



A DARK  
ENEMIES TO LOVERS  
ROMANCE

**TWISTED**  
**WITH** *a Kiss*

**BB HAMMEL**

# Twisted with a Kiss

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*A Dark Enemies to Lovers Romance*

BB Hamel

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# Trigger Warning

This book contains graphic descriptions of sexual content, explicit violence, and descriptions of off-page SA. These scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth experience, but may be triggering for some readers.

Read at your own risk.



# Chapter 1

## *Melody*

“**T**hey’re going to love you today, Bomber,” I whisper and my favorite horse lets out a breath like he believes me. “You’re going to do so perfect. They’ll probably change your name, but you don’t mind, do you? And your new owners are going to love you as much as I do. Well, maybe not as much, but close. And I promise, no matter what happens, I won’t forget about you. Maybe I’ll even come visit someday. Would you like that? I’d like that too, yes, I would. Okay, big guy, you’re going to do so great.”

As I finish up and turn from the stall, Kat steps into the barn and gives me a little wave. She’s pretty, curvy, late twenties like me, with brown hair and dark eyes, and she owns the entire farm along with her extremely wealthy husband. But back before they got married, Kat was just another friend from my old job, and now I’m here, working for her instead. Which was a good decision on my part, since this new gig came with a lot more money and basically no oversight. Kat looks good, nice and healthy. She’s wearing black and brown with a little scarf tied around her neck, and she’s grinning as she hurries over. “You finishing up your pep talk?” she asks.

“You can joke all you want but I swear they do better if I chat them up first.” I step out of the stall and lean against the gate. “Is he here yet?”

“Just pulled up and parked. Ford’s out talking to him right now.” Ford’s her husband, a rich guy from a rich family that doesn’t *quite* understand the horse business, but he loves that it makes his wife happy. And anyway, that’s what I’m here for. I

pretty much run the place these days, and Kat's content helping out where she can and going for long rides when we're not busy.

"What's the buyer's deal?" I ask and brush some hair from my face. "You haven't told me much about this one."

Kat slips her arm through mine and leads me toward the far end of the barn. Through the big doors, we'll parade Bomber out and show the buyer what the racehorse is capable of. Which is a lot, but they'll see. I've been working with Bomber for the last few months and he's one of the fastest horses I've ever seen in my life. If he doesn't end up winning his fair share of races, I'll probably retire here and now.

"I don't know much," Kat admits. "He got in touch with Ford. I did the usual due diligence and there weren't any red flags, but there's not much of anything on him at all. He's new to horse racing, and I really don't know what to make of it, but Ford says he's good people."

I pause at the entrance and tap my finger against the doorframe. "You sure it's a good idea, selling to a new owner?"

"He seems legit. He provided all the right references, had proof of stable, all his certifications—" She runs a hand through her hair and her face is clouded with doubt. "Still, I don't know. If I'm honest with you, something seems off."

I quell a growing sense of unease. "Let's meet the guy and get a feel for him, all right? If he seems shady, we'll just claim Bomber broke an ankle or something."

"Yeah, all right. It's just that, he seems too perfect, you know what I mean? He's a new owner just getting into the racing business but it's like he's got everything just right. When I'd expect someone new to seem a little bit..." She trails off, gesturing in the air.

"New?" I offer. "Disorganized? Disheveled?"

"Yeah, exactly."

I laugh and take her arm as we head into the paddock. "Maybe that's a good thing. What's the guy's name, anyway?"

“Warren Temple. He’s apparently Ford’s distant cousin, which is how he got in touch to begin with, but I don’t really understand the familial connection or whatever. Maybe that’s why I’m so suspicious. Anyone from Ford’s family is a real piece of shit, in my mind.”

I laugh lightly but a bell’s ringing in the back of my mind. That name *Warren Temple* sounds so familiar, but I can’t quite place it and I don’t know why. It’s possible I know someone related to Ford, considering we grew up in the same general circles, but they would have to be from my long-buried past, and I’ve worked very hard to avoid anyone connected with my old life and my old world. As far as I’m concerned, I was never that girl, and I act like I don’t know anything about people like Ford and his family. I act like I’m just another working-class girl from a rough-and-tumble Midwestern town. More lies, more stories. Layers to keep the real world away from what I was. But it keeps me sane and safe, and it’s hard to let go of the narratives we weave to define who we are.

An unease deepens in my gut and I try to ignore it, try to focus on the cool breeze blowing through the short-clipped grass and the horses grazing in the distance, but I can’t shake this feeling.

Something feels off about that *name*.

We reach the far fence and spot Ford coming toward us. Kat’s husband is a big guy, handsome if you’re into the muscles-and-tattoos type, which isn’t exactly my thing, but Ford’s charming and outgoing and treats Kat right, so he’s a good guy in my book. Walking beside him is the new buyer, and a sudden spike of chilled fear runs down my spine and lodges in my feet, my toes tingling with a sudden anxiety.

Warren Temple is around Ford’s height. He has light hair cut short and pushed back, a square jaw, a crooked nose, full lips, and although I can’t see them from where I’m standing, I know his eyes are a strange, piercing blue color, like the ocean in the middle of a solar eclipse. He’s in slim navy-blue slacks and a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled at the elbows showing off black tattoos. Where Ford’s blocky and muscular, the buyer is slouchy and slim, athletic but in a toned

and easy sort of way, like he spends all day swimming and rowing and playing polo. He walks with confidence, struts and glides like he knows everyone's staring at him and he doesn't mind it, and his eyes stare straight ahead—stare straight at me.

The men reach us and stop. The buyer's smile quirks at the edge of his lips and I take a step back away from the gate. Ford says something and gestures at the man, and Kat introduces herself to him, but my heart's racing so fast in my ears I feel like I might throw up.

"Hello, Melody," the buyer says and steps forward, grinning now. "It's nice to meet you."

"*War?*?" I blurt out in a sudden fit of confusion. "What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

Everyone stares at me like I've gone insane. Which is fair, considering the situation. Everyone except for War. He only looks amused, that same old smile, the look like he couldn't care less about anything at all, like the world's a game and he loves to play, but never bothers to think about winning or losing.

Memories, old and long dead, the sort of memories I've worked hard to bury, swirl back to the surface. My days at Jameson Prep, those dark days in that ugly little school, and a boy everyone called War. A boy everyone loved, a boy even the faculty adored. Tall, slouchy, outgoing. A loud, bombastic laugh. The class clown. A troubled boy. A boy surrounded with rumors and problems and excuses and pain. A string of broken hearts. An asshole and a thief and a bully. A boy that was my friend one second and gone the next. Now suddenly back from the mists of my long-past life like he never disappeared.

Last I saw War, he was a gangly fifteen-year-old taking puberty in the face like a hungry tiger. Even with the bad skin and the too-long legs, War was handsome in a boyish way. Now, he's even more gorgeous, tanned and lean and fit, with clothes that must cost a small mortgage and a smile that suggests he's at home pretty much anywhere he goes. This is the sort of man that expects the world to get down on its knees

and to give him exactly what he wants, and the sort of man that gets it. Even back then, War was magnetic, and everyone claimed him as a friend, but nobody was actually close with him. I can't remember ever seeing War outside of school as if he didn't exist after the last bell rang. War was a mystery. But even back then, I was smart enough to keep my distance.

"You know each other?" Kat asks, sounding confused.

"We go way back," War confirms and glances at Ford. "I didn't realize she was *the* Melody."

"How do you know each other?" Ford asks, shading his eyes.

War nudges his cousin's shoulder. "We went to school together. Remember that awful prep academy my parents shoved me into when I was a kid?"

Ford makes a face. "How long did you last there? A semester?"

"Two years," War says and glances at me. "I met Melody toward the end of my tenure at that lovely institution."

By now, I've gotten myself under control. It's not like I left things in a bad place with War back in the day—frankly, we were never that close, more like decent acquaintances that chatted in the halls and during classes but not much else—it's only that I try very hard not to let that life leak into this little world I've built for myself, and any reminder of the person I used to be is beyond unwelcome. But War's not the problem, and if he's here to buy Bomber then I need to suck it up, get myself together, and slap a smile on my face. I have a horse to sell.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have reacted like that," I say and step toward him, thrusting my hand out. "It's good to see you again, Warren."

He makes a face and shake my hand. "Please, keep calling me War. That name stuck, you know."

"Suits you," I say, and his palm is strong and dry and warm.

"Well, should we go take a look at the horse?" Ford asks.

“I’d like that,” War says, “but maybe Melody can take me alone. She’s the trainer, right? No offense, Ford, but I get the feeling you don’t know a thing about horses.”

“You’re not wrong,” Ford says with a laugh.

“She’s the head trainer and practically manages the whole place,” Kat confirms and glances at me. “Are you good with that?” Her expression suggests that it would be okay if I wasn’t.

But this is just a business deal and there’s no reason I can’t handle War on my own. Show him Bomber, put the horse through the usual paces, and be done with this. I can go back to my comfortable lies when War’s gone, like he was never here at all.

“Fine,” I say a little too brightly and unlatch the fence. “Come on in, I’ll take you over.”

“You sure?” Ford asks, eyebrows raised. “I don’t mind coming with.”

“Don’t get your pretty shoes dirty, Ford,” War says with an amiable grin and walks over to me. “Honestly, Melody’s an old acquaintance. We can catch up while we talk business.”

“Works for me,” Ford says. “We’ll just go over the paperwork and make sure everything’s in order.”

Kat steps out of the paddock and leans against her husband. He puts his arm around her protectively. They watch as I shut the gate behind War and begin leading him toward the barn. He walks alongside me, hands in his pockets, eyes glancing over like he’s waiting for me to say something, but suddenly all my words are lost and forgotten and gone.

I feel off-kilter, like the whole field’s suddenly tilted to one side. I left Jameson only a year after he did, well short of graduating. I don’t know what he ended up doing after and we didn’t keep in touch—my life took a weird turn and I worked very hard to distance myself from that entire existence, the beginning of all my stories—but seeing War again isn’t altogether terrible. It brings up a lot of ugly memories, but none of them have anything to do with him.

War was just a boy. A handsome, likeable, outgoing, troubled boy—but just a friend. We talked in math class, hung out in the hallways, shared jokes during gym, and yeah, there was some flirting, but it was the normal flirting all young kids with enormous and wild sex drives with no real outlet inevitably fall into. We were friendly, but our friendship never extended outside of school and that was always okay with me. Especially considering the rumors about him.

“You were hard to track down, you know,” War says softly as we approach the barn.

And I grind to a halt as his words pierce into my skull.

War turns to me, squinting in the sunlight, head tilted. His smile is gone. He studies me like he’s curious about something, like he’s trying to find a clue to a puzzle. I take a step back, heart racing again, that stick in my throat. I smell cut grass, animal musk, reeking old hay. I try to ground myself and keep from freaking out, but it’s not working.

“What do you mean, I was hard to track down?” I say very slowly, hoping that I’m misinterpreting him.

“I’ll admit, I’ve gotten my hands dirty doing some pretty ugly jobs over the years, but I don’t think I’ve ever had to walk into a barn before.” He makes a face and kicks some stray twine lying in the mud. “Seriously, Melody, you’re still into the horse shit? I figured you’d grow out of that.”

“*War*,” I say sharply. “What are you talking about? Were you—Were you *looking* for me? Is this some weird reunion? Are you even here to buy Bomber?”

“You named the horse Bomber?” He makes a face and I want to scream. He doesn’t even know Bomber’s name? “No, I’m not actually here to buy the horse.”

“But the paperwork—the proof—” I’m stuttering now, my brain glitching as I try to put this together. War looms over me, still not smiling, still staring into my face like he’s desperate to read my mind.

“All bullshit. All to get close to you.” He sighs and leans up against the wall, tilting his head back. His Adam’s apple bobs



and his eyes stare down at me. “Honestly, Melody, it was a real pain in my ass, tracking you down. But imagine my surprise when you were hiding in plain sight under my good cousin Ford’s care?”

“I don’t understand. If you wanted to talk to me, you could’ve just—”

He interrupts. “Called? Texted? Emailed?” He lets out a sharp breath. “Would you have responded? Honestly?”

I open my mouth and my jaw works before I nod my stubborn head. “Yes. I would’ve.”

“Liar,” he says and seems delighted, and he’s not wrong. “You went to all this trouble to disappear. Kept your name, sure, but you’re not online, you’re not on any social media, no websites, no addresses, nothing. I found an article about this new little horse breeding venture—” He gestures at the barn and the paddock beyond it. “—And saw you standing in the back of a picture. I only bothered clicking because Ford posted it, and Ford’s always posting the most inane shit. The paper didn’t even mention your name, but I recognized you. Even after all these years. It was pure and stupid luck.”

“*Why?*” I gasp at him. I feel like my head’s floating away. “Why are you here?”

“Four months ago, your father hired me to find you,” he says simply like he’s delivering a lecture on history. “I’m supposed to take you home.”

I back away from him. My hands come up and wave in the air like I can make him disappear. This can’t be happening. This can’t be real. War’s supposed to be some random piece of my history—painful maybe, but harmless—he’s not supposed to be connected with my family, the people I’ve been hiding out from all this time.

He doesn’t move, only watches me, and I think about turning and running, but what will Ford and Kat think? I can’t just ghost them and I can’t just abandon everything I’ve built here, not like I did when I ran away from home back in the day—that was too violent, too painful. I gave up everything and

rebuilt my life and I'm finally, *finally* starting to feel like I have friends and a family and a purpose again at this farm with Ford and Kat and everyone else—and I can't just turn and vanish.

Except the thought of going home makes me want to scream.

"I won't," I say, my voice shaking. "I'm not going back. I don't care what my father told you, I'm not going back."

War's face softens. His smirk disappears and he pushes off the wall, coming a step closer, but stops when I flinch. I recognize the way he's leaning toward me, like I'm a spooked horse about to bolt, and he's afraid that one wrong move will set me off, and he's right. I'm on the edge of panic. I feel it building in my chest, bleeding into my limbs. War's lovely mouth opens and I hear crickets screaming in my ears, eating at my skull, ripping my brains to mush.

"Melody, your father's dying," he says and I think a piece of my spine cracks as I back away. "I'm sorry. It's true. You need to go home."

I stare at him, my mouth open, his words like fists pummeling my skull, trying to flatten me, bloody me, kill me—

I turn and sprint away, running out across the field, deeper into the grass, and as far away from War as I can get.

## Chapter 2

## *War*

**T**he bar's dim and quiet. Basketball plays on a flat-screen in the corner. Nobody's watching. Only a few other folks sit hunched over their drinks, everyone keeping their distance from each other. I sip the beer in one hand and lean on my elbow, head propped in my other hand, spinning a coaster around and around. I'm in denim and a jacket, not quite blending in with this local dive, but not standing out, either. That's how I like it—invisible until I'm not.

The bartender brings me another when I finish. I suck the head off and glance at the TV, watching the shapes flash down the court. I don't really see anything—I keep thinking about the look on Melody's face when I mentioned her father.

I expected anger. I expected sadness. Instead, there was a deep, horrible terror, like I told her vampires were real, and they're coming to town tonight, and they feed exclusively on girls that like horses. She turned and ran so fast I thought she might trip over and hurt herself, but she kept on going, deeper into the fields, over a fence, and away.

It was the most bizarre thing I'd ever seen.

Over the years, I've delivered bad news—but I've never seen someone actually run away.

Ford didn't know what the hell to make of it. I tried to write the whole thing off as some joke, but I doubt he believed me. His wife kept giving me this hard, skeptical stare, not that I can blame her. I wiggled my way out of the paperwork, claiming illness, and they didn't press. They're smart people—

they can smell a liar, even if I'm very good and they're not totally sure what I'm even lying about.

With me, it's always a fair bet to assume the worst.

A person takes the stool next to mine. I glance over and Melody's sitting with her back straight, her face pale, her jaw set like she's facing down a very painful surgery but determined to be brave. "Want something?" I ask her and she orders a soda water and lime when the bartender comes over.

"I'm not staying long," she says and glances at me, turning the glass between her hands. "I just wanted to come and tell you not to contact me again."

I nod to myself, not surprised, and keep on looking at her. She doesn't like when I stare. She's probably not used to having someone from her old life around again considering the steps she took to sever ties. But it's hard to keep my eyes off her. Melody was always pretty—soft, full lips, dark hair and dark eyes, with a lovely figured even back then—but the years have hardened her, chiseled her down into something leaner, something tougher. Gone is the baby fat I remember, the freckles, the awkward bangs. Melody's a woman now, a beautiful woman, with sun-browned skin and sharp eyes and a fuck-you glare like a whip crack. It's attractive and totally unexpected. She looks like she can take a punch. She looks like she can dish one out.

Women like Melody, they don't end up working on horse farms. Oh, they ride horses, they preen over horses, they do all that stupid horse shit, but they don't end up training animals.

Women like Melody from good families with lots of money marry respectable hedge fund managers and pump out babies and do Pilates and get lip injections.

Except Melody's not like that at all. Whatever she is now, she's something of her own making, and an intense curiosity's keeping me here in this stool.

"I figured that's what you meant when you ran off the other day," I say and try not to smile. If it wasn't such a pain in the

ass, it would've been hilarious, watching her sprint down the field like I was the specter of death chasing after her.

She grimaces and stares at her drink. "I shouldn't have done that, okay? That was pretty embarrassing. You should've seen the look Ford gave me when I came crawling back."

"What'd you tell him?"

"I said I had to go get sick."

"That's the story I used too. I guess we're in sync."

Her smile is grim. "No. We aren't."

I rock my glass from side to side and watch the liquid nearly slosh over the edge. "I've never told someone their dad's dying before. I figured you'd have some questions, maybe cry a little bit. Never imagined you'd run."

She picks up her drink and studies it. "You clearly don't know my dad very well then."

"I guess not."

"I'm not going back, War." She glances at me and puts the drink back down. "Not now, not ever."

"Okay. I hear you."

"No, you don't. Why are you here? Why didn't my dad send someone else? Like a cousin or—" She shakes her head, looking frustrated. Looking scared.

I don't answer right away. It's a good question, and I'm not sure how to explain it. Melody's been outside of our world for a long time now and I don't know how much she remembers, but the wealthy folks of Texas are obsessed with their reputations. They'll do anything to make themselves look better, but life isn't always clean and lovely and perfect. Sometimes, bad things happen, ugly things, nasty things. Sometimes, bad people are necessary to take care of the garbage. "I take jobs," I tell her.

Her eyebrows raise. "Most people do. Except people like you. You know, people with trust funds."

I sip my beer. “Let’s say I found myself in a position where I can’t turn down an opportunity. There are certain things men like your father want done, but they don’t want anyone to find out about it. That’s where I come in.”

Melody groans. “You’re a fixer for rich people now?”

“Oh, well, I guess it’s not that complicated after all.”

“God, I’m just another job for my father, even when he’s dying.” She looks at her hands like they might tell her something. I can’t imagine what she wants them to say—that she’s not related to that man? Or that the stories in her head about their relationship aren’t true? Or a thousand other pretty lies she can keep on telling herself, all the nice little narratives she can weave to make herself feel better.

“He really is, you know,” I say and look straight ahead, into the mirror behind the bar, gauging her reaction. “Dying, I mean.”

Her lips press together. “I don’t care.”

“Cancer. The bad kind.”

“I don’t want to know the details.”

“He’s got months, if he’s lucky.”

“War. Stop it.”

“I’m just doing my job. Once you hear me out, I’m finished. I can head on back, report to your dead dad, cash one of his final checks, and wash my hands of this. Until the funeral. But then again, I doubt I’ll go.”

Her jaw tenses. “Don’t be a fucking asshole,” she snaps. “Are you really such a callous prick? You’re really going to talk about my dad like that?”

I tilt my head. “I didn’t think you cared about him.”

She hunches forward and takes a deep breath. There’s a long pause before she says, “He’s still my dad, okay?”

“Okay.” I take another long drink. “You should go see him while you can.”

“I told you already, I’m not going home.” She glances at me.  
“Why do you care so much? Do you get a bonus if you bring me back?”

“No,” I say and that’s only a half-truth, my favorite kind of truth.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not going. I’m sorry my dad’s dying, I really am, but—” She shakes her head and doesn’t finish.

I try to imagine how she’s feeling. Lost, alone, confused. Angry as all hell. Whatever happened back home must’ve been hell to push her away like this. She worked hard to escape her old life and now that old life’s trying to drag her back with its stinking claws. Guilt’s racking her, but that’s obvious. Hate’s there too, and I don’t know why. Nobody told me why Melody ran off, and I didn’t ask. I didn’t really care.

Now, sitting here with her, seeing the hard girl she turned into, staring at all the smoke and mirrors she placed around herself, I’m curious.

She looks just like me.

Lying to herself. Lying to everyone else just to get by.

“Did you ever graduate?” I ask.

She seems startled by the question. “From Jameson? No, I left the year after you did.”

“We have that in common then.”

“I got my GED but ended up working on a few farms. You know, since I grew up on a ranch. It’s good work. I like it, I guess.”

