud and energetically as

she did when Kenzie was here. We're both heartbroken by her sudden departure, and pained by a lack of closure.

Once we take a seat on the couch, my mom angles her body to face me more.

"You said you two had an argument," she says.

I lower my gaze as I nod.

"Yes. I look back on it... and I shouldn't have said half the things I said to her. I blamed her for using me. For trying to instigate behind my back with Ron Dalton," I tell her, shame filling me to the brim. I regret so much of what I did and said that night. What was I thinking?

"Why?" my mom asks.

I shake my head.

"She told Ron that she only sees me as a caretaker. That she won't stoop so low for my affection," I reply, the words stinging as they come out. "But she told me that she didn't mean them. That he inferred that she only makes decisions to make me happy so that I'll like her."

My mom nods as she listens.

"If that's true, it sounds like it was just a lack of judgment. Does she actually treat you like that?" she asks. "Because from what I saw, she looked at you with a spark in her eyes. She cared about you."

My face softens. I want to believe her words since they're from an outside source and not just my own head.

“No, we had arguments at the beginning, but we kept getting closer and closer. It was obvious that we liked each other. Then, I fell in love with her,” I admit. “And then, I heard her say those things before I could tell her about my feelings.”

My mom frowns and pats my leg.

“That must’ve been very hard. But do you believe there’s a possibility that she was telling the truth?” she asks me.

“Now, I think so,” I reply. In the heat of that past moment, I didn’t believe it, but now that I’m thinking clearer, it seems more likely.

“This may just be a big misunderstanding. You need to talk to her,” my mom urges me.

I know that she’s right, but a part of me wants to hold back. What if I bare my soul once more, and she denies me? What if she has already moved on or if she truly meant those words? My heart would be stomped on all over again, and I don’t know if I can bear that pain again.

“I don’t know. She snuck out and left without a word. She didn’t want to talk to me,” I reply as I shake my head.

My mom sighs and scoots closer to me.

“You’re holding yourself back, honey. Why are you doing that? It’s obvious you care about this girl. I haven’t seen you this connected to a person in a very long time,” she says.

I clench my jaw for a few seconds, steadying myself. It’s hard to answer that question, but I know the reason is buried



way down deep in my mind where I don't want to venture to. It's dark in there.

"You're worried about moving forward with your life, aren't you? You don't want to fall in love and get hurt again," my mom states, knowing me far too well. "That's why you're drawing away and giving up on her."

I look up at her and nod in silence. There's nothing more to say. She basically covered it all.

My mom gives me a sympathetic look as she takes my hand.

"You've already fallen in love, sweetie. This girl can make you very happy, but you can't give up on her. You have to go after her if you truly love her," she tells me.

"What if she turns me away? What if she doesn't want to be with me?" I ask her. That's my biggest fear.

"Then, you'll know that you did all you could," my mom tells me. "It may not make you feel better right then, but it will in the future."

I remain silent for a few seconds, thinking about her words. Perhaps, she's right. Maybe I need to endure a little more pain now to have a more peaceful future. At least I can say that I tried.

"I don't want to lose her. I don't know what I'll do," I say, not even wanting to think about that possibility. However, it continues to haunt the back of my mind like a bad memory that I can't shake.

“You’ll have to move forward. You’ve always had trouble with that,” my mom tells me. Her tone is soft, but her words are firm, saying exactly what I need to hear.

I’ve been in denial for so long, dragging my feet through life in fear that I’ll move too quickly and get caught up in another bad situation. It’s just cowardice on my part, and it’s not good for me or Harper. I need to be better than that.

“Daddy?”

I look over to see Harper standing at the entrance of the living room with a frown on her face. I hold my arms out to her, inviting her to hurry into my arms so that I can hug her.

“It’s okay,” I say. I really hope that things will turn out okay.

Harper sniffles a little as she shakes her head.

“I miss Kenzie,” she cries.

I rest my chin on the top of her head as I keep her in my hold, petting her hair gently to try to soothe her.

“I know. I do too,” I reply, glancing over at my mom, who peers at Harper with sadness and sympathy.

“Why did she leave?” Harper asks.

“We had a misunderstanding. We’re different people, and sometimes, those differences can lead to arguments,” I explain to her.

Harper wipes her tears away as she peers at me.

“Can’t you apologize and make things all better?” she asks.

My mom lifts her eyebrows at me. It seems like they both support my next plan of action. I also want to try to talk to Kenzie for the sake of my daughter and the ranch. I need answers because being in the dark this much is torturous.

“Maybe. Things are complicated,” I tell her.

“But you love her. Right?” Harper asks. “I know that she loves you because she wanted to look nice for you at the party.”

My heart thuds. So, that part was true. That could mean the rest of what Kenzie told me is true too, which also means I’m a huge jerk for not hearing her out. I was so caught up in my own thoughts and pain that I didn’t even give her a chance.

“I do,” I admit.

Harper grabs my arm and gives me a little shake.

“Bring her back, Daddy,” she tells me.

I gaze at her, feeling my mom’s eyes on me as well. The pressure is intense, but my next move seems clear to me now. I have to try, but that’s easier said than done. I don’t want to just call or text Kenzie and try to work things out. I need to be with her in person, but I don’t know how to get her to come back here.

I have to go to her.

I lean closer to Harper, placing my hands on her shoulders.

“What do you think about taking a trip to New York City?”  
I ask her.

Harper gasps in surprise, an excited smile crossing her face.

“Let’s go!” Harper cheers.

I grin, a spark of hope flaring inside of me. If this works, things can be just as I hoped for them to be. I don’t have to lose anything. I don’t have to go through heartbreak again. Things can be perfect!

But I need to talk to Kenzie first and hope that she hears me out. She may slam the door in my face or deny me anyways. The only way for me to find out is to go there and take a chance, which is exactly what I’m going to do.

Sitting here and feeling sorry for myself doesn’t fix anything. The days will continue to crawl by, and I’ll just stay miserable, wallowing in my hurt feelings. No more. I’m going after the woman I love.

“Alright, go get your suitcase out of the bottom of your closet. We have to pack,” I tell Harper, giving her a little nudge to encourage her to run to her room.

My mom smiles at me and squeezes my wrist.

“I’m proud of you, honey. I know you’re going to win her back,” she says.

“It won’t be easy,” I warn her. I don’t know if I’m going to come back victorious or not. All I can do is try my best and hope for the best afterward. It’s down to Kenzie if she wants to give us another chance.

My mom pats my cheek in an affectionate manner that warms my face.

“Nothing special and important in life is easy to come by,” she replies. “That’s why it’s so rewarding to have it.”

I smile a little and place my hand over hers. She’s right, and I’m willing to fight hard for what I want. And that’s Kenzie.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say sincerely. Her talk helped me realize what I needed to do.

My mom then rises to her feet and waves me off.

“Now, go pack! You need to get to New York,” she tells me.

She’s right. I need to get moving because it’s a long drive, and the clock is ticking. With each minute that passes, I lose her even more.

I can’t be too late again. I just can’t.

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## *Chapter Eighteen: Kenzie*

**T**he doorbell rings unexpectedly.

I look up from laying on the couch, a movie I'm not really watching droning on the television in the background. I have no idea who is at my apartment in the middle of the day, but I take a guess that it's Mr. Palmer bringing by some paperwork to sign. I'm going to be the official owner of the ranch any day now, but I can't find the will to be celebratory right now.

I still haven't made a decision, but I'm leaning more toward selling to a stranger who agrees to let Cole stay on as the caretaker and live in the house. That person may be hard to find, but I'll just hire a real estate agent to do the work for me.

My mind is way too occupied to focus on much lately. I told my clients that I'm on vacation for a week so that I can take the time to rest and recuperate from all that happened. The thought of Cole and Harper stings each and every time, but they're probably better off without me.

With a sigh, I haul myself to my feet, a strand of my hair slipping out of my messy bun as I walk to the front door in my sweatpants and a tank top. I feel like as much of a mess as I look. After unlocking the door and pulling it open, I want to slam it shut a second later.

“Ron! What are you doing here?” I hiss, grabbing the edge of the door so tightly that my knuckles turn white. He’s the last person that I want to see right now.

Ron puts his hands up innocently.

“I just want to talk,” he says. “I came all this way.”