“I’m happy for you. How’d you end up with my distant cousin?”

“I know his wife, Kat, from a different job.”

“Lucky you, friends with an Arc and a Stockton.”

“Lucky me,” she echoes and sighs. “I’m sorry if this messes you up. And I’m sorry if it seems heartless. But I’m really not going home.”



“You keep saying that,” I say and finish my beer. I toss some cash on the bar, enough to cover my drink plus whatever she wants. “I’m not as callous as you think, you know. I understand family stuff can be complicated.” I hesitate as I stand, waiting, waiting, and there it is. She glances at me, face guarded, but curious.

“Is that why you take jobs now?” she asks.

I laugh and lean closer to her. She smells like mint and perfume, and I feel a sudden rush into my chest. She got dressed up for me. Cream blouse that clings to her body. A necklace, earrings. She looks like the polar opposite of the hard, sun-beaten girl I saw back at the farm. Melody’s got a quiet strength about her, and if I didn’t know her from back in the day, I’d assume she was just another kick-ass Texan girl with blood like barbecue sauce and an itchy trigger finger. But I’ve met the real Melody, or the Melody she used to be, and I don’t know how she ended up like this, but I find myself wanting to know more.

“How about we make a little trade,” I say softly, making her lean in closer to hear. I want her lips inches away from mine. Those plump, soft lips. I wonder if she has much time for men. I wonder if she misses a pair of strong hands on her hips. A thrill runs down my spine, an excitement in my guts. “You tell me a secret and I’ll tell you one.”

“Do you have a lot of good secrets to offer me?”

“More than you can guess.”

Her mouth tugs into a smile—and she puts her palm into my face and shoves me back.

“Fuck off,” she says and leans forward on her elbows. “Not interested.”

I can’t help the laugh the breaks from my chest. God, what a woman. The old Melody would *never* have done something like that, but this one seems *almost* comfortable asserting herself. I want to trace my fingers down the back of her neck and listen to her mouth open and her throat gasp before I reach back up and pull her hair. I wonder if she’s really as strong as

she's pretending. I wonder how long it would take to peel away the layers of lies and stories and falsehoods. I wonder if it would be faster than peeling off her clothes.

"I get it, you've got issues back home," I say and step toward the door. "As much as you probably hate me right now, I'm only the messenger, and here's the message: your dad's dying, and if you want to say goodbye, now's your chance."

"I don't want anything to do with him," she says but she's staring down at the bar like it's the bottom of a deep, echoing well.

"Yeah, sure you don't." I turn away. "I'll be in town for another few days if you change your mind. You have my number."

I start to leave but her hand flashes out. Her fingers grip my wrist and I pause, glancing down into her eyes. For a moment, the old Melody's there: soft, sad, afraid. But it's quickly replaced by anger.

"Don't show up at the farm again," she says. "Do you understand me? Don't pull that fake certification bullshit again, either. You could get in trouble for that."

"I'll see what I can do." I arch my eyebrow at her hand. "Are you coming on to me or is this a power move?"

"You haven't changed a bit," she says, letting me go, and I hesitate. For some reason, that hits me hard. The War she knew back in school was a slacker, a kid that cared more about feeling girls up behind the bleachers and selling shitty weed than getting decent grades. But that War's long gone now, buried under years and years of struggle.

"You haven't either," I say and walk off, leaving her to think about what she wants.

Because I know one thing.

There's no way in hell I'm leaving the Dallas area without Melody.

Maybe she doesn't know it yet, but she's coming home with me, one way or another.

# Chapter 3

## *Melody*

I don't care about my dying dad.

I keep telling myself that, over and over. I don't care about him. I don't care, I don't care. I say it, again and again, staring into the mirror: I don't care about my dying dad. I don't care about his low, rumbling laugh, or the way he'd heft me up into the saddle, or the sound of him breathing as we'd sit out back and drink iced tea and read books, and it never quite works. It never quite convinces me.

I put some force into it. *I don't give a flying fuck about my dying dad.* That doesn't help.

I make it sound like I'm begging. *Please, please, I don't care, please don't let me care.* That makes it worse.

Nothing turns off the churning emotions rolling in the depths.

But I need this story. I need this lie.

Otherwise, I might do something stupid—like break the one rule I've had ever since I walked away from my old life at Leader Ranch.

The day after my barroom meeting with War, I throw myself into work. I show up earlier than usual to get in some extra chores, even the dirty stuff I hate doing, but keeping busy is the only thing that guarantees I won't think about home. There's nothing for me back there, and the day I ran away is the same day I decided I'd never see the ranch again, never speak to my father or my uncles or my aunts or my cousins, especially not my cousins. Even if it killed me to walk away,

even if it felt like cutting off a limb, I did it. I stood up for myself and went through a nightmare, the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and every decision after that stems from that single moment, from that single choice.

I won't go home. I won't ruin all my struggle and toil and pain.

I won't care about my dying dad.

He's been dead to me for years.

But even hard work only gets me so far. By the middle of the afternoon, I'm exhausted and covered in a sheen of sweat, and I can't stop picturing what things must be like at the ranch. My father, my big, towering father, always so large, always so loud, a big mustache, a thick beard, always in jeans and a denim shirt, always slightly dirty from the fields, with those rough hands and that deep laugh and that ever-present cigar. He was the heart and soul of Leader Ranch, the grease in the wheels, the brains behind it all. Everyone must be broken up about what's happening to him, and I wonder if everything's getting done or if my worthless cousins stepped up to fill the slack, or maybe my lazy uncles—

But no, it doesn't matter.

Dad's dying. I don't care. Him and his stupid cigars.

I used to tell him smoking would kill him one day. Back when I was a cheeky teenage girl without a care in the world.

He'd laugh and rustle my hair and tell me not to worry.

It's a miracle he lasted this long.

It's an impossibility that he'd go at all.

I find myself in Bomber's empty stall. He's out with Nicky, one of the other trainers, and I stare at the phone in my hands. I don't know why I'm doing this, but my fingers dial the old number that reaches the black landline in the office, the phone only one person ever answered back when I was there. I haven't heard her voice in a very long time, and I have no clue if she's still working there or if she'll be the one to pick up. I'm nervous as I listen to the ringing, and I nearly throw my

phone on the floor in shock when that familiar drawl comes over the line.

“Leader Ranch, Renee speaking.”

I clear my throat. My heart’s racing. My past is coming down the line like a ghost. Haunting me.

“Hi, Renee. It’s Melody.”

There’s a short pause. I can imagine the old ranch hand’s face: weathered and lined, her red hair tucked up in a loose bun, her flannel shirt rolled to the sleeves, her bright eyes shocked, a smile on her face. That was a decade ago now. She must be ancient, and heck, still working. Good for her.

“Melody? That really you?”

“Been a while, huh?”

“It’s good to hear from you,” Renee says with a laugh. “God, Melody, how long’s it been?”

“I’m not sure,” I lie. I know how long, down to the day. “How are things there?”

Another pause. This one’s more loaded. “Well, you know,” she says cautiously. “Things change. Listen, Melody—”

“I heard about Dad,” I say before she tells me. Renee’s one of the few people from back then I don’t still hate. She’s the only one that ever listened to me, the only one that took me seriously, even when everyone else said I was only making crazy accusations to get some attention. I loved Renee for that, even if she couldn’t do anything about it, and I still do. She made mistakes, nobody’s ever perfect, but I never held them against her.

The relief in her voice breaks my heart, because that means it’s true. “I’m sorry, kid. I really am. You know how we all feel about your old man.”

I do, and that’s part of why I left and why I can’t go back.

Colton Leader was a man without peer. He was a real rancher, an old-school rancher, the first one up in the morning, the last one done with work in the evening, always out among the

horses, out with the cattle, out digging ditches and mending fences and laughing with the workers and doing what needs doing. Colton Leader was magnetic, like the winds that whipped down through the grasslands, like the smell of fresh flowers drifting through the air on a lazy afternoon, like hard rain against harder rock. Colton Leader inspired loyalty and devotion. Colton Leader gave as much as he was given.

And now he's dying.

"How is he? Really that bad?" I ask, almost hoping for some other answer.

"Really that bad," she confirms. "Lung cancer. The ugly kind too, I guess. He's not... your dad's doing the best he can. Are you coming home to see him? I know it's been a real long time but—"

"No," I say sharper than I intended.

But she doesn't sound surprised. "That's all right. I'm just happy to hear from you."

"How's everything else? How are—" I almost ask about Uncle Lovett and Uncle Dudley and all my cousins, but I can't make myself speak their names.

Renee seems to know who I mean. "They're all right. About the same as they were, which, well, you know how that goes. We've been holding it down the best we can—" She stops short and clears her throat. Silence falls, and I hear a lot in that silence.

Holding it down the best they can—but it's hard to keep a body running without its heart, and Leader Ranch without Colton Leader is flesh and no spark.

The silence stretches. I wish I hadn't called. This was a huge mistake—not only because I can hear the pain in Renee's tone and sense that something's going wrong back at the ranch, but also because hearing her again makes me miss home so fiercely it's like thunder in my chest. I told myself I wouldn't do this, and now that I am, I wish I could take it all back.

"Listen, I just called to check in," I say quickly before it gets too strained. "Tell Dad—" I pause, not sure what I want him to

hear. “Well, don’t tell him anything.”

“I won’t, Melody.” Renee sighs. “But he doesn’t have all that much time. If you can come home, even for a little while, and say your goodbyes, that’d be a real good idea. And maybe we can go for a ride like we used to.”

I smile to myself. Renee taught me most of what I know about life on a ranch, about how to handle a horse, how to muck out a stall and tie a knot and everything I hold dear. Renee helped define me. “That sounds nice. I’ll think about it.”

“It’s good hearing from you, Melody.”

“You too.”

I hang up before I start to cry.



KAT SITS AT THE PICNIC BENCH OUTSIDE OF THE MAIN OFFICES and sips an iced tea in the shade. A breeze kicks through her hair and she smiles at me awkwardly and leans forward. “You okay?” she asks. “You’ve been a little off since—”

“Since the incident?” I grimace and nod. “I’m fine.” We haven’t spoken about what happened with War yet and I’ve been dreading this, but I can’t put it off forever. “You probably want to know why I decided to try out for the hundred-meter dash that day, right?”

“More like the marathon.” She grins at me. “Once you got going, nothing was going to stop you.”

I groan and put my face in my hands. “I’m pretty embarrassed, not gonna lie.”

“Totally understand. You literally ran from your problems. Not the best look in the world.”

“Kat.”

“What? I’m not allowed to tease you?”

“No, it’s fine.” I put my hands flat on the table and take a steadying breath. A seed pod swirls down through the air and



lands on the bench by my legs. “War told me something about my family, and it triggered some really bad memories and I sort of lost it a little bit.”

“Your family.” Kat sounds quiet as she sips her drink. “You know, I was really surprised when I found out that you were friendly with Warren back in the day. He’s Ford’s second or third or fourth cousin or something like that. His family has a lot of money.”

“I know,” I say, feeling absolutely miserable and exposed and rotten to my middle.

“And all this time, you acted like you didn’t know anything about—” She gestures around her.

“Rich people?”

“Right. Rich people.”

“I might’ve exaggerated my lack of expertise.” I want to dig a hole and throw myself into it. I want to evaporate into mist. If a tree fell on my head, that’d be a mercy. I hate that I mislead Kat, but I had to do it.

“Why?” she asks, not sounding mad, not sounding like anything more than curious. And that’s Kat. She’s kind and sweet, and I know she’ll forgive me, which only makes me hate myself even more. I’m a selfish lying jerk, and I don’t deserve a friend like her.

“I need to be someone else. No, I *am* someone else. It’s like, the second I left home all those years ago, I was totally reborn and I’ve been working so hard not to backslide into the girl I used to be. So when you’d talk about rich people stuff, I couldn’t admit I knew all about it. If I want to be this person, the person I am now, I had to live the story. I had to *be* the story. And I’m so, so sorry that I lied to you.”

Kat nods to herself and sips her iced tea. I tug on my hair, feeling awkward and nervous and tempted to start running again, but I figured I gave into that bad idea once already and it didn’t have the best outcome, and I might as well avoid that particular embarrassment this time.

At least I learn from my mistakes.

“I understand what you mean,” Kat says and gives me a tight, almost painful smile, not because she seems betrayed or like she wants to tear me a new one—but because she looks genuinely happy. “If you want, we can keep on pretending.”

“Oh, god. I think that’d be even worse now.”

“Are you sure? It’ll be fun. I’ll bring you to a party at one of Ford’s fancy friend’s houses and you can point at people and act like you don’t know anything about boating or polo—”

“I *don’t* know anything about boating or polo.”

“Whatever. You know what I mean.”

“I do, and I’m sorry, Kat.”

She gestures in the air like she’s blowing away smoke. “It doesn’t change who you are, right? I mean, where you come from doesn’t make you who you are now. You’re still Melody.”

My stomach tightens and a lump forms in my throat. I want that to be true so desperately it hurts. “Yeah, totally.”

“All right, Melody. Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead. I owe you that much, I think.”

“Where’d you really learn how to train horses?”

I laugh and fold my arms across my chest. “I grew up on a ranch. On a really nice ranch, honestly. We bred horses, raised cattle, had a few prize cows and bulls and stuff like that. Show pieces mostly. It was my dad’s pride and joy.”

“I guess that explains a lot,” Kat says thoughtfully. “Thanks for answering. I won’t ask you anything else about your past if you don’t want.”

I open my mouth to tell her no, it’s fine, she can ask anything because she’s my best friend and I love her—but I close it again. “Thank you,” I say instead, feeling like the biggest fraud in the world. “But I have a problem. War came here to take me home. He came here to tell me that my dad’s dying.”

Kat’s eyes go wide. “Oh my god, Melody. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t, seriously, it’s fine. I haven’t seen my dad in a really long time and we weren’t on good terms back then. We still aren’t.”

“Are you sure he’s dying? I mean, how long does he have?”

“I’m sure. War says weeks. A month or two, maybe.” I lean forward, hugging myself, and bang my forehead against the table, eyes squeezed shut. “I don’t want to go home back home. I really, really hate it there, and I don’t even know how I feel about my dad, but—”

“But he’s dying,” Kat finishes for me. “And this is your last chance to talk to him.”

“Yeah.” I groan and sit up straight. I look her in the eye and steel myself for what she’s going to say. “What should I do?”

She tilts her head, considering. “My relationship with my own family is a little, uh, *rough*, I think is a mild word for it.”

I grin at that. “I guess we have something in common.”

“Just trying to imagine if I were in your position... I think I’d want to go home. I think I’d want to see him one last time. Maybe he’ll be what you remember and you’ll feel justified in everything you’ve done, or maybe you’ll get some closure on all the bad stuff, or maybe you’ll just get to say bye. But I think I’d want to go.”

“Shit,” I say and lean my head back, looking up at the cloudless sky. “I knew you were going to say that.”

“Sorry,” she says. “Want me to pretend like you should stay away?”

“Yes, kind of.”

“Okay.” She clears her throat. “Hey, Melody, don’t go home to see your father on his deathbed, you’ll totally never regret that! Definitely something people never, ever regret!”

“Asshole.”

“You’re welcome.” She finishes her iced tea and taps the bottom of the glass with her fingernail. “Seriously Melody, I don’t know what happened between you and your family, so I

can't tell you what to do. All I know is this is your last chance."

"Thanks for listening." I stand up and step away from the table. "And sorry again for lying."

"Want me to break the news to Tina? Think she'll take it as well as me?"

I rub my face with both hands. "Can we just not? Do we have to?"

"No, we don't," she says and sounds thoughtful. "I won't say anything unless you're ready, okay?"

"Thanks, Kat. Really, for everything."

"Sure. Just don't run off on me again, 'kay?"

I laugh and turn away, blinking rapidly. I don't want her to see me cry as I walk back to the barn, but the tears are there and I can't stop them.

This is my last chance. I know she's right. And I hate that I have to make this choice, because I've worked hard to avoid thinking about my family.

I'm not that person anymore.

But the past is always there and I can't change it, no matter how many lies I tell myself.

As I reach the fence, I pause and take my phone from my pocket. I compose a quick text and send it to War.

*We're going out tonight. Drinks on me.*

# Chapter 4

## *War*

“Is that an actual mechanical bull?” I squint across the packed bar toward the giant brown and black monstrosity. There’s a bunch of padding set up around it for when whatever drunken idiot inevitably gets flung off in the most awkward and embarrassing manner possible. “You brought me to a bar with a mechanical bull?”

“Absolutely,” Melody says as she accepts the two shot glasses the bartender hands her. She’s in jeans and a denim shirt and looks like she just got off work, and it’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen in my life. Her hair’s down and wavy, her eyes are shining and sharp, and she throws back her whiskey like she was born with a glass bottle at her lips. I do the same and enjoy the pleasant burn in my belly.

She orders two more.

“Got to say, I don’t normally do shots of cheap whiskey in bars with actual mechanical bulls. Are you getting drunk enough to ride it or what?”

“Absolutely not,” she says and grins at me as she shoves the next shot into my hands. “But you are.”

My eyebrows shoot up and before I can argue, she’s throwing her liquor back. I do the same and grunt with frustration. What the hell got into this girl tonight? She seems like a totally different person—carefree, intensely present, incredibly alive. Not the uptight, angry, anxiety-laden girl from the dive the other night, or the morose and quiet and shy girl from back in the day. This is a new Melody—an outgoing and bright and

shiny Melody—and I can't tell if I like it or if she freaks me out.

“There's no way in hell I'm going to climb up on that thing,” I say, scowling at the leather and metal travesty as she takes my hand and tugs me through the crowd. My eyes move to her shoulders, her back, her ass, and, fuck, I'll follow this girl wherever she wants to go—and I'm still not getting on the damn bull.

“How much do you know about my family?” she asks as we claim a high top. She has to stand close and talk loud over the techno-influenced country music blaring through the speakers. It's a godawful nightmarish sound but the beat's all right and if it means Melody gets closer, I don't mind one bit.

“I know the basics,” I say, mouth to her ear. “Rich ranchers. Famous father. What else is there?”

“I mean, right now, what do you know about them right now?”

I frown at her for a second until I understand. “You want to know who's running the place now that your dad is sick.” She tilts her head sideways and stares at me. “I'm not sure,” I admit and put a hand on her hip. She lets it stay there for one brief second before brushing it away.

Melody turns and stares out at the dance floor. She pulls at a lock of her hair, and I don't know what she's thinking, but I can tell she's conflicted. Whatever's going on in her mind, she's wondering about heading home right now, asking herself if it's worth the effort and pain, and all I need to do is stay here and wait. All I need to do is listen, and smile, and laugh, and flirt if I want, and nudge at the right moment.

Then she'll tumble. And I'll have her.

I've done this before. Not this exact thing—the jobs I do are never the same—but something like it. These rich folk, they come to me because I'm one of them, because I can speak their language and fit in at their country club parties, and I take advantage of it. I laugh and smile and tell jokes and know all the right people, and when it's time to roll up my sleeves and

do the things nobody else wants to do, I make it happen. I keep my mouth shut. I cash the checks and move on.

That's been my whole life for years now. One job after the next. Always on the move, never settling down. A woman wants to prove her husband's cheating but has nowhere else to go. A father needs to pawn his top-tier golf clubs to pay for his daughter's rehab. A son needs his abusive asshole stepfather's knees broken. A grandmother needs pills. On and on, their problems are all the same and all different, and they wear on me. They sit in me like rot. I take them on because I need their money, because my clothes and my car and everything about me is a lie, and they know it and I know it, but nobody cares. So long as the work gets done.

And in the rush and tumble of moving from one thing to the next, I never settle down and wonder who the hell War actually is and why I keep doing all this shit.

Melody's not like them. She's not one of the country club girls with perfect hair and straight teeth and all the right friends. She's more like me—keeping her demons at bay with stories. With pretty lies. I have my own method for dealing with my past and my nightmares, my hunger. Melody's another job, but she's a good job at least. She's a pretty job in those jeans, with that anger, with those eyes.

I hate the music, but I like the company.

She turns to me, arms crossed. “How much are they paying you?” she asks.

I almost laugh, but shake my head. “That's confidential.”

“Don't bullshit me. I know they're giving you decent money. How long did it take you to track me down? Weeks, you said?”

“Weeks,” I confirm. “And my rate is competitive.”

She leans closer and jabs a finger in my chest. It's almost seductive, except there's a sharpness in her glare. “What's a guy like you need with *money*?”

I give her a tight smile as a thousand little lies bubble to the surface. I've gotten this question in a dozen different forms



over the years and my usual story comes quickly. “Who says I care about that? Who says I’m not doing this for fun?”

“Guys like you do coke and crash their expensive cars for *fun*. They don’t track down random girls.”

“This one does.”

“Come on. You’re in debt, right? You owe some shady people on some deal that fell through?”

“Not remotely.”