“Trust me, you didn’t have to. I have nothing to say to you,” I bite out, wanting him to turn around and leave before he ruins something else of mine. “How’d you find me?”

“Nearly everything about a person is public information if you dig deep enough,” Ron replies with a wry grin.

Something about him puts me off, making my skin feel uneasy. He’s different beneath his smiley face and charming grin, and he can’t trick me anymore. I feel bad for the people who haven’t figured him out, though. They have no idea what they’re getting themselves into when they get involved with Ron Dalton.

“Alright, leave,” I tell him as I start to close the door.

Ron puts his hand up against the interior side of the door to keep me from shutting it.

“Now, hold on a second. I just want to talk, okay? Can you at least give me five minutes?” he asks with a pleading look on

his face.

I glare at him for a moment before sighing and gesturing for him to speak. I'm not letting him inside my apartment, though.

"Sell the ranch to me. Name any price. Any conditions," Ron says.

I grind my teeth quietly, wishing he would just leave me alone. I'm already having a hard enough time figuring out what to do without his constant pestering. I can't believe he came all the way here to try to convince me again. He's determined.

Annoyingly.

"You won't treat the ranch with the respect it deserves," I tell him as I cross my arms over my chest.

Ron sighs, tilting his head back and seeming as annoyed with me as I am with him.

"It's a piece of land with animals and machines. It's not a person," he replies. "What do you want? Do you want me to let your boyfriend and his kid continue living at the ranch house? Is that your main condition? Because I can make that happen."

I find myself pausing for a second. That was my main condition. If he was willing to grant it, he could take the ranch off my hands. Maybe he'd even let Cole have a say in what happens to the ranch, but that's wishful thinking. I know how Ron is, and I doubt that I can trust him.

"You'll just go back on your word," I say.



Ron shakes his head.

“We’ll draw up a contract. You have a lawyer, right?” he asks.

I quietly nod, realizing that he’s really serious. He may be willing to compromise, but something tells me that selling to him still isn’t the right decision. I decide to keep feeling him out, though, and seeing how far he’ll go to meet my requirements.

“You can’t turn around and sell the ranch for a profit. You have to take care of it,” I tell him.

Ron nods.

“Alright, done,” he says before holding his hand out to me with a grin on his face. “Do we have a deal?”

I stare at his hand, part of me itching to agree just so that I can let go of the ranch and the memories that come along with it. Will that really soothe the ache, though? What about the guilt that will follow once I shake his hand?

“Wait!”

My heart feels like it shoots up into my throat as a familiar voice sounds behind Ron. I lean to the side to peer behind Ron, my jaw falling open at the sight of Cole and Harper rushing toward my house.

“What in the world?” I murmur to myself, wondering how they’re all here right now.

“Don’t shake his hand. Don’t make a deal with him. I promise you’ll regret it,” Cole says as he stands next to Ron, holding Harper’s hand.

I look down at Harper, seeing a hopeful look on her face that makes my heart skip. I really missed both of them. However, I have to deal with the situation at hand.

“Don’t listen to him,” Ron scoffs as he shoots Cole a glare.

“He just wants money,” Cole says, his eyes meeting mine. “I know you’ve grown to like the ranch. We had a lot of good times there. Remember the oak tree? Falling in the mud? Our kiss on the porch?”

All of those memories come flooding back to my mind, a warm feeling blooming in my chest.

“I couldn’t ever forget,” I reply, seeing a small smile cross his lips.

“Seriously? You can’t really be falling for this, right? Has he told you the truth?” Ron asks before sneering at Cole.

I almost forgot that Cole has been keeping secrets from me. Before I can even ask him what they are, Cole steps closer to me and starts talking.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you about my history with the ranch. Before your grandfather owned it, my family did. It’s been ours for generations. But I moved to Denver to go to law school after my family helped me pay for it. Then, Harper’s mom died. We decided to move back home only to find out that my family sold the ranch to pay off the

debt they were in from paying for my first year of law school,” Cole says, spilling everything to me with an uneasy glint in his eyes.

A shocked look fills my face as he reveals a past that I had no idea about.