“Drugs? Women? Oh, I bet some girl stole everything you got. Did you fall in love with a jaded stripper with a heart of gold? Did you pay for her lung transplant and her new fake tits?”

I laugh and shake my head. “No, but I’m starting to fall for a tipsy horse trainer with a beautiful ass.”

Her cheeks turn red. “Come on. Give me something. Why did you take this job? What are you even doing here, War?”

I grab her finger and slowly move it away, bending her wrist back ever so slightly, just enough to put some pressure on the joint. Her teeth press together, but she doesn’t yelp. That impresses me the most. She takes the pain. “That’s my business,” I say.

I release her and she glares. “You know *my* business and now I want to know yours. Remember your little offer? One secret?”

I look away. “Offer’s off the table now.”

“How about this.” She gives me a wicked smile and moves close. “If you can ride the bull for ten seconds, I’ll tell you why I left home and why I don’t want to go back. But if you can’t, I want to know why you need money so badly.”

I press my lips together and look over at the big machine. A drunk girl’s holding on with both hands, squealing and laughing as it rocks back and forth, going really slow, the operator doing his best to make her ass and tits shake. It’s lewd and stupid and borderline gross but folks are laughing and having a good time, and hell, it doesn’t look that hard. Though when the girl is finally launched off and her boyfriend takes his turn, he lasts for barely four seconds before the bull

wrenches him away. I get the feeling the bar doesn't want dudes up there if they can help it.

"Ten seconds," I say, considering, and decide to see how far I can push her. This may be a job, but at least I can have fun. "I don't care why you ran away from home. You can keep that secret. If you're going to get me to debase myself tonight, I want something else."

"I'm not going back there." Her eyebrows arch. "That's out of the question."

"I don't care about that. If I make it ten seconds, I want you to kiss me."

Her mouth drops open and that's the reaction I was hoping for. She stares at me, halfway between a laugh and an angry snort, but her head tilts, and I spot something in her eyes, something sharp and calculating, and her tongue rolls across her lower lip like she's thinking about me. That look is fascinating and it sends a spike of adrenaline into my chest, and slowly she gives me a sultry smile and touches her mouth with her knuckles like she's kissing a ring.

"One peck," she says. "No tongue. Two seconds."

"I want your taste, princess," I say, leaning in and speaking into her ear, enjoying the way she's getting all riled up. "I want tongue and teeth and lips. I want you to moan into my mouth —"

"I am *not* going to moan, War! What the hell!"

"That's my offer," I say, pulling back. "Take it or leave it."

She considers before nodding. "All right. A real kiss. Ten seconds, which seems only fair."

I incline my head. "Works for me."

She shoves her hand out. "Shake on it."

I take her palm in mine and squeeze. "I can't wait to feel your tongue on mine, princess."

She rolls her eyes—but she looks worried.

The bull operator barely looks at me as I get in line. He's a burly guy in cutoff jean shorts. I wait my turn and watch, paying close attention to the two other men that go before me, both of the younger and drunker than I am. Neither lasts long, but I learn a lot, and by the time it's my turn and I'm walking awkwardly out to the big, ugly machine, I'm starting to question all my life choices.

But I've done worse. I've done harder, and uglier, and more embarrassing. I've lowered myself to the floor and licked the pavement to get what I want. I've lied, cheated, stolen, and hurt people.

I can ride a fucking bull.

I get on the back and spot Melody in the crowd. She's watching, arms crossed, an intense half smile on her lips like she can't wait to watch me crash to the floor and fail. I stare back at her, gripping the pommel loosely, and the bull begins to move.

The trick is moving with it. Shifting my hips, keeping my balance centered. It wants to whip back and throw me forward, and I go with it, rolling like I'm riding a wave. Four seconds, five seconds, six seconds, and I've already held on longer than most guys, but the bull operator knows his audience, and this crowd doesn't give a shit about watching some man hang on for dear life. My fingers sink into the slippery leather and I rock forward and get a thick whiff of oiled plastic and spilled beer as the bull writhes and bucks wildly, twisting and spinning fast, and I'm sliding off and cursing now, all tact and strategy forgotten as sheer strength takes over, and seven seconds pass, eight seconds, and I'm slipping off the side and nearly falling, and nine seconds pass, and I spot Melody standing with her mouth open and her tongue against her teeth as ten seconds come and go and I finally let myself fly onto the padding.

"You've done that before," she accuses when I step out of the ring.

"I have," I confirm with a massive smile. "Do you have any idea how many mechanical bulls there are in Texas? Even rich

boys like to slum it sometimes.” Including one particular client five years back. He’d tip me a twenty every time I got up there and rode, the sick bastard. I almost miss him.

Melody groans and her cheeks are bright red, and I know what she’s thinking. A deal’s a deal and a girl like Melody won’t back down just because things didn’t go her way. I steer her to our table and we stand there like we’re in a bubble, away from the rest of the world, and I move close. I put my hand on the small of her back. I want her to think about this, to really feel it. She’s trembling, or maybe that’s me. I smell her perfume, and a bit of hay, and a touch of earth. Her mouth opens, her lips flushed red and lovely.

“Ten seconds,” she says. “No more.” Her voice is thick and sultry.

I lean forward, heart racing, thinking about how badly I want to grip her ass and squeeze. My mouth is inches from hers, and I want her taste, want her tongue and teeth and moans, and my lips brush against hers so softly it’s like a breeze, and I keep going, to her cheek, to her ear.

“You want to know why I need the money?” I whisper. “I’ve been cut off. No cash from Mommy and Daddy. I’m all on my own, and I’ve never been good at doing things the right way. Only the fun way.” I kiss her earlobe and pull away.

She’s staring at me, lips parted, looking like sin and sex wrapped up in heaven. “Really? That’s it? What did you do?”

“That’s another secret for another day,” I say and turn away. “It’s late and I should get going.”

“Wait,” she says, sounding breathless. “What about—”

“The kiss?” I look back at her. “Another time, maybe.”

Her face hardens. “This is your one shot.”

“Then consider yourself lucky. Goodnight, Melody.”

She says nothing as I walk away. My body’s ringing, vibrating with need. I wanted to kiss her so badly it was like chopping off a limb when I bypassed those lips. But I can’t rush things, not right now, not when the situation is so precarious. She

could go either way at any moment—but if I push too hard, I’ll scare her and send her running for a second time, and she’ll never come home.

And I’ll never get my *real* prize.

Out in the parking lot, I pause at my car and make a call. Colton Leader answers on the second ring. His voice is a rasp, the last gasp of a man that spent all his life with a thin cigar between his lips and is paying the price. “Warren. How is my daughter?”

“She’s doing good,” I say and glance back at the bar. I wonder what she’s doing alone in there now. Drinking, feeling sorry for herself. Wishing I’d kissed her. “I think I’ve almost got her convinced.”

“Good,” he says with a grunt. “Very good. Keep at it. My offer still stands.” He wheezes like his lungs are leaking. “The Leader Ranch needs a Leader at the helm, and Melody’s all I have left.” He pauses to take a phlegmy breath. “Bring her home. Marry her. Keep her here where she belongs. You stand to inherit a fortune if you can pull this off.”

# Chapter 5

## *Melody*

“**W**hat do you know about Warren Temple?” I sit with my legs crossed in Ford’s office while a gas fireplace crackles in the far corner.

Ford pours himself a drink and rolls his shoulders. “Not a whole lot, if I’m honest.”

“I thought you two were related?” I shake my head when he offers me a whiskey. A hangover from two days ago still pulses in the back of my skull. I do *not* go drinking like that anymore, but I was feeling raw and vulnerable, and I wanted to let out some steam, and I went a little overboard.

“We’re something like fourth cousins,” Ford says and sits down across from me in a green leather armchair. “His family was always a little...” He trails off, staring at the fire.

“A little, what?”

“Strange,” he says and gives me an apologetic look. “My family’s always been big and there’s this pecking order, and if you’re not on the inside, you might as well not exist. I think I saw War like three or four times at most growing up.”

“How were they strange?”

“They were always into these business schemes. I remember my father complaining about them once, said that Warren’s dad has a million ideas and none of them are good. I heard a rumor they struck it rich making these rubber reusable pen caps or something like that, but I also heard they went

bankrupt because of a Nigerian prince scam, so I don't really know."

I sigh and lean my head against the couch. War's a knot I want to untangle, but there are no loose threads to pull at. He's got a Facebook page, a Twitter, all the usual stuff, but he's not active on any of it. His friends are generic, and there's no information about his family anywhere—no news stories, no obituaries, nothing at all. It's like the Temples barely exist, and Warren's practically a ghost.

I want to know what he's been doing in the years since Jameson. He says he's a fixer for the rich, but I think there's a lot more going on. Why would my father hire him, of all people, instead of a real private detective? My father's not the kind of man to be embarrassed because he wants his estranged daughter to come see him before he dies. If that's all my dad wanted, there are a thousand better ways he could've gone about getting in touch.

Instead, he sent War, and I don't know why.

Ford's lack of information only deepens my suspicions. War's too slick, too charming, too clever. Too attractive. I think of that kiss, or that near-kiss, and the way he clung to that stupid mechanical bull like the prize for staying on was eternal life. And in the end he didn't even claim what he wanted—instead, he fed me some line about being cut off.

If War was related to a family like the powerful and mega-rich Arcs, he'd be at their house every weekend making sure they all knew him.

Unless he had a reason not to get anywhere near his wealthy cousins.

It all makes me frustrated. I want to know War's game, and I need to know why my father would send him in particular to fetch me, and it doesn't feel like any of those answers are forthcoming.

"I wish I could help you more," Ford says and swirls his drink. "You know I'd tell you whatever you wanted, it's just that Warren's as much a mystery to me as he is to you. I honestly



forgot we were even related until he asked about buying Bomber.”

“I know and I appreciate that. You and Kat have been very good to me. Especially considering—” I stop short and look away.

“Considering you’ve been lying about who you are since you met my wife?”

“I guess she told you.”

“No, actually, she hasn’t said anything about it.”

I look at him sharply. “Then how do you—?”

“You went to Jameson. Your last name is *Leader*, for fuck’s sake. You really think I didn’t figure out who you are, like, the instant I saw you?”

I laugh in disbelief. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“We’ve all got our pasts and our baggage,” he says and looks away. “I figured you’d come clean when you were ready, and if you were never ready, well, that’s fine too.”

“You weren’t worried I was going to hurt Kat?”

“No,” he says, his face taking on a hard cast. “Because you’re not that stupid.”

I let that sink in. Ford’s a good guy, jovial, funny, charming, but he can be scary as fuck when it comes to his wife and his family. “Understood,” I say and suppress a shiver. “Do me a favor though. If you ever find out anything about War, let me know.” I suddenly want to get the heck out of here as fast as I can.

“Actually, now that you say it, there is one weird thing.” He stands and walks over to his desk. “God, I forgot all about this, but I got a random message from this girl—” He boots up his laptop, clicks and types. “Yeah, here we go, it was like over a year ago. You know me, I never check this shit, but she randomly popped up in my messages asking if I knew where Warren Temple was hiding, and that she knew we were related. She’s some rich girl that runs in the same circles as me

and I told her I didn't know. Never heard from her again. But maybe she can tell you more about him?"

I blink rapidly and stand. "That'd be great. What's her name?"

"Sam Silvan. I'll send you her Facebook page and you can get in touch."

"Thanks, Ford. You think she's like an ex-girlfriend?"

"Maybe? Who knows." He sits back and sips his drink. "Hopefully you can get to the bottom of my very weird distant cousin. Either way, I have your back."

I smile at him tightly and nod. He's got my back, at least until he doesn't, but that's not a line I ever plan on crossing. "I appreciate it."

"Good luck."

SAM SILVAN HAS SLEEK BLONDE HAIR, LIPS PACKED WITH filler, and a scowl that could set the Texas prairie on fire. I meet her in downtown Dallas at a cute little coffee shop. She shows up ten minutes late in a sleek pencil skirt, expensive heels, and a blouse that looks like it costs more than my yearly salary.

"I cannot *believe* you asked me about Warren," Sam says as a greeting and sits down heavily in the chair across from me. She's pretty, pale skin, blue eyes, pretty much the prototypical Southern belle. "What did he do to you?"

"Uh," I say. "Hi, I'm Melody, nice to meet you."

"Sam." She shoves a hand at me. Her manicured nails glitter in the overhead lights. I shake. "Seriously, what did he do?"

"Nothing," I say and she gives me a skeptical look. "Honestly, he didn't do anything, but I'm considering him for a job—"

"*Don't.*" He crosses her legs and plops her bag in her lap protectively. "Warren Temple's nothing but trouble. That asshole still owes me six grand. Seriously, if you talk to him, tell him Sam still wants her money. That piece of shit."

I don't know if I should laugh or what. "Okay, uh, I'll pass that along."

Her eyes narrow. "You're really thinking about hiring him? Warren Temple? What sort of trouble are you in?"

"None," I say, totally bewildered. Sam's not at all what I thought she'd be, and this conversation is getting out of control. "It's just, uh, an inheritance dispute—"

Sam snorts. "Typical. If there's money, there's Warren Temple sniffing around."

"I went to him. To hire him. I was hoping—"

"Listen, Melody, you seem sweet or whatever." She leans forward, eyes narrowing. "Do not, under any circumstances, get involved with Warren. I'm serious. Run the other direction."

"What did he do to you?"

She leans back again. All her gestures are big and exaggerated, like she doesn't know how to do anything halfway. "It started out like how you're saying. I had a job and he had references, so I hired him. But things went south after that. He started asking me for more money, kept saying he needed cash if he was going to take care of my problem."

"And did he? Take care of it, I mean."

"Eventually." She waves that away. "After he drained as much money from me as he could, and you know what I found out weeks later? I found out he'd finished almost as soon as I hired him, and the extra money was just to line his pockets, that thieving piece of shit."

"Oh," I say, blinking rapidly, trying to square the guy she's describing with the War I know. And honestly, it doesn't sound far off.

"He's a conceited prick. He gets results, but who the fuck cares? There are a million people that can get stuff done, and most of them won't screw you in the process. I bet you're sitting there thinking you're different, but I'm telling you, you're not. Warren's no good. Just run away."

*Already did that once.* “What do you know about him? I mean, from before you two met and he started working for you?”

“Not a whole lot.” She purses her lips. “Comes from a good family. At least his name is good. People vouched for him. Like I said, he gets results, but he’ll make you bleed for it first.”

“Does he have any friends? Anyone else I can talk to?”

“Not that I know of.”

“You said he had references. Can I speak to them?”

“You can try, but I wouldn’t hold your breath. If they haven’t been burned by him yet, they will be.” She opens her purse and shoves her card at me. “Shoot me a text and when I dig up some names, I’ll pass them along, okay?”

“Great, thanks.” I shove the card into my pocket. “Can you tell me anything else?”

Sam stares at me for a long moment before she abruptly stands. “Warren is attractive. He’s smart, and he’s clever, and he’s going to make you feel like the sun revolves around you. Don’t fall for it. He’s a selfish, petty bastard. And now my conscience is clean.”

She turns and walks away. I watch her go, not sure what to make of that conversation at all, but I stay in my seat, completely disquieted. She seemed angry still, even after all this time, like the wounds are still fresh. Like the memory of Warren still haunts her. I can’t imagine it’s the money she cares about—six thousand dollars to a girl like that is nothing. But it’s the other stuff, the lying, the selfishness, the way he made her feel special.

She sounded like she loved him. For a little while, at least.

I’m not going to have that problem.

*Love* is the last thing I’ll ever associate with War.

Sam’s right, he’s a petty asshole, and he’s manipulative and controlling and maybe even a psychopath.

I should take her advice. Instead, I pull out my phone and send a text.

*Up for another date?*

War gets back right away. *I didn't know that was a date. I would've followed through with my kiss if I'd realized.*

I smile despite myself. Even knowing he's a liar and a fake, I can't help myself. *Too late for that. Missed your chance.*

*There's always next time,* he says, and I can picture him smiling down at his phone.

*Come to the farm tomorrow afternoon. We'll go for a hike and maybe you'll get your do-over.*

# Chapter 6

## *Melody*

I shade my eyes as I crest a hill and head into the scrubland surrounding the farm. The grazing lands stretch out around us and I angle toward a corpse of trees, a small wooded area that sits between our property and the bordering land.

War keeps pace. He strides along like he's enjoying himself. I'm surprised by how at home he seems on the rough trails. He's in joggers and a tank top that shows off his ink-covered arms, and I keep stealing glances at his chest and his mouth and thinking about that near-kiss, and the flirtatious texts I sent him, and Sam Silvan. He might've done the same thing to her that he's doing to me, but if this is some kind of game, I don't know where it's supposed to end.

"I almost took you riding," I say when we pause at a ridge and enjoy the landscape around us. Small, gnarled trees, brown and green bushes and tufts of grass, rocks strewn into the weeds and thistles.

"I'll ride a mechanical bull, but I won't ride a horse."

"Why not? Afraid?"

"I wouldn't call it *afraid*. More like realistic. I'm not interested in letting one of those things break my neck."

I laugh at him and regret not putting him on horseback now that I know he's uncomfortable about it, but talking is easier on foot. "Here I was starting to think you were fearless."

"I told you, I'm *not* scared."

“Right, that’s what a big, brave man would say, isn’t it?” I stride off and he follows. “I’ve been wondering something. How come you’re still hanging around?”

“Because you keep texting me.”

“You think I’m going to change my mind about going home.” I glance at him and he doesn’t deny it. “But I’m not going to.”

“We’ll see.”

“What’s in it for you, anyway? Is this really just money?”

“I told you the other night. I do this for the thrill, and I find you very thrilling, Melody.”

I roll my eyes. “Great line.”

“I mean it.”

“I think you’re full of crap. I think you haven’t said a single true statement since we’ve met.”

His lips tug into a smirk. “I said I wanted to kiss you. That’s true.”

I laugh to cover my sudden excitement. What is with this guy? He’s supposed to be on a job right now, but he insists on hitting on me every chance he gets. I glance at his arms, at his biceps, and try not to think about the way he squeezed my finger and bent my wrist away and the power in his easy, languid motions, or in the way he held on to that bull and rocked his hips with its rhythm in an almost lascivious motion.

“Tell me about your family. Do you have parents?”

“I have parents,” he confirms. “A mother and a father. Both still living.”

“Lucky you. Are you close with them?”

“I’d say we’re close-ish. What about your mother?”

I dodge around a tree and cock my head. “She passed when I was little. Cancer.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

“Do you call your mother?”



He stops walking. “Are you interrogating me on how often I speak with my mom?”

“I’m trying to get to know the man that’s stalking me.”

He laughs and picks up a stick and cracks it in half. “Not stalking. Performing a service. And if I remember correctly, I haven’t contacted you since our first meeting. You’ve reached out each time since.”

I tighten my lips. “That’s a good point. Maybe I should think twice before I text you.”

“Maybe you should.” He tosses the sticks away and starts walking away. “Twice a week.”

“Excuse me?” I hurry to keep pace. We move along a narrow trail through the woods, the sunlight coming in through branches above, the smell of fresh sap in the air.

“I call my mother twice per week. Usually when I’m driving. She doesn’t always pick up though.”

“I’m honestly impressed. What about your dad?”

“Dad comes and goes as he pleases. I hear from him from time to time, but—” He shrugs and pushes a tree branch aside to let me go past. “We don’t all have the luxury of owning a ranch.”

I scoot through the gap and he keeps walking. He stays on my hip and slightly behind, loping along, looking around at the trees. It’s a beautiful day—not too hot, which is rare for this time of year—and I’m happy I decided to get away from a couple hours. Even if the company is less than ideal.

“Why do you seem interested in my family all of a sudden?” he asks as we come to a fallen tree in the path. The trunk is old and rotten, scattered with moss and small mushrooms. I climb up and stand at the top before looking back at him, hands on my hips.

“You seem to know so much about me and I don’t know a thing about you. I asked Ford, and he didn’t know anything either, which I thought was weird.”

He waves that away. “Ford and I are barely related.”

“I also spoke with one of your former clients.”

He goes very still at that. His charming exterior stiffens and his eyes lock on mine, sharp and searching. “And who would that be?”

“Sam Silvan.”

He relaxes slightly. “Ah, Sammie. How’s she doing?”

“She’s doing okay. You owe her six grand.”

He grins at me and climbs over the log. “Tell her to send me an invoice.”

“She hates you.” I jump down beside him. “*Really* hates you. Did you know that?”

We walk on. He doesn’t answer at first, only looks ahead at the path, eyes on the ground. I can’t read his body language, but his shoulders are slumped, and he’s avoiding my gaze. Finally, he says, “Did she tell you what she wanted me to do for her?”

“No,” I admit, feeling uneasy. “I didn’t feel comfortable asking.”

“Sammie Silvan looks like a good old girl, a nice Southern lady, but that’s only a facade. Sammie Silvan was holding a lot of debt to a lot of very unsavory people back in the day, the sort of people she wanted an intermediary to deal with. That’s why she hired me.”