“They sold it to your grandfather. I tried to buy it back, but he didn’t want to sell. He let me be the caretaker so that I could stay close to it and have a place to raise Harper,” Cole continues before looking over at Ron. “Your grandfather refused to sell to Ron because he would just use the land however he wanted to make a quick profit.”

I narrow my eyes as I look over at Ron, who has a hard, steely expression on his face.

“Now that your grandfather has passed, Ron is trying to manipulate you into selling to him,” Cole says.

Anger burns beneath my skin as the realization hits me like a train. All of Ron’s condescending and tricky words run through my mind, and it’s obvious to me now what he’s been trying to do. He wasn’t just trying to be a businessman. He was trying to be a snake, just like what Cole tried to tell me.

“You really think that I’m that spineless?” I ask Ron in a sharp voice.

Ron puts his hands up innocently.

“I tried to give you a good deal. I tried to give your grandfather a good deal, but both of you are so stubborn,” he

grits out as he shakes his head. “Have fun drowning in debt over those acres of junk.”

I glare after Ron as I watch him get in his car and leave. At least I’m done dealing with him, but that doesn’t mean my problems are done with yet. I look over at Cole and brush a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“Why are you here? Did you know Ron was coming here?” I ask.

Cole shakes his head.

“No, I didn’t. I think him being here at the same time proves that I made the right decision coming here. We need to talk,” he says with a hopeful look on his face.

“About what?” I reply, still guarding myself just in case. The last few days have been full of hurt, an ache that I can’t shake. I don’t want him to pile on top of it.

Cole holds his hand out to me.

“Us,” he says, his soft gaze being the essence of inviting.

Tentatively, I place my hand in his, feeling a magnetic pull between us.

“You didn’t believe me when I told you that I didn’t mean those words,” I reply.

Cole shakes his head at himself.

“And I should’ve. I wasn’t thinking straight,” he tells me. “I’m sorry, Kenzie.”

My heart skips as I look down at our joined hands, noticing that Harper smiles at the sight.

“I’m sorry too. I said things I didn’t mean,” I say. “I think we both made mistakes that night. We didn’t hear each other out.”

Cole nods in agreement as he moves closer to me.

“There is one thing I didn’t get to say to you that night,” he says.

My breathing seems to cease as I gaze up into his eyes.

“What?” I ask.

Cole cups my cheek and smiles.

“I love you, Kenzie,” he tells me. “And I don’t want to be without you. Just these last few days without you have been some of the worst of my life. I want you back. We want you back.”

I glance down at Harper, who peers up at me with a pleading look in her eyes. My gaze shifts back to Cole as my heart flutters over and over again, his words running on a loop in my mind. I can’t believe he actually said them!

“I love you,” I say as I place my hand on his chest, slowly inching up toward the back of his neck. “So much.”

Cole’s smile brightens before he leans forward and presses his lips against mine in a sweet kiss that makes me melt on the spot.

Harper claps happily, beaming brighter than the sun.

I laugh softly into the kiss as I rest my hand on the back of Cole's neck, holding him close to me and never wanting to let go now that he's finally here with me.

"I'm so happy you're here. Both of you," I say as I lean down to hug Harper.

Harper squeezes me tightly.

"I thought I'd never see you again," she admits.

I stroke her hair as a feeling of relief fills me whole. What happened that night is in the past for me. All I care about is the future and how I want them in it. I didn't feel at home when I returned to New York City, but I feel at home now with them.

Suddenly, all of my questions on what to do next are answered.

"You don't have to worry about that," I tell her before straightening up and facing Cole. "I'm going to keep the ranch. Actually, I want you to own it with me."

Cole stares at me with pure shock written all over his face.

"Seriously? Does that... are you staying at the ranch?" he asks, hope gleaming in his eyes.

Just by how hopeful he looks tells me that I'm making the right decision. I don't feel that kind of love here in New York. I feel it wherever he is, and he was right earlier. I did come to love the ranch and all of its little details and our memories engraved in every inch of it. I don't want to leave that behind.

"If you'll have me," I tell him.

A relieved smile breaks across Cole's face as he sweeps me up in his arms.

"Of course!" he says, holding me close. "I want you with me."

I wrap my arms around his neck, warmth spreading through my entire body. My heart rate remains quick as pure happiness consumes me whole. I can't remember ever feeling like this before. Like I'm on top of the world.