“You were a middleman?”

“Let’s call it a go-between. She gave me cash and I used it to pay off her drug dealers.”

I suck in a breath. The girl sitting across from me at the coffee shop was put together and stone sober, there’s no way she was a drug addict. “I don’t believe you.”

“I won’t act like I didn’t skim some off the top, but she dug her own grave. Eventually, when I realized she was never actually going to pay these guys off completely, I walked, and she didn’t like it. She threatened me, said a lot of very nasty things, and eventually gave me six grand to keep my mouth shut.”

“I guess you owe her that six grand back now,” I say and he pauses to lean against a tree. “How much of that story is true?”

“Enough,” he says, staring at me. “You want me to say I haven’t done some bad things in my life? I can’t do that. I’ve bribed gangsters and paid off drug dealers. I’ve bought coke for bored housewives and helped an addict tie off one time. Sammie Silvan’s problems were just another day in the office for me, but to her it was the end of the world, and she didn’t like how I handled things. So we parted ways.”

I let his words sink in. It all fits with my image of him, but none of this is making me feel any better. “Why would my dad send you, of all people, to bring me home?” I blurt out because I can’t keep in in anymore.

He looks at me for a long moment before turning away and walking away. “You’d better ask him that.”

“I’m not going to, so I’m asking you instead. Why you, War? Why not a private detective? Or one of my cousins?”

“I suspect he’s got his reasons.”

“That’s a great copout but doesn’t help me at all.”

“I don’t know why you’re so interested in me suddenly. Did Sammie scare you?”

“No,” I say and hurry past him, taking the lead again and skirting around a large muddy puddle. I’m tempted to push him in. “I’m just trying to figure out what you’re doing here.”

“If you think getting to know me is going to give you some insight into what your father is thinking, you’re going to be disappointed.”

I look at the trees, frowning. Is that what I’m doing? Maybe he’s right—maybe this whole thing is about getting a glimpse into my father’s thought process. He’s always been the kind of man that does whatever he wants, that makes his decisions and his decisions are final, that doesn’t take criticism and isn’t interested in opinions. Maybe if I can see in War what my father sees then I can glean some precious insight into the man I hate and ran away from and still desperately miss.

Except that's not what I'm doing. "This is about what you're hiding from me."

He slows and I put some distance between us. "What I'm hiding?" he asks.

"You're a liar, War. Don't tell me you're not."

His smile bristles with knives. "As the playground cliché goes, takes one to know one."

"Right, and that doesn't change anything. Why did my father send you? What does he want from me?"

"He wants to die with a clear conscience."

War says it so simply, so directly, and it's like a punch to my gut. I have to lean my hand against the rough bark of a nearby tree to catch my breath. My father is dying—he's really dying—and here I am interrogating the messenger like any of this matters. Colton Leader is on his deathbed, and I can't stop obsessing about War and what he means. When maybe there's no meaning to him at all. Maybe War's just a kid that takes jobs, and my dad really does want to bring me back home to say goodbye.

"Am I making a mistake?" I ask him quietly. Tears spring into my eyes and I blink them back. "Not going home, I mean?"

War watches me from a few feet away. He doesn't move, doesn't come closer. "I don't know," he says and it surprises me. I expected him to say yes, yes, I'm making a huge mistake, I need to run home *now*, but instead his stare is unflinching and his lips are pulled into a slight frown. "I don't know what happened to you, Melody. I don't know why you ran away, and I can't say if it's worth going back."

"It's bad," I whisper and look away. "It's ugly. It's the ugliest thing I've ever gone through."

"Then don't go." He faces me, hands on his hips. "All I know is, your father's really dying, and you won't get another chance to say whatever it is you need to say. It doesn't have to be goodbye, and it doesn't have to be forgiveness. You can show up and tell him you hope he burns in hell. Doesn't matter. All I know is, I've seen regret, and I've felt it myself,

and there's nothing you can do about that. Trying though? Trying and fucking up? That's something easier to live with."

I hang my head and close my eyes. War's so smooth, so clever, like he knows what I'm going to say and he's three steps ahead already. But maybe I'm projecting something onto him when really, I'm the liar here, I'm the smooth talker, the con artist, the fake. I'm the one shoving stories down my own throat, wrapping stories around me like cloaks, pretending to be someone I'm not. Ford saw through it, but he let me keep the lies. Kat knows everything now, and she still loves me anyway. So why am I keeping these stories and not letting myself be who I am?

"What do you talk about when you call your mom?" I ask and wipe tears away.

War laughs bitterly and looks at the trees. "I ask how she's doing. She tells me about her latest obsession. Handbags, jewelry, artists, that sort of stuff. Midcentury coffee tables. Vintage dresses. Early American outsider paintings. My mom has nothing so she fills herself with all of that, trying to close the gaps. But it's never enough."

"If I have a son, I really hope he never says that about me."

"You won't." He starts walking again. "Come on, let's finish this hike. I'm sick of talking about my family."

"Me too." I catch up with him. "I'm really not going back." But the words feel cheap now. Like they're thin and crumbling to pieces.

"I'm not going to force you," he says. "Unless you want me to." His eyebrows raise and he smirks at me. "Unless that's your thing."

"You always have to ruin it."

We keep walking together and the conversation drifts to easy, safe topics: movies, music, TV shows, politics, that sort of stuff, and I catch glimpses of brilliant War, funny and clever War, but there's still the man that calls his mother twice every week and has such deep insights into her, and the man that has

nothing to say about his father at all, and I wonder if War knows more about a broken family than he's letting on.

Not that it matters. He shouldn't be my focus. My father should be, and every time I try to think about Leader Ranch and the great Colton Leader, it's like my mind bends away from it.

I'm distracting myself with War. And I can't help it.

As we finish the hike and get close to the farm, I spot a figure up ahead riding an ATV toward us. It's Nicky, looking frantic. She's young, early twenties, with auburn hair and green eyes, and she pulls up looking upset.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "What happened?"

"It's Bomber," she says in a rush. "Oh, shit, Melody, I've been looking for you all over."

"Bomber? What happened?" My heart's racing, and War's totally forgotten.

"We were going through his steps and there was this rock in the dirt and he didn't see it and shit, Melody, I think it's broken. I think it's broken *bad*."

Horror lances into my stomach. "Let's get back," I say and glance at War.

He nods. "Go."

I get onto the ATV with Nicky and she pulls out.

If Bomber's as injured as she says, this is bad, very bad. Not only for all the work and invested time we put into training him, but for Bomber himself—a racehorse that can't race isn't worth anything. A lame racehorse ends up at a knackery, slaughtered for its parts, because a worthless racehorse is better off dead.

And I can't let that happen.

# Chapter 7

## War

**M**y father appears in a flurry of calls and texts two days after my hike with Melody as if he sensed that I'd been talking about him. We make plans to meet at an upscale lunch spot and he shows half an hour late wearing black slacks, a white button-down, and a watch worth at least fifty grand. "There you are," he says as if he's been looking for me and I haven't been sitting at this table alone staring at my phone and stewing.

"Dad," I say and he hugs me roughly before sitting down and leaning back with a wary smile. "Where've you been? You look tan."

"Spain," he says and I doubt that's true. He runs a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair, mostly salt these days. I wonder when he'll start to color it. "What'd your mother tell you?"

"That you were working. You know Mom."

She's good at keeping her mouth shut.

He runs a hand through his hair. "I've been busy, that's all. Following some leads. Working some angles. Boy, where is that waitress? I'm thirsty."

He orders a beer and flirts with the young girl working our table before taking out his phone and tapping away. I let him get this little display out of his system—this song and dance, this gesture toward respectability. He's always *working* and *following leads* but we both know that's slang for avoiding the consequences of his own actions.



If I was into gambling, I'd bet all my money that my father's been off hiding somewhere in the Caribbean, holed up in some shack with no Wi-Fi and no cell service and no way anyone could possibly locate him. Maybe he really was in Spain—but it wasn't some sightseeing trip. I don't know why he's hiding or who he's running from, but the sleazy way he smiles at me suggests I'm about to find out.

"How have you been, Warren?" he asks, adjusting his watch. He crosses his legs and slouches back, one arm over the back of the chair on his left, looking at ease like a king holding court.

"Been fine," I say. Waiting for him to get on with it.

"Got a job?"

"I'm working something. Just like you." I arch an eyebrow at him.

"That's good, that's really good." He nods to himself. "You always were a hard worker. I know these past few years have been hard, but we've been proud of you, you know that?"

I don't bother responding. I've heard this before and I'll hear it a dozen more times. I know what's coming next and my stomach's a twisting mess of anxiety. I wonder if this is going to be the time that I finally tell him no, that I finally tell him to go solve his own problems and to stop shoving them down my throat. But it's been years and years of this, of my father disappearing for weeks and months at a time only to turn up with stories of exotic locations and incredible business opportunities and tragedy. He's always *close, so close*, always inches away from that one last investment, and every time it falls through there are a dozen excuses and a thousand broken hearts in his wake.

None of those excuses are ever *I'm a fake and a cheat and an addict*.

He chats about a Spanish winery he visited as the waitress brings out our food. He talks about a bull fight, meeting a professional Spanish boxer, about drinking all night on a beach with a bunch of English Premier Division soccer players. I

listen to his stories and almost believe him. Dad's a lot of things, but most of all he's a storyteller, a man that lives for moments like this where he can unwind and spin his tale and let it all come to life for a captive audience, and I've always been as captive as it gets when it comes to him. Despite myself, I love it when Dad tells stories.

But it never lasts. His charisma, his humor, it fades. It always does, and I'm ready when he finishes his meal, sips his third beer, and leans toward me.

"Listen, Warren, that winery I mentioned before—"

"Let me guess," I say, interrupting him. "They need a small investment to buy some special grapes. Or maybe you owe them money? Maybe you already dumped the last investment I gave you, which was for what, exactly? A Russian Oligarch's stolen yacht? Just a little cash to get it out of impound and we'll be rich again."

His eyes widen. "Warren—"

"Dad, I give you money. I've *always* given you money. I listen to your stories, and I laugh and smile because they're fun and you're good at telling them. But I know there's no winery. I know there's no yacht and never was. Who do you really owe?"

His nostrils flare. "Warren." His tone darkens. This is the dad I know best. The one he keeps hidden from the rest of the world beneath his charm and his smile and his flashy second-hand clothes. "You can't talk to your father that way. What's gotten into you?"

"I'm tired," I say, and they're the most honest words I've ever spoken. "How much do you need?"

He considers me. I can criticize him all I want but my father's always been an extremely good judge of character. When it comes to money, he's hopeless, but people make sense to him, and I've always been his favorite target for study. He speaks me like a second language, and I hate him so much for it and love him even more. My father's a titan in my life, a towering figure, a man without equal. I've looked up to him for years

and years, and still do, even long after I realized what he really is.

“Two million,” he says.

And it’s like a kick to the jaw. Neither of us speaks for a long minute. He drinks his beer and I hold my whiskey with trembling hands. Two million. Two-fucking-million dollars. For a family like the Arcs or the Stocktons or even like the Leaders, two million is spit in the ocean. But for us, two million is everything. It’s more than everything—it’s an impossibility. An amount of money I can’t even imagine ever having again.

Once, we were wealthy. We had everything. But those days are long gone and now we live on the fumes and the memories of those days, pining after a glory we’ll never find again.

“You know I don’t have that,” I say and sit up straight. “How the fuck do you owe someone two million dollars? Who the hell would extend you that much credit?”

“Don’t start that with me, boy,” he says, and his tone matches mine: brittle and rage-filled and exhausted. “I had an opportunity to finally dig this family out of the hole we find ourselves in. It was a risk, but it was a good risk. Your mother —”

“You took her money?” I whisper, the words coming out strangled. I learned a long time ago that I can’t give my mother a dime without it landing in my father’s lap, and so I worked out a system of different checking accounts to try to keep their income separate. Clearly, it didn’t work.

“She offered it when she heard about the investment opportunity,” he says and nudges his fork across the plate, not looking at me. “It was an arbitrage run by a few Albanian gentlemen.”

“You mean Albanian mobsters.” I want to scream at him. I want to smash his face into the table. “How could you get involved with organized crime? You know better than that.”

His eyes flash up to mine. “How is working for a bunch of spoiled rich fucks any better than what I do? You think your

money's clean? At least I'm out there trying."

"I least I *have* money," I say and stare him down. "At least my money doesn't disappear the second I get it. What happened? Tell me they're not going to kill you."

"Not yet," he says, deflating. He takes a slow, steady breath, and lets it out. "The Albanians had this thing going. This racket where they were buying cheap pills from Canada, smuggling them into the States, and selling them for a profit. I borrowed some money from your mother, but it wasn't enough. So I used some contacts and got another loan from some Greeks—"

"More fucking mobsters?" I say, feeling sick. "How do you even know these people?"

"—And I bought in with all that cash, thinking it was a sure thing. The Albanians had been running it for a couple years, everything was going great, but the laws changed, and I guess the drugs came out of patent—"

I groan and rub my face. "You got fucked. You got duped. They tricked you into buying a bunch of pills they knew weren't going to be worth shit. They passed the bag off to you."

"It wasn't like that," he says but there's no force behind his words. He knows it's true, just like I do. "Anyway, the generic came out and the prices plummeted. I managed to recoup less than half of what I borrowed and that wasn't enough for the Greeks, they wanted more, and so I had some words for the head of their organization—"

"Oh, fuck. You insulted a mafia Don."

He waves that away. "The Greeks don't call them Dons."

"I don't give a fuck what they say." I slam my hand flat on the table. "How bad is it?"

"He's very unhappy. Very, very unhappy. That's why I've been hiding out in—uh, vacationing in Spain. Waiting for him to cool down. But apparently he's not the cool-down type."

"What's his name?"

“Evander Kazan.”

I work my memory, but it’s not familiar. “All right. Okay. And you owe Kazan two million?”

“And some change,” he says with a shrug. “You can help me, can’t you? I know you don’t have it all, but something?”

I close my eyes and think. I have cash in my accounts and can scrape together a million, maybe more, but that’s everything, all my investments, my entire fucking future. I was saving for a house, for retirement, for anything other than this endless string of shitty jobs, of an ugly half-life pretending I’m something that I’m not, and maybe I could even bring my mother with me. Get her a nicer apartment, buy her some decent things. Treat her the way my father never could. Get her out of that lonely townhouse, the last thing she owns, give her something new for once.

That dream’s dead now.

“I’m working on something,” I say, shame and dread filling my guts like poison. I hate my useless bastard of a father but I can’t let him get murdered by the Greek mafia no matter how much I want to pull the trigger myself. “It’s a good job. A hard one, but the potential payout could solve all our problems and then some.” *And if it works, I’ll cover your debts and send you packing. You will never, ever fucking do this to me ever again.*

He straightens up, eyes brightening. “What’s the deal? Tell me, maybe—”

“No,” I say sharply and shove a finger in his face. “You stay the *fuck* away. You stay as far away as you possibly can.”

He narrows his gaze and turns his beer glass in a slow circle. “I don’t like your tone.”

“And I don’t like the fact that you owe gangsters over two million dollars. I don’t like spending my whole life saving you from shitty situations, over and over again. I don’t like that I had to drop out of school because you lost all our money, and because Mom spent her entire inheritance on bullshit, and I don’t like that I tell the world you two cut me off, when really

I'm the one funding your mistakes. So please, spare me the fatherly bullshit and stay the fuck away."

I'm seething. I'm breathing hard. I feel my edges starting to crumble and crack and break apart. My dad's staring at me like he can't decide if he wants to stand and storm off or if he's going to strangle me. I welcome either outcome, anything to give me an excuse to finally end this toxic relationship for good. He's the reason I'm trapped in place, him and my mother, because the second I finally cut myself off from them is the second my father ruins my mother for good. Whatever she has left, he'll suck it all down and make it vanish into his bad luck and stupid decisions.

And as much as I hate him, I can't let it happen. I won't let them end up washed out and pathetic, living on nothing, a ghost of their former selves. It's bad enough my mother's down to just the townhouse in Austin, the last property my family owns, everything else having been sold off to pay debts years ago. It's bad enough I'm taking these ugly jobs, conning my way through high society, pretending to be something I'm not and won't ever be.

Unless I can convince Melody to marry me.

That's my only chance at making things right. If I can get her family's money, I'll be able to cover my father's debts and make sure my mother's safe and taken care of. I'll even throw more cash at Dad to make sure he disappears and never resurfaces again. Let him snort his way through Amsterdam and end up dead in a canal. So long as he doesn't leave a mess in his wake.

Melody's my way out. She's my best chance.

And I *despise* myself for it so deeply it's like a shard of glass in my heart.

But at this point, I have no other choice.

"All right," Dad says finally, sounding calmer than I expected. "You have a good thing going. I can respect that and I'll leave you to it. But listen to me, Warren. Kazan won't stay quiet

forever. He's going to find me sooner or later, and when he does, it won't go well for me."

"I'll do what I can."

"Good. Make it fast." Dad pushes his chair back and stands. "You got this? It's good seeing you again, Warren."

"Don't go visit Mom."

"She's my wife." He shows me his teeth. On anyone else, it might be a charming smile. On him, it's the smirk of a shark.

"I should visit."

"Leave her alone. If you won't divorce, at least don't drag her down with you."

"Good luck, son. We're rooting for you." He winks and walks off, whistling softly to himself. I watch him go and feel like I'm falling off a cliff, spiraling into the dark, rushing down toward black churning waves.

And hoping I hit a rock hard enough to make my end quick.

# Chapter 8



## *Melody*

The vet's in with Bomber for a few hours. Equipment, a portable X-ray machine, casting materials, and several helpful techs all fill the stable. The vibe feels frenzied but calm. I pace across the paddock feeling horrible, an ugly stone in my throat. Kat sits nearby, back against the fence, alternating between watching me and trying to read. There's nothing else to do at this point, nothing else we can do. Ford brought in the best horse doctor in the area and told him to do whatever it takes, and now we wait, hoping the grizzled old Texas veterinarian can manage a miracle.

"They're going to save him," Kat says as I slump down beside her. She puts an arm across my shoulder. "I promise, they will."

"You don't know that." I close my eyes and lean against her. "Poor Bomber. Even if the break's clean and they can set it and he heals right, he'll never race. I doubt anyone will be able to ride him ever again."

"We'll figure out what to do with him when the time comes."

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out, trying to manage this terrible feeling lodged deep in my chest, but it's like a splinter in my heart.

I grew up on a ranch. I've worked on multiple farms since then. I've seen this before, over and over: horses rarely survive a broken leg, and when they do, their quality of life tends to be very low. Horses aren't like people—they're top heavy with very little in the way of muscles along their lower parts, which

means their breaks tend to heal wrong because they're often standing, and they tend to experience a lot of pain since there's not much to support the weakened portions. Horses' legs carry a ton of weight and stress, and more often than not, it's cleaner to euthanize them rather than let them suffer for the rest of their lives.

I've seen it before. I'll see it again. I've even pulled the trigger, or hit the plunger, or done what needed doing, and it sticks with me in ways I don't fully understand. Maybe that's why I'm taking this so hard. I don't want to lose another animal. I hate that we have to make this decision, and for some reason it's weighing on me even harder than it normally does. I don't know what it is about Bomber, but I've put so much time and energy and love into that animal, and to see him in pain, to see him suffer, to watch him have to be put down—it kills me. It truly kills me.

"I'll buy him," I whisper and feel the idea form in my chest like a salve to the rot I feel there.

"What?" Kat frowns and shakes her head. "Melody—"

"No, I'll buy him. I'll pay his stabling fees. If he survives this and his leg heals, I'll take him on. I'll take care of him."

"Honey, you know we don't need money," Kat says softly. "You can just have him. He can just stay here."

"But space is limited. If we keep Bomber in a stall, that's one less spot for a horse than can earn something for the business."

Kat looks concerned. "It's not about *earning*, Melody, you know that. Ford's got plenty. We don't actually need to turn a profit."

"I need to." I pull back and climb to my feet. "I can't just keep relying on your generosity. I need to do something on my own for once." I walk away, pacing again, head spinning from here back to my father's ranch and back to here again. "I know you and Ford can keep Bomber around indefinitely. I know the money means nothing to you guys, but it means *a lot* to me. I have to prove—I have to prove I can do this." I stop and face her, hands on my hips, breathing fast.

“This isn’t just about Bomber,” Kat says.

And she’s right, it’s not about Bomber. It’s about how I feel like *I’m* Bomber with a broken leg, barely standing upright, afraid I’ll never heal no matter how much time passes. It’s about me, and my family, and War, and everything else. It’s about being the person I’ve always wanted to be, independent, in control of my own life. Strong, competent, smart. It’s about standing tall and holding my head up.

And being so afraid I’ll never get there.

“I can save that horse,” I say and hold my head up. “I can pay to give him a good life and I want you to let me.”

“Okay,” Kat says, looking bewildered. “If that’s what you want, that’s what we’ll do.”