"Then, it's settled. You're stuck with me," I say as we smile at each other.

"Sounds good to me," Cole replies before pecking my lips. "Now, I just need to take you back home."

"I'm ready," I say before glancing around. "I don't belong here anymore."

Cole follows my gaze.

"It is a nice apartment, though," he tells me.

"It's so small!," Harper shouts.

We both laugh and I take a look around my tiny one-bedroom home. Before I went to Georgia, I thought this place was a palace. Now, I agree with Harper. It's time to move on.

"This isn't home to me, anymore" I say.

My mind shifts back to PapPap's letter to me. All along he was right, knowing exactly what I need. Finally, I understand because I found the love I've always been missing. And I'm never letting it go.

“What do you think, Harper? Ready to go home with Kenzie?” Cole asks her.

Kenzie nods excitedly before wrapping her arms around us, joining our embrace.

“Yes!” she exclaims.

I laugh and place my hand on her back, bringing her even closer as we all hug each other. This is true happiness. True paradise.

And my true home.

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## *Epilogue*

*O*ne year and a few months later

Chilly winds blow over the ranch, making the windchimes hanging from the top of the porch ring. There's nothing more peaceful than a cool winter morning with an overcast sky. My eyes sweep over the land as I stand on the porch of the ranch house, bundled up in a flannel shirt and jacket with my jeans and boots.

New equipment is neatly stored near the shed that was recently renovated with a brand new roof since the old one was rusting. More storage was needed since Kenzie and I invested in more supplies to keep the ranch in tip-top shape. The number of animals we had doubled as we started taking in abandoned ones, acting on my ideas that I've had forever.

Being able to see everything take shape is so satisfying. It looks like a new and improved ranch compared to how it looked a year ago. I just can't believe it, and it's all thanks to Kenzie.

When she broke her lease and moved out to the ranch with her inheritance, we made a plan to put money into the ranch, even starting a garden. Between the animals and the garden, we produce enough products to make a good living.

But it's never been about the money to us. We sell our goods cheap to the people of this town because they've been endlessly supportive of our ranch and our business. We even ship goods throughout the state and region, which is completely thanks to Kenzie.

She's kept up a successful blog about her life on the ranch, talking about her experiences and giving tips and advice for others interested in the farm or ranch life. She also runs our business's Instagram and has garnered a lot of attention for us.

It took a few months for us to properly align our skills and set up a plan, but once we did, everything started running smoothly. We believed in our goals, and we believed in each other. That was all we needed to reach the success that we celebrate and enjoy today.

The boom of our business just further proved to us that we make an incredible team and that we're better together than apart. I also haven't seen Harper this happy in a very long time. She's become so close to Kenzie, and the two are essentially inseparable. They get ready in the morning together, and Harper has taken an interest in photography that Kenzie has been excited to help her with.

I haven't felt this complete in such a long time, and I'm just glad that I finally let love back into my life. I took that chance,

and it paid off tenfold. I can't imagine my life without Kenzie, and I never have to worry about that possibility.

I can hear laughter from inside before the front door of the ranch house swings open. Harper walks out onto the porch with a cup in her hands.

"We made you coffee, Dad," Harper quips as she turns to smile at Kenzie, who follows her out on the porch.

My eyes immediately drop down to Kenzie's growing baby bump, my heart warming just at the sight. When we found out that Kenzie was pregnant five months ago, we were ecstatic, having talked about possibly starting a family just a few months earlier. Now, Harper is going to be a big sister, which she is beyond ecstatic about. She's been such a big help getting the nursery ready.

"I miss coffee," Kenzie laughs as she holds a cup of hot chocolate in one hand and my cup of coffee in the other hand. She hands me the coffee before pecking me on the lips. "Good morning, honey."

"Morning, honey," I say back, shooting her a wink that makes her smile wide. Man, I love that smile. I love this woman. "Harper, got your things ready for school?"

Harper nods.

"My backpack and lunch box are right inside," she tells me before sitting on the porch swing to enjoy her hot chocolate before school. It's like she's grown up so much just over the

course of a year and some months. It's too fast, but I'm also really proud of her.

“Robert is coming over to pick up those crates of goat milk,” Kenzie tells me as she stands by my side.

I nod. Robert is one of our regular buyers in town. He sells a lot of our products at his general store.

“It's ready in the storage fridge,” I say, having prepared the cases last night.

We have a few people who come by and help during busy seasons and for big orders, but I still handle most of the manual labor around the ranch. Kenzie takes charge of the business and financial affairs. We developed a system that runs perfectly.

“You know, Robert used to be a client of Ron's,” Kenzie informs me with an amused look on her face.

“Oh, boy,” I chuckle.

Ron hasn't been doing the best lately. He made a string of bad investments that cost him a lot of money, forcing him to sell a big chunk of his land just to keep himself afloat. Karma certainly came for him, and he luckily leaves us alone.

Kenzie and I focus on our work, our family, and our community. We've moved on from a past full of drama, stress, and miscommunication. Honestly, we've grown a lot, but the best thing is that we've grown together. There's nothing like a shared experience with the love of my life.

“I think I hear the bus down the road. Go ahead and grab your things, Harper,” Kenzie tells her.

Harper nods and finishes up her hot chocolate before heading inside.

Kenzie rubs her stomach with her free hand.

“Is he kicking again?” I ask her.

Kenzie smiles and nods, taking my hand and placing it over a certain spot on her stomach.

The feeling of my son kicking inside of her makes my heart race. We’ve come so far over the course of a year, and I can only see us going even further. We have so many years left in our lives to do anything we pleased, and having a child together is one of them.

“I can’t believe it,” I murmur as I shake my head in disbelief.

Kenzie kisses me on the cheek.

“Believe it. He’ll be here before we know it,” she reminds me.

That makes me a little nervous because it’s been a minute since I’ve raised a newborn. However, I’m mostly excited to have this experience with Kenzie and to watch Harper be a big sister to her little brother. It’s going to be amazing.

“Alright, I’m ready,” Harper says as she hurries out of the house with her backpack on her back and her lunch box in her right hand.

“Let’s go. Just in time,” I reply as I hear the bus get closer to the end of the driveway. We all walk to the bus stop together like we usually do before Kenzie and I start on our daily tasks.

“Are we still having roast for dinner?” Harper asks.

“Absolutely,” Kenzie says.

Harper makes a victorious fist.

“Yes!” she replies. It’s her favorite dish that Kenzie makes.

Kenzie laughs, smiling in a warm manner. She’s been so good to Harper, which just makes me love her more.

Once the bus stops on the road at the end of the driveway, Harper hugs us both.

“Bye!” she quips before hopping on the bus.

Kenzie and I remain next to the road, our eyes trailing the bus until it’s out of sight. She then looks over at me.

“For Christmas, I think we should get her a camera. A good camera,” she tells me. “What do you think?”

I nod in agreement.

“I think that’s a great idea,” I reply, knowing that Harper will freak out in excitement when she opens that gift. I place my hands on her waist and pull her body close to mine, her stomach pressing against mine. “And what do you want for Christmas?”

Kenzie cracks an amused smile as she curls her arms around my neck. She hums under her breath in thought.

“A pond with a bunch of ducks,” she says.

I playfully scoff at her, having heard this request a million times already. Little does she know, I've already started talking to a company about digging the hole for the pond. It would be a nice touch to the ranch, and of course, I want to do anything to put a smile on her face.

“Any other requests?” I ask.

Kenzie shrugs as she smiles up at me.

“I've got everything I've ever wanted,” she says. “There's nothing left to ask for.”

“Just the pond and ducks,” I tease her as we sway on the spot.

Kenzie laughs and nods.

“Yep,” she quips before tilting her head at me.

“Well, I already got a present for you.”

“What?,” she says, as I lead her toward her favorite tree.

“Close your eyes.”

“Oh no, what in the world are you up to Cole Boseman?”

“No peeking.”

I take her hand and place her finger on the bark.

“Open.”

She gasps when she sees the newly carved heart with our initials inside, just below the original heart with my parents' initials.

“I love it, I love it, I love it,” she says while wiping away tears.

“And I love you. Thank you.”

“What is it with you and that old oak tree...”