The barn door opens and Nicky comes out. She’s young and cute with curly hair and green eyes. Her eyeliner is smudged and she’s wiping away tears, but she’s smiling, and that knot in my throat loosens a touch at the relief etched into her.

“They set the leg,” Nicky says as she comes over. “The vet said the break was simple and clean. He thinks Bomber’s got a real chance at making it.”

I nearly fall over with relief. I tilt my head down and close my eyes for a second, getting myself together, before looking at Nicky.

“That’s really good news,” I say. “Really, great news.”

She steps closer. “Melody. I am so, so sorry. I never should’ve \_\_\_”

I walk over and give her a tight hug. She sobs once, and I know what she’s feeling. She’s new and young and loves these animals as much as I do, and it’s so horrible to see one of them get injured on your watch. If it were me, and I was the one doing the training that led to the break, I’d be beside myself. Even worse than I am. I understand how Nicky’s feeling, and I hope she can forgive herself one day.

“You’re okay,” I tell her and squeeze tight. “It’ll be okay. I’ll take care of Bomber, okay? These things happen.”

“It was my fault,” she says, and I keep on hugging her, because whether or not that’s true, it doesn’t matter.

The vet confirms everything Nicky said. He goes over treatments, aftercare, gives his predictions, makes it clear he’s not at all sure Bomber’s going to pull through, schedules follow-up appointments, and drives off with his staff in tow. I stand in the parking lot with Ford watching the big white van disappear down the bend of the gravel driveway and feel so worn out I could curl up on the ground and pass out right then and there.

“How are you holding up?” he asks, not looking at me.

“I’m all right. Relieved. Worried. You know, the usual.”

He nods and glances over. “Kat told me what you said. About buying the horse.”

I hold up a hand. “If you’re about to offer me money—”

“I won’t if you don’t want me to, but you know I would.”

“I know, and I love you guys for that, but you’ve done too much for me already. You could just give me Bomber and keep him here, but I can’t live with that. I need to start earning my keep.”

He nods, looking thoughtful. “You know, I don’t think our relationship is as unequal as you seem to.”

“Oh, yeah? Did I give you a good job? Pay you too much?”

He laughs. “I’m paying you too much? Sounds like we need to renegotiate your compensation.”

“You know what I’m saying.” I start back toward the barn and he follows, hands clasped behind his band.

“I do, but look at it from my perspective. You’re Kat’s friend and she loves you.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes me feel good, I’m getting paid to be her friend.”

“No, you’re being paid to run this place. Don’t give me that look, you know it’s true. Kat’s great with the animals and she loves it, but you’re the one with real experience. You’re the

one holding everything together, day in and day out. I know you feel like you're a burden on us, but believe me, you're not. Kat loves this place and I love that it makes her happy. You owe us nothing. We're even in my book. So if you want the horse, take the horse. If you want to buy him, you can buy him for whatever you think is fair. Either way, you're important to us."

I nod and can't look at him. Gratitude swells in me. I hate feeling like I'm a burden, like Ford and Kat are constantly doing me favors, and I'm here mooching off their generosity, and to hear Ford say that I'm carrying my fair share feels better than he probably knows.

"Thanks for saying that. I still don't want you to pay for Bomber."

"All right, well, I had to try. Should I send you the bill for the vet too?" He tilts his head and frowns. "After the state-of-the-art X-ray, the advanced casting materials, all those helpers, not to mention his borderline extortionate hourly rate—"

"Thank you, Ford, I get it."

He grins. "I'll handle the vet. You can do the rest." He stops when we reach the main buildings, and I keep going on. "Take a break sometime, okay, Melody? You're allowed to worry about yourself too."

I wave at him and walk on into the paddock. Taking a break sounds like heaven, but there's no break for me, no rest, no quiet. Not when I'm constantly trying to prove myself, constantly trying to keep the veil of who I am firmly in place. I step into the stables and find Bomber in his stall, still sedated, his leg wrapped in blue and white with a complicated support system bearing most of his weight. I stare at the beautiful creature and a deep, black pain fills my throat, and I think about my cousin Rosie for the first time in a long, long time.

She hated horses. *Hated* them. She used to come into my room, chewing her bubblegum, her mouth packed with the stuff, chomping away at it, and she'd rip the horse posters down off my walls. She'd sit on my bed, kicking her legs, and sneer at me with her straight black hair and her deep brown

eyes. *You're just like those dumb, smelly animals out there, you dumb, smelly Melody. Smellody, that's what we should call you.* She'd blow a massive bubble and laugh. This horrible, ugly laugh. *Smellody, ugly little Smellody. One day I'm going to shove you off one of those horses and we'll see how much you love them when you get trampled to death.*

Rosie's gone now. Dead for a while. I wish I missed her, but I don't.

"You won't be doing much trampling, will you, big guy?" I say quietly and watch Bomber's breath come in, slow and even. "No, I don't think you will, not for a while."

The magnitude of what I'm going to do slowly descends on my shoulders. Horses are expensive—their stables are expensive, their feed is expensive, and their medical care is expensive. Add in the fact that Bomber's going to need extra medications, extra rehab, more imaging, more vet visits, and he's going to be like a mortgage. Worse than a mortgage. And while Ford really is overpaying me, it's not nearly enough.

I don't have many options. I could get another job, or sell my plasma, or start an OnlyFans. I could be the naked horse girl.

But I know what I really have to do. The truth tastes like salt on the back of my tongue. I want to gag, but I can either swallow it now or choke.

I take out my phone and call War.

# Chapter 9

## *Melody*

The bar in the lobby of Warren's hotel is quiet. A young man in a suit sips a light beer and watches baseball on the TV in the corner. The bartender brings me a gin and tonic, and I take a long drink, not sure why I wanted it. Dad used to drink these, and for years, the smell of gin made me think of it. For years, it made me sick.

War shows up right on time. He slinks into the bar, walking in that slouchy, confident way he has, like he can glide into any room and feel it out and take it over if he wanted. He sits on the stool next to me.

"I was happy you called," he says. "And happier you wanted to meet."

"Don't think I'm doing this because I like you." I glance at him. "I don't have any other choice. Bomber got hurt."

"The horse? What happened?"

"Broke his leg, and instead of writing him off and putting him down, I'm going to buy him. But horses are expensive."

He frowns like he doesn't understand. "You're saving him? What about Ford?"

"Bomber's *mine*," I say, and he doesn't push. "That's why we need to talk."

The bartender brings War a beer. He takes a long drink and leans forward on his elbows, studying the moisture droplets on the glass. "It's funny, you know. You're the second person to come to me for money in the last couple days."



“Who else?” I ask and shake my head before he answers. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter. How much did my dad offer you to bring me home?”

He keeps staring and doesn’t answer. His eyes narrow like he’s considering something, like he’s doing the math. My heart’s racing in my chest and I feel sick, sick deep in my soul, like something’s rotten in my body. Like I’m rotten, the part of me that’s *me* somehow tainted. I’m selling myself to War, offering to give him what he wants for a cut of his prize, willing to go home for *money*. All to save Bomber. All to prove that I can do something on my own for once.

“Why not just ask your dad for whatever you need?” he asks, and the question takes me off guard. I sip the gin and think of my dad striding across the barn, grinning like a maniac, arms thrown wide to scoop me up in a big hug. He towered, he loomed, that gigantic man. He was warmth and joy, at least for a while, at least until things changed.

“I’ll take your money, but I won’t take his.” I toss the gin back, letting it burn. “Well? How much?”

“Not enough,” he says, and I feel myself deflate. “But there’s a bonus.” Slowly, he turns to me, and he stares at me like he wants to rip into my body. I open my mouth to ask him what he means, but I suddenly don’t want to know, like knowing will only make things so much harder, so much worse. He holds me there, pinned in his gaze, his handsome mouth pulled down into a frown, his eyes hard.

He reaches out and puts a hand on my knee.

I can’t move. My heart’s racing. I don’t understand my reaction, but it’s like he’s got hold of me, like he’s latched on and weighing me down. His head tilts, his mouth opens, and I think of that kiss—the kiss I owe him. The kiss I promised him. And I feel like he could take it whenever he wanted, but the fact that he hasn’t yet means I’m in his debt, that my body, my lips, my tongue, are his to own until he collects.

He says, “If I can get you to stay for a week, he’ll give me a half a million dollars. I assumed that would never happen. But two hundred and fifty each? For one week?”

My guts revolt. I brush his hand away, spell broken. “That’s absurd. That’s—that’s way too much money.”

“He’s rich and he’s dying and he’s desperate.”

“Why? Why would he be so desperate to get me home and make me stay?”

“Because you’re the last one left.” His words strike me in the throat and I can’t speak. “You’re his only daughter. That’s what he keeps saying, anyway. You’re the only one that can take over Leader Ranch. I guess he thinks if you come home and stick around for a week, you’ll fall in love with the place again—and you’ll stay. He believes it enough to gamble half a million dollars, which you know is nothing to him.”

Half a million dollars. War’s right, to my father, that’s nothing. Meaningless, paltry. What’s money compared to his flesh and blood taking over the ranch? That place is everything to my father, everything in the world, and he’ll spend any amount, any sum at all, to get me to stay there. Even half a million for a week.

“This is crazy.” I turn away and stare at my drink. It’s nearly empty, only ice and dregs. “This is really, really crazy.”

“You need money. I love money. And it’s only one week.”

“Fuck.” I squeeze my eyes closed. I can’t believe I’m considering this, but two hundred and fifty grand will go a long, long way to giving Bomber a good, comfortable life, with some left over for me. “Fuck you, War. Fucking fuck.”

“I know what you mean,” he says with a sigh. “Come on. We’ll do it together.”

“I don’t want to do anything with you,” I say more sharply than I should. I take a breath to calm myself. “I just don’t want to do it at all, okay?”

“This is the best I can offer you,” he says. “I’ll come and I’ll stay and I’ll help you survive it. We’ll spend one week at that stupid ranch, we’ll make a big show of it, and then we’ll take your father’s check and get the hell out of there. This is your chance, Melody.”

This is my chance. I close my eyes, squeeze them tight. I know he's right, and I don't want to do it. I don't want to do it at all.

I see Rosie again. Her bubbles popping in her face like a big pink wound. Dead Rosie, gone a long time now, her face purple and swollen, her eyes wide and disbelieving in those last moments, the panic as her legs thrashed. Her moment touches everything at that ranch, and she's the real reason I can't bring myself to go home. She haunts the place, every inch of it, her and everything that came after her.

"One week," I whisper, my hands trembling, my toes numb. "I can do one week."

"It'll be an adventure. Or at the very least, we'll walk away with a good chunk of money." He holds up his beer. "To going home."

I shove my stool back and stand. "Tell my dad we'll see him in a couple days. I need time to pack and get things settled with Ford and Kat."

"Whatever you want." He lowers his glass and watches me, his face serious. "I meant it when I said I'll stay with you, for whatever that's worth."

"Don't pretend like you give a shit about me now, War," I say and turn my back on him. "You're doing this for the money, just like me."

"Yeah," he says almost too quietly for me to hear. "Sure I am."

I walk away, steeling myself, trying to make myself believe this is really happening.

I'm going home.

# Chapter 10

## *Melody*

**I**t's an hour drive from the sprawl of Dallas to reach Leader Ranch. The closer we get, the tighter my stomach feels, like I'm going to lose my lunch on the side of the road. We barely talk and it's like War understands I need the silence right now, for once in his life. There's too much crowding my head and too many bad memories trying to force their way to the surface. I fiddle with the radio and let the dread take me deeper and deeper into fear and anxiety as more familiar landmarks from my childhood appear like weeds: the old movie theater, the Wal-Mart, Frank's Barbecue Joint with the ugly red pig sign, everything looking unchanged in the years since I left, like my life's been paused and this is reality reasserting itself.

And finally, the ranch itself, surrounded by a silver metal fence tarnished by the sun. The gravel driveway from the main road to the big house bumps more than I remembered. As I stare out the window at the fields, I notice more weeds, a couple rusting tires, and barely any animals, only a few sad-looking cows and a lone horse grazing. It looks strange, desolate, and I wonder where the workers are, the herd of sheep, the goats and chickens and pigs. It feels wrong—this place should be bustling and alive on a workday like this, except it's like nothing's opened, like an old town shuttered.

“Seen better days,” War remarks as the house approaches, and I bite back my sharp retort.

Because he's right. The place looks cluttered. An old car's rusting near the far garage. Work equipment's left out near the

barn: a wheelbarrow, sandbags filled with something I can't identify, shovels and rakes left to bleach to bone white in the sun. During my time here, my father *never* would've let the place look like this. He had pride in the ranch and it was an extension of him. To let the fields and outbuildings rot would be like letting his own body decay.

Worst of all, it feels abandoned. In my mind, Leader Ranch is a bustling place full of people and animals. There were always workers everywhere moving from one place to another, always a cousin nearby, always an aunt or uncle chatting away at whoever will listen, none of them willing to do any real hard work but all of them trying to look like they're involved. This, though, it's like a bad dream, like a ghost.

At least the house looks the same. It's a rancher with a slanted modern roof, lots of red wood and stone, like a mixture between a castle and a barn. Big, wide windows gape out at the wreck of the land like they're accusing me for leaving the place. Sitting toward the back is the tower, a tall structure connected to the house and overlooking everything, built for my mother when she was on her death bed. Dad told me she used to sit up there and stare out at their property for hours in those last days, and I'd do the same thing when I was a little girl, up in that airy and lovely room at the top, alternating between reading adventure novels and daydreaming.

Those were perfect afternoons, far away from the stress of work and the disdain of my family. Except now the tower looks abandoned, like nobody's bothered using it for years.

"You ready?" War asks me, putting the car in park and killing the engine.

I sit in the sudden quiet. "No. Not at all."

"One week," he says and puts a hand on my leg. "You can do this."

I stare at the hand. I stare at the man it belongs to. I try to connect the things in my head—War touching me, War's comforting smile, his serious face, his handsome mouth—but I'm having trouble forming coherent thoughts. Eventually, I push it away and step outside.

He follows. We walk up the steps to the house together. I start to knock but stop myself. When did I ever knock on my own door? Never, not once in my life. I'm a Leader still, even if I did leave home. I turn the knob and step into the cool, airy entryway. "Hello?" I call out.

Quiet. Deep and heavy quiet.

"Maybe nobody's home," War says, sounding skeptical.

"Hello?" I call again, poking my head into the sitting room. It looks unused and untouched, dusted and cleaned, but like it's a photograph. There's nobody in the office, in the kitchen, or in the living room. Everything feels so familiar, but slightly off—there are fewer pictures of the family hanging on the walls, replaced by modern paintings that I don't recognize. I can't imagine Dad would ever want this stuff around. Abstracts, colorful and contemporary, at odds with the traditional vibe of everything else. He'd hate this stuff.

"Oh, hi there." A woman appears, looking startled. She's older, dark skin, and wearing a blue nurse's uniform. Her hand presses to her chest. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Hi," I say, moving toward her. War leans against the kitchen island, head tilted curiously. "I'm Melody. Uh, is anyone else home?"

The woman's eyes brighten. "*You're* Melody? Of course you are, look at you, sweetie. Oh, I should've recognized you, but I wasn't expecting anyone. Your father didn't tell me you were coming."

I exchange a look with War. He told Dad we were on the way, or at least he says he did. "Uh, right, well, I'm here. Is anyone else home?"

"No, honey, not right now. They're all in town and won't be back for a few hours."

In town? Nobody would *ever* go into town on a workday when my dad was in charge back when I lived here.

"Right, okay, that's fine. Maybe I can wait here?" I feel strange, asking for permission to sit in the kitchen I grew up in

from a woman I don't know. There are too many memories in this room and I try not to let them invade me.

The woman smiles kindly. "Your daddy's awake and doing all right if you want to come for a visit? He'd love it."

My guts twist. I wanted to speak with Uncle Lovett or Uncle Dudley first, get a feel for how things are around here, maybe get a little insight into Dad's state of mind, but if they're not here—I don't know how I can turn down following this woman back to my father, but the idea is terrifying, facing him without any preparation.

I look to War, not sure why. His face is hard and he nods slowly, eyes narrowed like he knows what I'm thinking, and panic's sucking at my chest and making my heart go wild. I don't want to do this—coming home was a huge mistake—I can turn and run away now and pretend like this never happened—

But I'm here for a reason. I don't have to let the ghosts haunt me anymore. I'm not owned by my past, and I'm not defined by the things that happened to me back then. And I need this money, for Bomber, and for myself.

"Go ahead," War says quietly. "I'll wait here."

I nod slowly to the nurse. "Okay, let's go talk to him."

"Wonderful." She opens the refrigerator and gets a water bottle out. "Come on this way. My name's Lorraine, by the way, I've been your daddy's nurse for a year now."

"How's he doing?" I ask as we walk through the halls toward my father's wing. He has his own section with several private rooms, bathrooms, living rooms, and a small kitchen. "I know he's sick, but how sick?"

"I'm a hospice nurse," she says and that tells me everything. "But he's got good days and bad days, just like everyone. You happened to show up on a good day, which is a real blessing." Lorraine flashes me a kind smile. "Just to warn you, he's in a hospital bed, there's beeping equipment, and he's got an IV line in right now for some medicine, but that's not always there. Some people get a little squeamish around that stuff, but



don't let it put you off, just act like you normally do when you visit your father." She pauses when we reach the door. "Do you need a second to gather yourself?"

I take a deep breath and shake my head. Lorraine's nice and she's clearly done this before, but there's no amount of waiting around that will make this any easier. "Let's go in."

My father looks like he shrank to half his size. His face is gaunt, his hair gray, the wrinkles around his deep blue eyes deepened into massive furrows. His room is exactly like I remember it, except for the hospital equipment: oil paintings of the Texas landscape, pictures of the family, including several of my mother, and more than a few of me when I was little. There's a TV playing a Western, but Dad's eyes track me as I walk toward him, feeling strange and small and like a child all over again.

"Hi, Dad," I say, and Lorraine comes over, giving him the water and helping him sit up.

"I found this one in the kitchen looking for everyone else," Lorraine says, giving him a knowing smile. "But you know how that is."

"Thank you," Dad says to his nurse. "Could you give us a moment? I haven't seen my daughter in quite some time."

"Sure, honey, sure." Lorraine gets him settled. "You need anything at all, you just yell." She gives me another kind smile and departs.

I remain standing alone at the end of Dad's bed.

A thousand emotions tear into me with their claws. Memories, good and bad, some of the worst and best of my life. Dad sitting on a stool taking his boots off after a long day of work, giving me a tired smile as I do a dance I practiced for him all afternoon. Dad grunting as he changed the channel with me by his side, talking about his favorite movies, hugging me tight against his massive, warm flank. Dad staring down his nose and calling me a liar. And now Dad is lying in that bed, looking like a skeleton, pale and sickly, slightly jaundiced,

exhausted and aching. Dying slowly, by inches, when I never imagined he could be anything but his massive, vital self.

“So,” Dad says, and his voice is still that low prairie rumble, drawing out a single word. “He really did it. He brought you home.”

“Didn’t think he could?”

“I had my doubts. You’re a Leader, after all. Stubborn to a fault.”

I smile bitterly at that. If he only understood how much that stings, he might’ve not said it. “Why’d you send War after me, Dad?” I want to ask a dozen other, more important questions, but that’s what comes out first.

He chuckles and that laugh nearly kills me. I loved that laugh. I worked *hard* for that laugh. Whenever my father smiled and gave me that laugh, it was like everything was worth it, all the hard work, all the tough lessons, all the struggle and the judgment. My father could make me feel seen, or make me feel invisible, or make me feel any number of extremes more easily than anyone else in my life ever could before and since.

Now I feel tiny and humbled and scared and sad for my larger-than-life father.

“Didn’t trust anyone else,” he says, and he coughs and sips the water Lorraine gave him. “Not that I trust Warren. Your cousin’s been very involved in everything and I needed someone she didn’t know.”

“Which one?” I can’t imagine any of them taking charge of Leader. There’s lazy Evan, a couple years older than me, and burly Dean, exactly my age, and dense Bruno, dumb as a rock and two years younger, and those are all Uncle Lovett’s boys. There are also Uncle Dudley’s kids, and Aunt Noreen and Aunt Jade, both with their own broods. Too many cousins to count, and all of them worthless in their own way.

But I suddenly understand who he means before he says it. I dread hearing the name, dread the memory. I look to the side, and it’s like Rosie’s right there, laughing at me, blowing those big bubbles. *Stupid fucking horse girl.*

“Daisy,” Dad rasps and I want to cry. Daisy, Rosie’s little sister, a year younger than me. “Stepped up when you left. Very involved in the business side of things. Smart girl. Too smart.”

“If she’s so involved, why isn’t she here right now?”

He gives me a look and says nothing.

I pace away from the bed. The equipment is making me feel horrible, and Dad’s sunken eyes are terrifying, and too much is happening all at once. I wasn’t ready for this, and now that it’s happening, I want to get out. I want to run away.

I have to remind myself, again, why I’m here. For me, for Bomber. To prove that I can handle it.

“Did you think Daisy would tamper with someone else?” I ask, trying to get my bearings.

“Very likely, yes. She doesn’t want you coming back.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m dying, Melody, and I want to leave the ranch to you.”

I stop pacing and stare at him, mouth hanging open.

This is too much. It’s much, much too much. I knew he was dying and I was ready to have that conversation, but to hear him bluntly offer me Leader Ranch is like taking a knife to my liver. I try to find some words, but what is there to say? How can I tell my dying father that this place is a nightmare for me, that the worst moments of my life all happened here, that I’d rather burn it all to the ground than own it? He’s an old man and he doesn’t have much time left in the world. How can I look him in the face and tell him to go to hell?

“Dad,” I say and stare down at my feet. “I’ve been gone for a while. I don’t know anything about running this place.” Which isn’t strictly true, but he doesn’t need to know that.

He chuckles, low and throaty, and coughs for a few seconds. It’s an ugly, bone-deep hack. “I know you don’t want it, Melody. You don’t have to say so. But I didn’t go to all this trouble to keep War’s mission a secret from your cousin just to

say hello and goodbye. I'm going to be dead in a few weeks, a few months if I'm lucky, and when I'm gone I need someone I can trust to run this place. You want to know why you're here? Look around outside. You'll see why." He coughs again, harder this time, and I have to go over and give him the water. His hands shake as he drinks it.

Lorraine comes in, summoned by the coughing fit, and I'm ushered out with kind words and a sad smile. Dad's watching me the whole time, and I watch him spit blood into a tissue as the door shuts. I walk down the hall, overwhelmed and dizzy, and I find War still sitting in the kitchen.

"How'd that go?" he asks, coming over to me, looking concerned. He puts a hand on my arm, and I don't shake him away this time. I need the comfort and whatever strength he can provide, even if I trust him about as much as my father does.

"He looked bad," I say, and War helps me over to a stool. I sit down, feeling numb. "Worse than bad. He says weeks."

"I'm sorry," War says, tightening his grip on me, and for a moment it anchors me into the room.

"He wants to leave the ranch to me. He wants me to take it over when he's gone."

War says nothing for a long moment and we sit there in silence.

Until the front door opens. The sound of laughter and people. War's grip is hard on my arm, and I look up as three people come into the room.

The first is Aunt Noreen with her white hair and thin face. She looks surprised, nearly shocked at the sight of me. Next is Kerry, Aunt Jade's oldest daughter, looking tall and healthy in jeans and a button-down. She stares, and says nothing, eyebrows raised, but not looking altogether unfriendly.

Daisy comes in last.

She looks so much like her sister, Rosie. Daisy's tan, brown hair, green eyes, skinny but muscled from working outdoors. She's in jeans and a light sweater, and her eyes narrow to slits

when she sees me. Nobody speaks, and War's tension infects me, and I wonder if he's about to spring forward and smack one of those women over the head with a chair.

Daisy breaks the quiet, like I knew she would. She was always the first one to speak up, the first one to get up from dinner, the first one to suggest a new game, the first one across the finish line.

"Who the *fuck* let *you* come back?" she says and whirls to glare at her mother, Aunt Noreen. "Did you know about this?"

Aunt Noreen shakes her head. "Hon, I had no clue."

"Me neither," Kerry says quickly.

"You aren't welcome here," Daisy says, facing me again with fury in her face. "You aren't welcome anywhere *near* here, Melody. Pack up your shit, turn around, and get the fuck out."

"Nice to see you too," I say quietly, too stunned to say anything else.

Daisy lets out a snarl and storms past me back toward Dad's room. Aunt Noreen gives me an apologetic look and follows her daughter.

Kerry remains behind. Her shock's worn off, replaced with a bemused smile.

"Been a while," she says with a shrug. "A lot's changed. Anyway, welcome home, I guess." She gives a laugh and shakes her head and walks off, disappearing into one of the back halls.

"If that's how it's going to be, maybe this week's going to be harder than I thought," War says.

And I think he has no idea how hard this is going to get.

## Chapter II

## *War*

“**T**his is the famous Leader Ranch?” I squint out at a rolling expanse of weeds, bramble bushes, and scrubby trees. “It looks ... nice.”

“Save it,” Melody snaps and strides forward, following some unseen path through the tall grass. I keep up, trying not to smile. “It wasn’t always like this.”

“You mean when your dad was healthy?”

“And when I lived here.” She’s staring off into the distance, remembering something. Her childhood spent blissfully romping through the wilderness with nothing but cattle and horses for company?

“What happened to it?”

She goes quiet and shakes her head.

The hike takes us across a field and toward a forest at the edge of the property. The path proper appears and Melody plunges down it, stepping over roots like she was born knowing where they were. At least her pace slows as she looks at the woods, moving slowly now, thoughtfully. I stay to her left and slightly behind, trying to see this place the way she’s seeing it, but failing.

From my vantage, this is just a bunch of half-dead trees and bushes and vines and a whole bunch of ticks just waiting to descend on my delicious blood-filled body.

“Looks smaller,” she says and pauses beside an old log. “When I was a girl, I used to dig under this thing. I’d try to

find the grossest beetles and worms and stuff so I could bring them back to throw them at my cousins.”

“Sounds fun,” I say, thinking that sounds like the worst game imaginable. If I were her cousin, I’d shove her face in mud for slinging insects at me like that.

“It was more about revenge than fun.” She tilts her head, side to side. “My cousins weren’t nice.”

“Why not?”

“I was the heir.” She steps over the log and keeps walking.

“Which means what?”

“Dad’s favorite. The inevitable head of the family.”

“You’d think that would make the cousins be nice.”

“It didn’t.” She glances at me. “They wanted to take my place. It’s hard to get a kid to understand tact.”

“They bullied you?” I ask but I already know the answer based on the way Daisy treated her back at the house.

“That’s putting it mildly.” She stretches and breathes deep. “I came out here a lot when I was younger. My cousins were always indoors people, despite growing up around here and working the ranch like everyone else. They never followed me into the woods and I made it into my own little paradise.”

“Looks more like hell than heaven,” I mutter, and she shoots me a glare.

“I thought this place was enormous, like I could never explore the whole forest all by myself. But now it’s like—I don’t know, it feels smaller.”

“A lot looks smaller years after the fact.” I think back to my old life—to the houses, the cars. I can’t compare then to now because all that’s gone, but I can picture what Melody’s feeling. It would be strange to march back into our old mansion at this point, years and years after it was sold and leveled so the land could be developed into a strip mall.

“Is that why Daisy hates you?” I ask. “She’s jealous?”



Melody waves a hand in the air. “I don’t know, if I’m honest. I haven’t spoken to Daisy in years. I really don’t know what she’s thinking.”

“I can tell you it’s not good.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Melody chews her lip. “Poor Daddy. Can you imagine dying in that house? Surrounded by people that want you dead and can’t wait for it to happen?”

“That almost sounds like you pity your father.”

Her expression clouds. “Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t forgive him, but I’m still a person. I feel empathy.”

“News to me.”

She stops in a small clearing surrounded by fallen trees. In the middle, tufts of grass and small bushes and sticker plants wrap around old metal barrels packed with soil. Magazines are tucked in the nooks around their bases: *Nintendo Power*, *Dungeons & Dragons Weekly*, *Gaming Pro*. “I really was a nerd,” she says with a laugh.

“You really were,” I agree and watch as she roots around the area, unearthing more treasures. An ancient Barbie, covered in soil. Cans of Coke, gone bad by now. A box of colored pencils, a coloring book, a journal so waterlogged and rotten the words are all gone, plastic My Little Pony dolls, Backstreet Boys CDs, and a dozen other trinkets.

“My escape,” she says and turns her back to me, rubbing her face. I can’t tell if she’s crying or trying to calm down or what. “I shouldn’t be surprised that it’s all still here, but I am anyway.”

“I guess your family doesn’t make it out here much.” I scoop up a half-rotten *Vogue Magazine* and hold it pinched between two fingers. “You had a very... eclectic reading habit.”

“I read *everything*,” she says, shaking one of the drums. “Whatever I could get my hands on.”

“Did you have friends?”

Her eyes flash to mine. “That’s a weird question.”

“And I notice you’re not answering.”

Her jaw works, but after a moment, she turns her back on me. “No, I didn’t,” she says and walks to the edge of the clearing. “Not when I was younger at least. I made friends at school, but when I was coming here the most—” She only shrugs slightly, her back tensing and relaxing. “It was lonely.” She turns to face me again. “What about you? Do you have friends?”

I let out a bitter laugh. “I have secrets.”

“Is that a fancy way of saying no?”

“That’s a fancy way of saying nobody likes the guy that does the dirty work. Nobody likes the guy that knows where the bodies are buried.” I avoid her gaze and stare down at the rotting magazine instead. Isn’t this supposed to be about her right now? I should be teasing her about the *Dungeons & Dragons* and the video games and the high fashion, but instead I feel more exposed than I’ve been in a long while.

There’s always been a gap between me and everyone else. I want to pretend it’s a recent thing and a product of all the jobs I’ve done for the rich and the filthy over the years, but I know the truth. It’s always been like this, even back when I knew Melody in school—the lies I tell myself and the stories I spin for everyone else create a gap between the me deep down and the person I present to the world.

That means nobody gets in. Nobody sees past the veil. And for a long time, I liked it that way, at least until I met somebody with narrative armor as thick as my own.

Melody brushes her hair back and smiles. It’s a sad smile, one tinged with pity. I hate it, and love it—the way her lips pull up, the way her head tilts, the gleam in her pretty eyes—and I move closer to her. She doesn’t back away, only tilts her chin up to meet my gaze, like a challenge.

“Why’d you run away from here?” I ask quietly, and the wind buzzes through the trees. Melody goes stiff, her jaw tightening. It was the wrong question to ask but curiosity’s stabbing me in the guts. She clearly loves this place, so what drove her away? What, aside from her asshole cousins? What

would make her turn her back on this land, these animals, this life? Once she came of age, nothing else would matter—so why turn her back on it?

“It’s an ugly story,” she says and brushes past me, coming close enough that I can smell her, soft and floral. “And I don’t feel like telling it.”

“Would you tell me the truth even if you did?”

She doesn’t answer, only finds the path and heads back to the house.

We don’t come across anyone until we get close to the barn. A couple guys are there working on a fence, fixing a fallen post. Melody doesn’t seem to recognize them, but both stop what they’re doing to stare, and I get a bad feeling down my spine. When we get close to the house, the girl Daisy from earlier steps out the back door and stares at Melody, her nostrils flared. I feel like we just walked into a trap like an old-timey gunslinger rolling into town only to be ambushed by the local sheriff and his corrupt cronies.

“I really couldn’t believe it when I saw you,” Daisy says, her eyes locked on Melody, who stands a few yards away. I linger close and let everyone know how things stand: Melody’s mine to keep safe, and I don’t care how much these cousins hate each other, I’m not about to let anyone get close.

“And I really can’t believe the state of this place.” Melody’s tone is barely restrained anger. “Seriously, Daisy. What’s going on here?”

“Nothing’s *going on*,” Daisy says, making a face. “You always thought you were better than everyone else, Melody, and it looks like nothing’s changed.”

“The paddock’s a mess. The fields look like they haven’t been tended in weeks. The fences are falling apart—”

“We’re *fixing* those,” Daisy snaps.

“—And I think the barn roof might collapse at any moment. Not to mention the mess inside. How long have you been in charge?”

“Long enough to know that you’re not welcome here anymore, cousin.”

“I came back to say goodbye to my father,” Melody says.

“Then say goodbye and leave.” Daisy takes a step closer. “Or did you think you could roll up here after all these years and get welcomed with open arms? Did you really think anyone wanted you here?”

“I’m not here for you,” Melody says but I can sense her starting to wilt.

“That’s right, you’re only here for yourself. Leave your poor father alone. He’s been through enough and he deserves some dignity in his last days. Not some ungrateful brat daughter who hates the family that gave her everything.”

“You gave me nothing,” Melody says, hands curled into fists. “None of you did.”

“Oh, poor girl. You going to start making some bullshit accusations again, huh? Or maybe you want to smear my dead sister’s name some more?” Daisy jabs a finger in the air, pointing it at Melody’s chest. “Turn around and go home, Melody. Fuck off and don’t come back. You are *not* wanted at this ranch. We’re doing fine without you.”

Melody lets out a soft grunt of pain and her hands relax. She takes a step back and, for a second, I think she’s about to turn and bolt like she did back at the farm. Instead, she shakes her head, looking like Daisy punched her in the chest and ripped her heart from its cavity, and storms back to the front door.

I pause and watch her go before glancing over at Daisy. “Nice to meet you. You seem lovely.”

Daisy sneers at me. “You can fuck off too, rich boy. I don’t even know why you’re here.”

I follow after Melody and find her in the quiet sitting room standing by the cold and dead fireplace. She leaning against the mantle, breathing hard, shoulders slumped. I touch her arm softly. “Melody.”

She turns on me, face lit up with fury. “You don’t know anything about me,” she says, her voice a harsh whisper. “Just leave me alone.”

“You can tell me—”

“Just *fuck off*, War. I don’t want you here right now.” She grinds that out through her teeth and her eyes shine with tears. “Just get away.”

I take a breath and back off. Whatever just happened with her cousin, it was bad enough to crack Melody’s hardened skin, but I feel completely lost. What accusations did Melody throw around? What does Daisy’s sister have to do with anything? I wish I understood even half the nuance of this house, but as I step out into the hall and stand in the quiet, I realize I know nothing.

But I catch sight of Daisy in the kitchen smiling at me as she pours herself a glass of water.

# Chapter 12

## *Melody*

Riding is the only thing that calms me down anymore.

I head out early the next morning after spending the night holed up in my old bedroom. I don't know where War slept—I should've been a better host, but I was feeling too lost and confused to do much more than mope and stay locked away. I get up before the sun and I ride out before it's fully risen on the back of a friendly old mare with a chocolate coat and a tan mane. I take her along my usual route, skirting along the fencing to the edges of the property, and back around through the woods.

I keep seeing my father. Everywhere I look, he's there. Memories of him as he was, tall and proud. Memories of him now. Wasted, shriveled, exhausted. Sad and angry. The desperation in his eyes when he was coughing, the fear when he spit out the blood, and the need, the utter and incredible need when he told me he wanted to leave the ranch to me. I didn't know what to say, and I still don't.

I don't want this place.

I left for a reason. Leader Ranch was my childhood, it was my entire world for a long time, and it'll always be the most influential place I've ever lived. This land shaped me, made me who I am today, and riding through it brings back so many memories it's like an avalanche that I can't keep at bay. I knew each tree, each bush, each hill and valley, and all that knowledge is still locked up inside of me, lying dormant. It would be so easy to accept my father's offer and slip back into the role of keeper and tender and rancher, to become the girl I

was always meant to be, to take over Leader and turn it around.

But I can't. I won't do it.

Because for all its beauty, there's a rot at the heart of this place, and nothing I can do will ever change that.

I make it back to the barn and start unsaddling the horse when I hear a voice from the office. "There's no way that's Melody." Renee steps out, her eyes wide with excitement. "That can't be you!"

"Renee," I say with real pleasure and, for the first time since coming home, I'm actually happy to see someone.

She comes over and gives me a big hug. She's thinner than she used to be, her eyes more wrinkled, her hands tougher, her shoulder bonier. But she's still Renee with her big red hair and her tough smile and her beat-up old jeans rolled at the ankles and her rough flannel shirt pulled up to her elbows. I hold on to that hug a little longer than I should but I can't help myself—Renee taught me so much of what I know about horses and training and riding.

"I'm so happy to see you," she says, grinning huge. "I take it you already met old Missy."

"Missy, huh?" I pat the mare's flank. "She's a good old lady. I was surprised to see her in here, if I'm honest. There aren't many animals in the stalls."

Renee's expression clouds. "Well, Missy wouldn't be here if I hadn't put up a stink." She covers her discomfort with another massive smile. "Come here, let me look at you. Gosh, you look good, you still riding regularly?"

"I've been working on a farm, just like this one. Managing the place, actually."

"Good for you," she says and laughs. "I always knew you had it in your blood."

We get Missy stabled and settled together, talking about the good old days, about the horses we remember and the old ranch hands that used to wander around this place doing



whatever needed doing. We talk about my father, back before things went bad, and about all the hours we spent riding together out in the countryside. She walks slowly from the barn, out into the paddock, and we pause beside the fence.

“Renee, I keep asking myself, where is everybody?” I gesture around us at the empty yard. “Last time I was here, this place was bustling.”

Renee nods and squints into the distance. “Things changed.”

“Changed how? Dad’s not dead. Even lying in that bed in his room, I can’t imagine he’d ever let Leader get like this.”

Renee clears her throat and starts walking. She looks awkward, like she’s got something to say but she doesn’t want to say it. Finally, she looks at me with a sad smile. “Your daddy hasn’t been the same since you left, honey. No, don’t look at me like that, it’s the truth. He withdrew, and your cousin Daisy stepped up to fill the void. Things were more or less okay for a while, but she slowly made some changes, fired some staff, stopped investing as much in new horses and new stock, sold off the goats and the sheep and most of the pigs. For a little while, she was giving tours of the grounds and party rides to little kids.” Renee’s expression darkens. “Your daddy put a stop to that at least.”

“This is all Daisy then?” I gesture at the beat-up fence and the weeds growing all over.

“Just not enough hands to manage it all.”

“How’s the ranch making any money?”

Renee laughs sharply. “It’s not. Daisy’s got the family assets tied up in investments she says will be more lucrative than doing what we’ve always done. And what can I do about it? I’m not in the family. All I can do is work.”

I let that sink in. The ranch was always the heart of the family and the source of all our income, even though the Leaders haven’t really needed new income for a couple generations. Still, the ranch was always there, always earning, always working. Now it’s a ghost farm, devoid of life, barely hanging on.

Because Daisy doesn't feel like running it anymore.

Anger swells in my stomach. A cold, righteous anger, born of spending my formative years on this land and loving it like a piece of my body. Rage cuts deep into my core, and if I had what Daisy has, I'd do anything to keep it going. I'd treat it like it deserves to be treated.

Instead, Daisy neglected the ranch, and I can't imagine this place will last for much longer.

Slowly though, my anger deflates. I can be pissed all I want, but I have the chance to change things and I'm not going to take it. I'm as bad as Daisy or maybe worse—I could accept my father's offer, wait for him to pass, and move back here to turn this place around. Instead, I'm turning my back and letting it disappear.

"I'm sorry it's like this, Renee," I say quietly and squeeze her hand. She squeezes back, looking sad and tired.

"Not your fault, honey, not at all. I just wanted to say, I never blamed you for leaving, you know. I remember how things were back then. I remember what happened."

My throat swells and I look away. "Thanks for saying that. Sometimes I feel like I'm crazy."

"You're not. You weren't then and you're not now. What your daddy said, the way they treated you—" Renee only grunts and shakes her head.

I hug her again, unable to help myself, and I force the tears away. This isn't how I wanted this reunion to go—I wanted fewer tears and more laughter. And there will be time for that, since I'm staying for the week, but I can't let myself waste all the time I have left.

Because once I'm done with this visit, I'm done with Leader Ranch for good. No more coming home.

We start walking again, but Renee slows and gazes over toward the house. "Well, now, who's that?" she asks, and I spot War walking toward us.

“That’s the man that Father sent to fetch me.” I stand with my hands on my hips. “He’s sticking around for the week.”

Renee’s eyebrows lift and she whistles. “Not a bad specimen to have around.”

“God, Renee, please don’t.”

“I’m just saying, honey, he’s not bad to look at.”

“I’m so embarrassed I could explode right about now. Please don’t get any ideas.”

“Ah, hon, I’m seventy years old, my ideas are long gone. But you’re still young.”

I feel heat rise into my cheeks as War raises a hand in greeting and leans up against the fence. He looks good in jeans and a button-down, his hair slightly messy, his eyes bright and fresh.

Renee introduces herself. “Melody has nice things to say about you,” she says with a teasing little smirk.

War laughs. “I bet she does.” His grin boils my blood.

“Renee’s been working here since I was a girl,” I say quickly before the old woman starts asking him if he’s single and if he’d like to date me. I bet she’d gladly give him a calendar of my ovulation schedule if it meant pumping out some Leader heirs and settling down on the farm.

“Speaking of which, I was just heading back to the office to get some stuff done,” Renee says with a wave. “I’ll see you two folks later on. Dinner tonight, Melody?”

“Gladly.” I wave as she walks back and War leans closer.

“She seems nice. You two were close?”

“Very close,” I admit and glance at him. “What are you smiling about?”

“You look happy.”

“I do not.” I force myself to stop grinning. “This is miserable for me. Remember?”

“Right, sure, I almost forgot. You hate the world, woe is you, all that.”

“Don’t start with me.”