Kenzie smiles and leans in to kiss me, her fingers sliding up into my hair.

My hands rest on the small of her back, holding her body against mine. I can stand there and kiss her forever, enjoying the softness of her lips and how they curl up in a smile. It’s the cutest thing.

We break away after a few seconds, knowing that we have a lot to do. Morning is our busiest time of the day. We prefer to get most of the work done then so that we can relax later in the day with Harper when she gets home from school.

“Since we’re giving Robert most of our goat milk supply, want to help me milk Betty?” I tease her.

Kenzie smirks and rolls her eyes at me.

“Absolutely not. She hates me,” she replies.

“No, she doesn’t hate you,” I insist. “She just hates being milked.”

“You can have fun with that,” Kenzie says.

I chuckle and hold my hand out to her.

Kenzie slides her hand into mine, a gleaming engagement ring and a sleek wedding ring adorning her finger.



I remember our wedding like it was yesterday, even if it was six months ago. We held it on the ranch at the back of the property where the field is clear. We had plenty of kind people offer to help set up the area, and one of our favorite restaurants in town catered it. The people we were closest to all showed up that day to witness our love becoming official.

I relive that day in my head all the time, remembering how beautiful she looked in her sleek, lace-top wedding dress with its long train. She looked like a queen, one who I'm extremely fortunate to have in my life. If we could get married all over again, I'd do it in a heartbeat just to see her walk down that aisle again.

"What are you thinking about?" Kenzie asks as we start to walk back to the house together, our hands remaining joined.

"Our wedding," I tell her, coaxing a pink tint to light up her cheeks. She looks back on that day as often as I do, and we bring it up quite often. "You looked so beautiful."

"You looked quite fetching yourself," Kenzie says, winking at me.

I chuckle and pause once we reached the porch. Honestly, this is my favorite part of the property. We shared our first kiss here. So many memories linger in this one spot, and I plan on making many more with her and the rest of my growing family.

"I love you, Kenz," I say as we turn to face each other, both our hands joining now. It's like we're back at our wedding,

gazing into each other's eyes with pure love and adoration in them.

"I love you," Kenzie replies with a look of awe on her face. "I always will."

"Promise?" I ask with a teasing grin.

Kenzie laughs a little, but her expression turns more serious as she nods.

"Promise," she replies. "No matter what."

That's what makes us destined to be together. We've gone through so much since we met each other. We went from being at odds with each other to being in love, and I treasure every moment we've shared together. I wouldn't want to experience them with anyone else but her.

"You've made this place feel like home to me," Kenzie tells me as she steps closer to me. "And I can't imagine myself being anywhere else but right by your side."

"Good. Because I'm not letting you go ever again," I promise her. The moments we were split apart were the most painful, and I never want to hurt her again when she means the world to me.

All I want to do is love her. Cherish her. Protect her.

Because she's mine, and nothing will ever come between us ever again.

*Also By*

**Thanks for reading Cole & Kenzie's story!**

**You're going to love the next book in this inheritance series, which follows Kenzie's brother CHASE. On his 30th birthday, Chase finds out that in order to secure his inheritance, he has to find a bride within a year. The business-minded Chase cuts a deal with a financially-strapped waitress so he can earn husband status without locking down his heart. Oh the best-laid plans...**

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This is a summary from the main character, Leigh Ann:

**Last Friday at 10 am, I was broke and brokenhearted.**

**Less than an hour later, I found out that I'm an heiress – sort of.**

**All I have to do to claim my inheritance is complete a task or two in Ireland with my grandpa's handsome lawyer, Jake Hartford. He also happens to be a pilot...with a really attractive face...did I mention that already?**

**Too bad he's a grump who acts like he would rather be anywhere else.**

**Given my history with men, Jake is way out of my league anyway.**

**I'm convinced the only thing we have in common is our love for my PapPap, but by the time we reach the Cliffs of Moher, I catch this man staring at me (I think?), cracking a smile at my joke attempts and even opening up about his troubled family.**

**It's starting to feel like PapPap was matchmaking all along, but I have to wonder – is Jake more interested in getting to know me or getting his hands on my bequest?**

Can't wait to share many more sweet romances with you in  
2023!

— Audie

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