“I’m just happy you found one person you still care about around here.” He looks past me into the distance and his face tightens. I follow his gaze and two ATVs are coming toward us, one with my cousin Evan on the left, and the other with my cousin Bruno.

Evan’s rangy, lanky, tall and narrow, with squinty eyes and an easy smile. Bruno’s got that same height, but he’s stockier, all shoulders and neck. They park nearby and kill their engines, looking like they’re out for a hunt and finally caught a herd of grazing deer.

“Look at this,” Evan says. “Little cousin Melody’s back from the dead.”

“She didn’t die, just ran off,” Bruno says and slaps the handlebar of his ATV. “When did you get here? Nobody told us you showed your face.”

“Yesterday,” I say, glaring at the boys. These two are harmless, but they’ve never been nice to me. The third brother, Dean, was nicer to me, since we’re the same age, but these two are total pricks as far as I’m concerned.

“Did Daisy tell you to fuck off yet?” Evan ask, eyes sparkling like he’d love to see it.

“Yes, pretty much,” I admit. “Has she been like that all this time?”

“Ever since she practically took over,” Bruno admits. Evan nudges his brother with an elbow and Bruno grins sheepishly. “I mean, she’s been, uh, great.”

War laughs and leans toward them. “You two are your cousin’s lackeys or what?”

“We have our own agenda,” Evan says and narrows his eyes. “And who the fuck are you?”

“This is Warren,” I say, gesturing. “That’s all you need to know.”

“Nothing’s changed with you, huh, Melody,” Evan says, sneering now. “Still miserable as always. You used to stomp

around here looking at everyone like you were so much better than us just because you did all the work your daddy told you to do while we actually had a little fun. You still got that look now.”

“Maybe because she *is* better than you,” War says before I can reply, and the venom in his tone surprises me. “Maybe it’d be smart to watch the way you speak to Melody.”

“Fuck off,” Bruno says, crossing his arms over his chest.

I speak up before this gets ugly. “Boys, it was good to see you both, but War and I are going for a hike.”

“Yeah, good, go wander around like you used to. If we’re lucky, you’ll get lost and won’t bother coming back this time.” Evan laughs as he turns on his ATV. Bruno follows him, and together they ride back to the barn and disappear around back.

I watch them go, an ugly rolling in my stomach.

Evan and Bruno were always nasty and rude and loved to tease me—but that was outright hostile. I wonder if Daisy’s got them wrapped around her finger.

“Were you serious about the hike?” War asks quietly. “Because if I have to wander around the woods again for a few hours, I’m going to let one of those idiots ride over my head.”

“No, I wasn’t serious.” I turn to him and level a hard stare. “Next time, don’t speak up and pick a fight, all right? I can handle myself.”

“I can’t stand around and let a couple of assholes talk to you that way.” His stare is equally hard and sends a shiver down my spine.

“Why do you even care?”

“Guess I have a thing for damsels in distress.”

I jab a finger at him. “I am *not* a damsel, and I sure as fuck am not in distress, so save the macho crap next time.”

He laughs as I turn and storm off. The anger’s back, and it’s hotter than ever, even though Evan and Bruno are idiots and don’t deserve a second thought. Only I hoped things might be

different now that everyone's an adult, and yet coming back to this place only reminds me that nothing ever changes. I'll always be treated like this, regardless of whether I take it over or run away again.

I'm an outsider in my own family, and no matter what, that'll never change.

# Chapter 13

## *Melody*

**T**he spiral stairs to the stop of the tower creak.

A thick layer of dust sits on the railing. I push it off, going up and up. Everything's the same as the last time I was in here, the same posters and pictures, the same paintings, the same carpet. The door to the top is the same: big, blue, with a gold handle and an equestrian design etched into the center, two big horses rearing back with leaves set all around them.

I push it open and climb into my childhood.

The room's cold. Spiders took residence in the corners and there's evidence of mice. The books are old and musty, but dry, and their binding glue's still intact. The CDs are stacked on the shelf, the magazines shoved in bins, the speakers collecting more dust. The walls are all glass, pristine like they'd been cleaned yesterday. I lie on my back on the green shag carpet and stare out the windows at the land beyond, watching the trees, the grass, the wind whip through the bushes like a wave. It's all so strange and so familiar, and an ache lodges itself in my chest.

This could all be mine, but I'll never have it.

So close, and so far away.

I spend awhile up here alone looking out at the ranch and thinking about how much I've missed and how much has changed until noise from down below catches my attention. It's War poking around at the base, looking for the door. I watch him, frowning, trying to decide if I want to help or tell him to go away. Eventually, he comes into the tower, and I



listen to him creak up the stairs. I look over my shoulder as he steps into the room.

He's quiet for a second. His eyes are wide as he looks at the windows, at all the old stuff, and down to me. "Wow," he says.

I crack a smile despite myself. "I know. Right?"

"What is this place?" He closes the door and walks inside, staring out at the fields.

"My father built it for my mother in the last few months of her life, or at least that's what I was told. They spent their last days together up there when I was really little, and now I feel like I'm closer to her when I'm at the top."

"I'm sorry," War says and puts a hand on the glass. "It's amazing up here."

"I think Dad wanted Mom to have someplace that made her happy in the end. Somewhere she could be comfortable, but still be able to see outside."

"That's a really beautiful thought."

"I basically lived in here. I mean, when I wasn't running around outside, I was up here."

"A clearing in the woods and the top of a tower. How very fairytale."

I smile and stretch. "I guess you're right."

He turns and studies me with those searching eyes. I always get the feeling that War wants to say something but he's holding it back for some secretive reason. It's like whatever he really wants to say is locked behind his lips, and he's too afraid to let it out.

"Why are you cousins all pricks to you?" he asks as casually as anyone can ask that question.

It makes me laugh though. "I bet you're starting to understand why I never come home."

"It was always like that?"

“Not like *that*, but they liked to tease me a lot, sure. I was always sort of the odd one out.”

“Fuckers,” he mutters and looks over his shoulder like he might spot Evan and Bruno riding around.

“But that’s not why I left,” I whisper, and I don’t know why I say it, but once the words are out, I suddenly want to tell him more. I’m desperate for someone to hear it, maybe not the full truth, not the total story, but a piece of it at least. A big and horrible piece of it.

“You don’t have to tell me.” He narrows his gaze before he walks over and sits down next to me.

I like the warmth of his leg against mine. He’s close, too close, and if I had sense, I’d shift away.

Instead, I only tilt my head back and look up at the ceiling where several crystals hang down, catching the light and casting rainbow shapes across the floor.

“It was Daisy’s sister that really did it. Her name was Rosie.” I close my eyes and see her again. Chomping on gum. Sneering at me. “She was the worst of all my cousins. I don’t know why, but Rosie always hated me, ever since we were little. She was a year older and she made it her life’s mission to torture me. Sometimes the other cousins played along, but mostly it was Rosie, telling me I was stupid or lame for liking the ranch so much, or pulling horrible pranks. Like the time she cut my hair in my sleep and glued it to my face. Or the time she stole all my books and burned them out back.”

“Those don’t sound like pranks,” War says. “It sounds more like she was trying to hurt you.”

“She was.” I close my eyes. Rosie’s sneer, her wicked laugh. “There was an accident when I was fifteen, a couple years before I left for good. She died—I mean, I guess she choked to death. And I was there. I tried—” I stop talking and take a trembling breath. “Anyway, she died, and after that, things changed. They got worse.”

War’s quiet except for his slow, steady breathing. I want to lean my head against his chest and listen to the march of his

heart if only to have something human to hold on to. This story is at the heart of my nightmare, in the center of why I can't come back to this place and why I'll never take it over. It's my trauma, and it's worse than that. It's my origin story and everything that drives me to keep on running.

Rosie's hands scrabbling at her throat. Her blue lips, her bulging eyes, the way she fell over crashing to the ground and flopping on her side, clawing and clawing and clawing, trying to get the gum dislodged from her throat, the desperation and fear in her eyes. God, so much fear, and slowly that fear leached away, slowly her thrashing stopped.

"That must've been hard, losing someone so young like that," War says and shifts closer. "How'd your family take it?"

"Hard," I say. "Her parents basically turned into recluses. Daisy was a total wreck. My dad—" I stop and lean my face in my hands. "Well, my dad wasn't kind."

"They blamed you." War's voice is silken and smooth, but not sympathetic.

"They did," I agree. "Because I didn't save her. They said I should've done something. But I was fifteen, I didn't know, I was panicking, and I just—"

"You froze."

I sigh and scrape both hands over my eyes. I'm not crying, not again, not over that old nightmare. I don't have tears to shed for Rosie. Frankly, I never did.

"Things got bad after that. The cousins were brutal, especially Daisy. She was relentlessly mean to me, and Dad didn't do anything to stop it. I still don't understand why. Maybe he wanted me to stand up for myself and wanted to teach me some kind of lesson, or maybe he thought I deserved all the hassle. But either way, it got to the point where I figured I'd either stay here and die or leave and keep on living."

"So you left."

"Sometimes I wonder if I should've stuck it out."

His hand touches my leg. Big and bold. He squeezes, tightening his grip, and shifts to look me in the eye. “You did what you had to do. I’ve seen what families can be like when they want to hurt each other. It’s so much worse than a stranger.”

“You went through something like that?”

He tilts his head slightly. “Something like that. But I’ve also worked jobs—” He takes a breath and lets it out. “A girl named Marcy was on the outs with her grandmother. But the sweet old bat had a necklace that Marcy couldn’t stop thinking about. And so I was hired to go into the ancestral family’s home, sneak into the grandmother’s room, and fetch the necklace back for dear old Marcy. Well, Marcy broke the thing down, sold the diamonds to the highest bidder, and replaced them with glass. When the grandmother found out, Marcy was excommunicated, prosecuted, and committed. My name was blessedly left out of the proceedings.” He pauses, looking out the windows, eyes far away. “I’ve seen worse. Sons hurting their fathers. Cousins hurting cousins. I’ve never killed, but there are a few situations where I’m pretty sure I would’ve gotten paid handsomely to do it. That’s the world we were born into, all these rich people and their grudges, desperate to defend their place in the world.”

I watch him carefully, surprised at the emotion in his tone. On a whim, I reach out and touch his cheek, not sure why I’m doing it. The skin’s stubbled, freshly shaven but beginning to shadow, and he looks at me as my fingers linger there. He’s warm, almost hot, and his eyes burn into mine. His expression is hard, pained, but also longing—also hungry.

I feel that same hunger, deep inside my chest, deep in my guts.

When his lips come toward mine, I don’t move. I smell him, bright and acidic and musky. I feel him, both soft and firm. I open my mouth and taste him—citrus and mint. And I kiss him, and let his tongue wrap against my tongue, and let him pull me by the hips onto his lap until I’m straddling him at the top of the tower where I spent so much time as a little girl, sometimes imagining scenarios a lot like this one. I melt into that kiss, let myself get lost in that kiss, because for the first

time in as long as I can remember, this feels good. This feels better than anything has felt, better than I thought I could feel, and I don't want it to stop.

His fingers dig into my hips. I let out a whimper into his mouth. His right hand comes up and wraps into my hair, pulling. I moan and gasp, his lips moving away, finding my neck, kissing me there. The sounds coming from my throat—I didn't know I could even make them. I move my hips, grinding into him. War's driving me wild, and a deep, almost overwhelming desire bursts into my mind as he rolls me over and pins me down on the thick carpet.

“War,” I pant, whimpering, gasping. “What are—”

“If you keep talking, you're going to ruin this,” he says, unbuttoning my jeans, his eyes a hungry blaze. “And I don't want to stop.”

“War,” I moan as my jeans come off. I lift my ass, letting him unwrap me. He kisses my inner thigh, kisses up to my panties. I'm in simple black cotton. I didn't expect anyone to see me like this, not today, not here. I grip his hair as he pushes my underwear aside, tongue probing, teasing, and I don't know why, I don't know how this is even happening, but when he licks my pussy from the base to the tip, pausing to swirl around my clit, moving back down along my lips, I nearly scream.

“There you are,” he whispers and slides a finger inside as he rolls his tongue in knee-shaking circles. My back arches and my hands grip his hair harder. “There you fucking are, Melody.” He sucks my clit, teasing me faster. “Making those moans. Rolling those hips. Did I finally crack your shell? No, don't fucking talk. I only want your whimpers. I only want to hear you say my name.”

“War,” I moan, head tilted back, the outside world now upside-down as my hips buck. “Fuck, War.”

He slides his finger in and out faster as he works my clit. “I didn't think I'd taste you today, lovely Melody, but don't for a second think I haven't been imagining it. Your lovely little pussy on my tongue. Your fucking gorgeous moans in my ears.

You don't have any idea how badly I want to stick myself between your legs and feel your silky little cunt wrap itself around my cock. I want your mouth on my mouth. I want your tongue on my cock, sucking, gagging. I want you sweating and so satisfied you could fucking cry."

"God damn it," I gasp, hands reaching up, palms pressing flat against the glass. "Don't stop."

He licks and sucks faster, tongue lashing and swirling, teeth and lips working me as he slides another finger inside and fucks me deeper. I'm in bliss, in heaven, and all my problems and worries and fears disappear, there's nothing else but War, and for the first time it's like I can see him clearly.

War is like me.

He's a liar, a fake, a cheat.

He's a beautiful man with a lovely story, but that's all it is. A puff of smoke and nothing.

And that's all I am, all I'll ever be.

Pretty deceit, gorgeous dishonesty.

And god, there is nothing better than a liar's tongue licking my pussy, a liar's fingers fucking me deep, a liar's voice driving deep into my brain like a chisel pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

"I want to taste it, Melody," he croons. "I want to taste you as you come. Are you going to come for me, lovely Melody? Come on, you dirty fucking girl." He slides his fingers faster, curling them. "You lovely, dirty fucking girl, I want to taste it. Tell me you're going to come for me. I want you to say it for me, you filthy girl."

"I'm close," I say, gasping for air, my body flushed.

He keeps going, licking and sucking, and I'm moaning his name and rolling my hips, two fakes at the top of the tower. When the orgasm hits, it's like all my fictions and my myths and my distortions blow away in a gale-force wind and I come as his lips suck and lick me, not slowing, not gentle, not holding back, and I come and come, brain bursting at the

seams, until slowly I regain myself, twitching and panting hard.

War leans back and looks at me as I lie on my side, grinning.

“Good girl,” he whispers, and I watch as he licks my pussy clean from his fingers. “Very good girl.”

I adjust myself. Get my panties back into place, for all the good they’ll do. I pull up my jeans and sit there, chewing on my lip, trying to decide what the hell we do now. This wasn’t supposed to happen—I didn’t want to complicate things with War more than they already were—

A voice calls from outside: “Melody! I know you’re up there!”

I exchange a look with War. He’s grinning, head tilted. I’m suddenly mortified. If someone saw—

But no, it’s impossible to see into the windows during the day, especially from on the ground.

I roll over and look out. Daisy’s standing down below with Uncle Lovett and Uncle Dudley, and none of them look happy.

“Melody!” Daisy’s shouting again. “Get down here. We need to talk.”

“You’d better go,” War says, licking the tip of his finger.

I turn and glare at him. “Not a word,” I say. “Seriously, War. Not a single word.”

He laughs like he doesn’t know what I mean as I storm over to the stairs and head down to face my cousin and my uncles.

# Chapter 14



## *Melody*

**D**aisy stands in front of Uncle Lovett and Uncle Dudley looking pissed. Her arms cross over her chest and her eyes narrow as I step out of the tower and face them. I'm distinctly aware of War back in the shadows on the stairs, and I can still feel him between my legs, his mouth on my mouth, his fingers deep inside—

And I have to pinch my thigh to get that image out of my head. This is absolutely not the time to daydream.

“What can I do for you, Daisy?” I'm proud of the way my voice doesn't shake, even though a prickle of fear rolls down into my stomach.

My cousin takes a couple steps forward. “I wanted to have a conversation with you, Cousin Melody. I thought we might clear the air between us and make sure you understand the current situation.”

I glance back her toward my uncles. “And you brought back-up?”

“Melody,” Uncle Lovett says, a tall and skinny man with gray hair and wrinkles around his eyes. “We're just here to make sure everyone's clear about the situation. This doesn't have to be confrontational.”

“How's that supposed to work?” I ask him. “You two are going to stand there looking tough? You haven't even said hello to me, you know, and I'm supposed to be your niece.”

“Things are complicated,” Uncle Lovett says.

“When was the last time you visited my dad?” I give him a hard look and spread my hands to encompass the others. “Any of you? Do any of you go sit with him?”

“I watched a movie with him with a few days ago,” Uncle Dudley says as if that’s more an admission of guilt than anything else. He’s heavy-set, softer than I remembered, and I get the feeling that none of these people have been working the ranch much in my absence. It sure as heck doesn’t look like it, at least.

Anger builds up in my chest. I don’t want to have this talk—I’m not interested in whatever Daisy has to say—but seeing my uncles like this, standing behind my cousin like they’re afraid of her, it makes me mad as hell. This place didn’t used to be so soft and weak, and there was no backstabbing and gossip. It used to be a place of business, a place to raise horses and train them and sell them, not some weird stomping ground for rich girls to flex their power. I knew my uncles were different from my dad, but I thought they had some backbone at least. Apparently not.

“None of that matters,” Daisy says, cutting off anything my uncles might’ve added in their defense. “I’m here to explain the situation to you, Melody, since you’ve been away for so long and so much has changed.” She comes closer, staring at me like this conversation is about to turn into a fistfight. And I almost welcome it: based on her manicured nails and her blowout, I’m pretty sure I can take her.

“I’m not interested,” I say as firmly as I can. “I came home to say goodbye to my dad and that’s it. I don’t want to get involved in your family drama.”

Daisy’s smile is tight. “Then perfect. You won’t mind listening to what I have to say then.” When I don’t argue, she continues. “See, after you left, someone had to step up and start running this place. Your father’s been on a steady decline for years, and at a certain point, it got so bad that we had to ask him to step down. And I bet you can guess how that went.”

I look away and try to picture my father, big and tall and proud, backing down from working on the ranch. That’d be

like asking him to cut off his own leg and give up any purpose he had in this world, and I'm positive he would've fought against that like a rabid tiger. That fact that he eventually gave in makes me believe Daisy's story, that he really was in bad shape.

"You weren't here," Daisy says, her voice low now, gentle and accusing. "You ran off when things got hard, and you left us to pick up the pieces. You stirred the pot, got everyone upset and angry and hating each other, and then you dipped out like none of that was your problem. Your father was a wreck when you wouldn't come home, and slowly but surely, he fell apart, and the ranch began to fall apart with him. I had to make changes, streamline things, get rid of all the excess employees, trim the fat, or else we would've gone under years ago. You have no idea what state the ranch was in, Melody, but I do. Because I saved it."

I try to imagine what she's saying. It's totally plausible the ranch was in bad financial shape—I never saw the books and have no clue how much was going out and how much was coming in—but it *feels* impossible. My father loved this place, he was *obsessed* with making sure Leader Ranch was as successful as possible, and the idea that he'd somehow mismanaged it so badly that it was on the verge of closing feels crazy.

And yet neither of my uncles disagrees. They stand there looking hard and annoyed, probably pissed they have to deal with this instead of sitting down to watch basketball or whatever they waste their time with, and some part of my skepticism falters. If what Daisy's saying is true, then everything my father told me and War is painted in a new light. If Dad really has been declining for a while, it's about more than his lung cancer. There could be other problems, like Alzheimer's or something like that, and I wouldn't know a thing about it because I haven't been around to watch it develop.

"Now try to see it from my perspective," Daisy says. "I work hard to save the ranch. It's not what it was, I won't deny that, but at least it's still open and functioning. I make the hard

choices, the real sacrifices. I do the work and I save this place. Then you appear out of nowhere after years of being away, and you waltz back in here like you never left, and I hear your father is talking about leaving ownership of the ranch to you in his will. Imagine how I feel about you coming back when I've been here this whole time bleeding for this place. When I'm the one that kept it from going under."

My jaw works as Daisy circles me to the left and back around to the right again. "I didn't ask for any of that," I say, staring into her eyes as she paces. "I don't want Leader. I told Dad that already. If you think you're entitled to this place then you can have it."

"Good," Daisy says, stopping. "Pack your shit and leave."

My eyebrows raise. "I'd love to."

"Great. I'll bring your car around myself."

"But I can't. Not yet anyway." I step toward her. Only a couple feet separate us now. It's like the world is narrowed down into this moment, down into this tiny space, and all I care about is Daisy, the way she's looking at me, the memories she drags up in me. Loathing swells, but also confusion, and curiosity, and I falter, thinking maybe she's right if her story's true, maybe I really *am* wrong to be here.

But none of that matters. She can think whatever she wants to think—I'm here for one reason and only one reason, and that's to collect the money Dad promised to War for making me stay here. I want to cash my check, save Bomber, prove to myself that I can handle my own life, and move the hell on.

"There's the problem," Daisy says. "You pretend like you don't want the ranch, but *you're still here*. You could pack and go whenever, return to your other life, go back to whatever you were doing before you decided to come blow up everything we're worked for. Instead, you're lingering with that weird boyfriend of yours, and I don't believe a word you're saying."

"War isn't my boyfriend."

“Do you think I give a shit what he is to you?” Her eyes narrow in anger. “All I want is for you to drive on home, Melody. Leave us alone.”

I take a deep breath and let it out. “In a few days, I’ll be gone,” I say quietly. “I’m staying until the end of the week. I’ll visit with Dad and say my goodbyes. I’ll ride the ranch and spend some time with Renee. Heck, even you and I could try to get along, if you wanted. But I’m not leaving until I’m ready.”

Or until War earns the paycheck I desperately need.

Daisy’s smile is an ugly smear across her face and I can already tell where this is going. I’ve seen that look on her face—it’s the smirk she’s always given me before sinking her claws in my face. “You always were a liar, weren’t you, Melody? You never could tell the truth, and it looks like nothing’s changed. Like what happened to my sister. Are you still telling that tall tale about how you tried to help her? Or are you starting to admit that you’re the one who stood by while she choked to death, you sick bitch?”

I move toward her, hands tensed into fists, a sudden and violent ringing in my ears. “You don’t know a damn thing,” I say but something’s going off in my head, some alarm, screaming at me.

Daisy’s grinning now and not backing down. “Did you tell your guy the same bullshit story you told everyone else after Rosie died? That slanderous disgusting shit? Did you tell him your pathetic little story, your little woe-is-me garbage? Your little pity fest?”

“Fuck you, Daisy,” I say, and I’m trembling now with rage.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I bet you can’t tell that lie anymore, can you? Because it was never about Rosie bullying you or being a bitch, and trust me, she could be fucking cruel to me too. Nah, it was always about little Melody getting all the attention for herself, the big boss’s daughter, the most important girl in the whole Leader family. You couldn’t handle that a dead girl was getting the spotlight for a little while, so you told your sob story, you made up your little lie, and you

slandered my dead sister's memory all for your own pathetic attention-seeking."

I'm breathing hard, face flushed, dizzy as the memory comes back to me, that horrible night two days after Rosie died: crying so hard I threw up and Renee finding me on the floor of the barn and asking what was wrong, and how I admitted it to her. I told her everything, the whole ugly story about why I hated Rosie and what she did to me when we were younger, I let it rush out of me in a stupid, horrible flood, and once I was done, I felt better but everything got so much worse, because Renee couldn't let it go. She couldn't keep her mouth shut.

"I never wanted you to find out about that," I say so softly I'm almost whispering, but Daisy only shakes her head. "I never wanted anyone to find out."

"Bullshit. Another lie. How many more lies you got, Melody? God, just go back home and leave us alone. You're not wanted here."

"I'm not lying," I say and feel like I might fall over. "I was never lying. I'm not—" But I am lying, or I was lying, or maybe I'm lying now. I can't tell where the real me starts and the stories end because for so long now I've wrapped myself in layers to keep all this pain at bay.

Now Daisy's ripping it back into the light.

But my protest only makes Daisy's lip pull back in rage. "Don't start denying it now, you disgusting, fucking piece of trash," she snaps. "You sick piece of garbage, I swear to god, Melody, I'll fucking kill you, don't you start denying it now!"

"You don't know what happened," I choke out. "You weren't there. You knew what your sister was like, do you still think Rosie was innocent after all these years? Do you really think Rosie wouldn't have—"

Daisy comes at me, screaming. I'm so surprised that I don't even defend myself. Her hands slam into my face, slapping me hard. I stagger back and she's still on me, slapping, punching, screaming at me, telling me she hates me, she'll kill me, she'll rip out my eyes and make me eat them if I don't leave. I snap

out of my shock as fear and rage take over, and I manage to hit her back, screaming right in her face at the top of my lungs. I grab her hair and pull and she grabs on mine and we hit the ground in a heap, pulling and scratching and trying to hurt each other, an ugly mess of limbs and screaming and hate, and I don't know if I'm trying to beat Daisy or the memory of Rosie and I don't care. Being back home and facing all my demons has driven me to the edge already and I'm tumbling, plummeting back down into that dark place.

"Hey! Let her go!" Hands grab me, more hands grab Daisy. She's struggling, shouting, crying, accusing me of every awful thing she can come up with, trying to hit me, trying to hurt me, and I'm trying to hurt her right back.

"You lying bitch, you made it all up, admit it, admit you're a fucking lying bitch!"

"Daisy," Uncle Lovett says loudly and finally yanks her away. I feel a piece of hair tear from my scalp and I yelp in pain. "Stop it now, Daisy, damn it."

"Fucking bitch," Daisy screams as Uncle Lovett pulls her away, and she keeps struggling, keeps shouting obscenities, insults, every horrible thing she can come up with, she spews it at me like bile.

Then War's there, standing between Uncle Dudley and me. Dudley's staring with hate in his eyes like he wants to pick up where Daisy left off, and I'm sitting on the ground breathing hard, my lip swollen and bleeding, my ears ringing and head pounding, and War's glaring at my uncle.

"Go ahead," War says like he's ordering at a restaurant. "Come closer. Take your shot. You want to, I can see it."

Uncle Dudley's eyes flash malice. "This ain't your fight, boy. You can leave whenever you want."

"I could, but I like it here. So come on, old man. Come closer. Come try to hurt a girl while she's down on the ground. That's the kind of man you are, isn't it?"

Uncle Dudley's lips pull back into a disgusted sneer but he shakes his head and turns away. "Sick people," he says and

spits in the grass, walking after Uncle Lovett, who's still pulling screaming Daisy away. "Sick fucking people."

War watches him go until they disappear into the big house, Daisy's screams silenced, and quiet falls over the ranch.

I sit there, head spinning, trying to make sense of what happened. Daisy called me a liar, refused to admit I might've been telling the truth, and attacked me—and I didn't back down. Sure, I panicked at first, but I hit her back, and it felt good, it felt really good to stand up for myself.

Even if I basically lost.

"You okay?" War's expression is clouded. He holds out a hand and I let him help me up.

"I'm fine. I haven't been in a fight since—" I shrug and dab two fingers against my split lip. "Not since Rosie died."

"You got a few good hits in there," War says, softening a bit. "But Daisy kicked your ass."

"Thanks, I'm aware. No thanks to you." I push away from him and stagger a few paces toward the tower. "I think I need to be alone for a while." I turn my back on him, unable to look into his handsome eyes right now. I can only guess at what he's thinking after what he just heard.

"You sure about that?" he asks. "We don't have to talk, but you also don't have to be alone."

"I'm fine. Just go back to your room or something and just—" I shake my head, trembling as I open the door to the tower and step back inside. "I'm fine."

I climb the stairs and he doesn't follow. When I reach the top, I look out the window and spot him sitting at a nearby picnic table, watching the door like a dog guarding its master. I sink back into the shag carpet and finally let myself cry, tears streaming down my face, mingling with my bloody mouth.



# Chapter 15

## *War*

**M**elody stays locked in the tower for the rest of the day and I can't blame her for it, not after that ugly brawl. It only lasted seconds, and I couldn't get to her fast enough to stop it, but I saw the pain in her eyes after it was done. Nothing hurts like family, and this family seems dead set on hurting each other as much as humanly possible.

I'm tempted to scale those stairs and push my way into the top room, but I decide she's better off left alone.

Around dinnertime, a few cars leave the main house, and I go wandering back, looking around for those cowardly shithead uncles or any of her cousins, but the place is empty.

Which provides a man like me with an opportunity.

The thing about doing what I do is I developed some flexible morals over the years. I've seen the nasty side of people and got a glimpse at what families are capable of when they're desperate and angry and willing to go as far as it takes to get what they want, and I've learned that there are no lines when it comes to winning. Everything for me is moral gray, there's no black and white. Melody hasn't figured that out yet, but fortunately, she's got me.

Something about Daisy's story didn't ring true to me. I keep thinking about what she said about Colton Leader as I drift through the big house, looking like I'm just out for an evening stroll and taking a tour. I poke my head in room after room, moving from wing to wing. I come across some living spaces,

some bedrooms, and I poke around where it seems interesting, but I keep it moving. I keep it casual. And I keep on thinking.

It was when she started talking about the years after Melody left, and how her father started going downhill mentally, and how she was the one that stepped up and saved this place—

I smile to myself as I turn a knob and peer into another bedroom on the far end of the eastern wing. This one feels right—its feminine but younger. It's a big room, very pretty and well maintained, with small modern touches. Throw pillows, comfortable blankets, a couple candles left burning. Heels are lined up near the door. I step inside, peering around the corner, but the place is empty. A computer sits blank on a desk across from a massive four-poster bed. An iPad charges on the bedside table. Another door leads into a bathroom with a messy vanity, and beyond that is a massive walk-in closet with more women's clothing.

I start with the closet. People are predictable. I learned that over the years too—even if I think a hiding spot is too obvious, half the time that's exactly where I find whatever I'm searching for. I flip through sweaters, glance under dresses, poke around on shelves. I find old shoeboxes of photographs—young girls smiling, tanned and happy, and I recognize Daisy, and Melody, and some of the guy cousins, and another girl cousin that must be Rosie—but nothing useful. Old memories, dead and gone.

I drift back into the main room and start rifling through the desk.

Why would *Daisy* save this place? Of all the people in her family, why her? Why not those uncles, or an aunt, or anyone else? There have to be outside investors involved with a business like this, or at least people that know something about the day-to-day operations, somebody that could look at the books and ask the right questions. Why didn't they step in if Colton was so bad? Daisy had to have been young back then, maybe twenty at most. Why would a kid that age be the one to start making huge financial decisions, and why would anyone go along with it?

Just doesn't add up.

But that's not the only thing bugging me. That's bad enough, but what she said about Old Man Leader doesn't sit right, either. I've spoken to him a few times and he always came across as totally lucid. Struggling with his health, often in pain and suffering, but mentally all there, totally aware of what's going on with a solid grasp on fine details and long-term planning. I've met old folks suffering from memory problems, dementia, Alzheimer's, all that stuff, and Melody's father never struck me as impaired like that, not even a little bit.

Which shoots a pretty massive hole right in Daisy's story.

I find nothing in the drawers. The computer is locked and I can't guess the password. There are no files, no notebooks, no diaries. The place looks barren, almost like it was picked through and cleaned out recently. There's nothing under the mattress, or behind the bed, no loose floorboards, no hiding spots behind paintings, nothing like that. My search turns up frustratingly little, which is something in itself since it only makes me think Daisy's got something to hide even more than I already did, but my questions remain.

Why Daisy? And how much of that story was true?

There's a noise in the hall. I freeze, listening close. I didn't hear any cars return, but maybe I was wrong about everyone leaving for the night. I sneak to the door, trying to strain, but there's nothing. No voices, no footsteps. Heart racing, I step back out into the hall and close the door behind me.

"You won't find much in there."

I flinch and look over. The nurse stands there, smiling at me like she caught me sneaking cookies from the kitchen. I straighten and face her, arms crossed over my chest. I consider lying, telling some story about looking for a lost phone or a missing wallet, but something in her tone makes me pause. "What do you think I was looking for?" I ask.

"Don't know," she admits and leans back against the wall. "But you wouldn't be in Miss Daisy's room unless you were trying to find *something*. Problem is Miss Daisy's very careful,

and I doubt she'd keep anything important in there." Her eyebrows raise. "Unless you have a more intimate relationship with her than I thought?"

"Daisy's a stranger to me. I'm here with Melody."

"Figured." She shrugs, still smiling, and I can't get a read on what's going on. She's not angry, which is what I expected. She's almost—relieved.

"Let me ask you something." I move closer to her and smell mint and flowers. "You've been Colton Leader's nurse for a year now, right?"

"Little bit longer, but yes, that's right."

"Has he been diagnosed with dementia? Or Alzheimer's?"

She looks surprised. "No, not that I'm aware. And I'm not a doctor, but I've been around patients with those diseases. Colton doesn't show any of those symptoms."

I grunt and look away. I knew Daisy was lying about that, but why would she do it? And why would her uncles let her?

"Is there anything else about Colton's disease you want to tell me about?"

The nurse takes a deep breath and lets it out like she's been waiting for this moment a long time. "I don't know what you're thinking, but here's all I'll say. I'm not a part of this family and their fight over this place isn't my business, but I'm around a lot and I hear things. Folks act like I'm invisible and like I don't have ears sometimes. And I can tell you, something's not right. I've been waiting for someone to come around and start asking questions, and I think you're the closest thing I'm gonna get."

"What sort of questions should I be asking?" My heart's racing with anticipation. No matter how many times I do stuff like this, ask questions, poke around somewhere I shouldn't, it's always a rush.

She looks back the way she came. "It's about money, isn't it?" She blinks up at me and tilts her head. "You were looking in

Daisy's room. That's smart. But Daisy's smart too, and I don't think she'd leave anything to chance. Do you?"

"What do you know?" I press, but she's already shaking her head and walking away.

"I know Daisy and her uncles are involved in something. I know it's probably not legal. I know they don't want anyone looking around, and they definitely don't want Colton hearing about it. That's all I know."

"You need to give me something else. That could be anything."

"If I knew more, I'd tell you. All I've got are bad feelings. Colton's a hard man, but I think he's a good one, and I hope you figure out what's happening around here before he passes, because I think he knows something's wrong too."

I watch her disappear around the corner and lean my head up against the wall, eyes closed.

Melody's split lip flits into my memory. The anger in her eyes, the hurt at being called a liar. The taste of her, the sensual sounds of her moans as she came under my tongue.

I want to help her. I want to solve—whatever's happening at this place. Fraud? Murder? Probably a little bit of both.

But I'm lost and in the dark, and I'm not sure I can find out the truth without her help, and I doubt Melody's interested in digging through the wreckage of this place.

Too many bad memories.

Which leaves it up to me.

And the problem is, I'm not sure I *want* the truth. Whatever Daisy's been up to all these years can stay hidden for all I care, so long as I get Melody to marry me in time to inherit. Once that happens, we can evict all these petty little fuckers and take control of the ranch.

I can pay off my father's debt and save him from the Greeks.

I can give my mother the life she deserves.

All I need to do is fall in love.

With fucking Melody. And her taste. And her moans. And her kiss.

Let it go. Just let it go. Forget about Daisy and all the rest. Focus on what matters. Focus on the mission.

But as I push myself off the wall and walk away, I can't help but think about my next moves, because those soulless pieces of trash hurt Melody, and I can't let them get away with it.

# Chapter 16



## *Melody*

I lie on my back and stare out the windows as night falls on the ranch.

My mind's spiraling out of control from the fight. My head aches, my lip stings, but most of all, my pride is battered. I never should've let Daisy bait me into that, and I hate that I acted like a child again, like I was a teenager getting into a tussle. We're grown-ass adults, we shouldn't be fighting in the yard like that anymore, and yet the uncles did nothing about it at first, not until War showed up.

I hate myself for letting Daisy get to me. But her words echo in my brain, spinning through my thoughts. I'm a liar, an enormous fake, nobody believes me, and they never did. Why would they? I can still see my father, days after Rosie's funeral, standing in his bedroom as he looks down at me with utter disgust. I still hear what he said: *What is wrong with you, girl, talking bad about the dead that way, spinning crazy stories?* It was like a hammer blow, like getting punched in the throat. I would rather let Daisy slap me around for hours than hear that contempt in my father's tone again. I couldn't speak, couldn't explain. Dad stared at me with utter hatred, called me a liar, called me a fraud right to my face, questioned the most pivotal moment of my entire life like it was something I'd created for fun. He truly believed I made up the most awful moment of my life. Truly believed I told Renee for attention, and that I'd better drop it and forget it.

I left the ranch a week after that, after everyone heard about what I said, after my cousins brutally mocked me, after my

aunts and uncles all joined the chorus of *liar, liar, liar*, after everyone kept singing the praises of Rosie and made her sound like a saint.

Rosie wasn't a saint. She was an abusive bully and a part of me thinks she deserved what she got. I hated Rosie so much, hated her with all my body and soul, and to be called a liar, called a fake, called selfish and terrible, while they all acted as if she was the decent one—

I couldn't handle it.

I left and promised myself I'd never come back. And now here I am.

War leaves the main house a few hours after dark. I watch him walk through the night, barely more than a shadow. He's coming for me, and I don't care. I'm too tired to do much more than listen to the door open, listen to him come up toward me. I roll onto my side and prop my back to the window as he emerges through the trap door and crouches there looking at me like a hungry wolf.

"You've been up here for a while," he says.

I look down at my lap. "I just want to be alone."

"You've been alone long enough." He moves closer. "How's your face?"

"Fine. You can go."

"Your lip?"

"War."

"I'm just trying to check on you." He stops about a foot away, staring at my wounds. "You're dead set on pushing me away, huh?"

I feel a tingle run down my spine. My lips throb, whether from the cut or from something else, I'm not sure. "I don't want to be checked on."

"Here I am anyway. Tell me what you're thinking."

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out. "You want to know? I'm thinking this was a mistake."

“Don’t forget why we’re here.”

“Money,” I say and glance out the window, out toward the fields. I’m here for money, for Bomber, to prove I can be independent, but maybe that was all some foolish dream. “But there doesn’t seem to be that much around here these days. And I’m wondering how much my pride is worth.”

“I spoke with your father’s nurse earlier after I got done snooping through Daisy’s room. She says he doesn’t have dementia.”

My mouth drops open and I stare at him. There’s a lot to unpack, and I sit up straight. “You went through Daisy’s room?”

“Didn’t find anything,” he says, still gazing into my eyes. “What do you think about that? Your father doesn’t have dementia. Daisy’s story was bullshit.”

“She’s just a nurse,” I say, brushing him off. “You can’t go through Daisy’s stuff. That’s just—”

“I’ve done worse,” he says, coming nearer. “I didn’t think you’d give a fuck about that though.” God, he’s so big and handsome, and I think of his mouth between my legs, and a strange patter takes over my heart. Excitement courses into my veins. He’s close, and it’s dark, and we’re very alone up here.

“We’re staying for as long as it takes to get paid and then we’re leaving,” I tell him. “Don’t do anything that’ll make things harder. What’s it matter if she’s lying? None of this stuff is important.”

“*Why* is she lying? That matters to me. It should matter to you.” His head tilts, his eyes narrow. “You should give a shit.”

“I don’t.” I try not to let him notice my lips trembling. “I told you I didn’t want to come back, and I don’t want to stay. We’re hanging around for a few more days, getting paid, and that’ll be that.”

“You really don’t want to know what Daisy’s doing to this place? You’re not curious why she’s the one in charge and not one of your uncles or your aunts? Something’s broken here, Melody.” His tone is serious, like he genuinely cares, but why?

I don't understand what War has to gain from getting involved in my family's drama.

"I don't care," I say harsher than I wanted, but my nerves are raw. "This place isn't mine anymore."

"Melody—"

"No War, no, just stop it. Stop snooping. Stop asking around. I know you probably think you're helping, but you're not. I want you to stop."

He's quiet, letting my words drill into him, and a sickening hate slithers down into my guts. I hate myself, and I hate Daisy, and I hate War for bringing me here, and I hate him for kissing me and getting me off, and I hate him for making me confront the lies I've told, and the lies I'll keep on telling, because so much of my world is based on those lies.

"I think you're stuck in a cycle and you're unable to break free," he says, and my hands tremble. "I think you're going to keep on lying to yourself, pretending like you don't care about any of this, until it eats you up inside." He puts his hand on my thigh, his fingers digging into my skin. "I think you're rotting."

"Fuck you," I say and try to push him away, but he comes closer. I shift my weight and scramble to the side, but he grabs me and pushes me down against the carpet. I stare up at him as he pins my hands up above my head and shoves his knee between my legs, and I'm breathing hard, not from fear but from excitement. "War," I whisper. I know he's right. Something's rotten inside of me. The truth, the real version of myself, buried under all the lies.

His lips are inches from mine. "I think you'll keep on hating yourself if we don't do something."

"Why do you care? Why the *fuck* do you care?"

For the first time, he looks uncertain. His eyes flash to my lips, to my chest, and he slowly chews his lips. "I don't know," he whispers. "I thought it was just the job, but—" He hesitates and leans down, mouth brushing against my cheek. "I thought

it was just a game, just money. Now I'm wondering if it's more."

"What's more?" I'm shaking with anticipation.

"You." He kisses my neck. "Me. This place. I don't know." He kisses up my chin and lingers at the corner of my mouth. "If you tell me to stop, I'll walk away. I'll pretend like this never happened. It's not too late."

"And if I don't?"

"I won't go easy on you this time, pretty Melody."

He kisses me and I kiss him back, whimpering into his mouth as he crushes me with his body, pinning me down and controlling me, dominating me and destroying me, his kiss like poison and like heaven. I know this is stupid and complicated and I should put a stop to it, but I don't want to.

I want him to kiss me. I want his hands on my body. I sit up and let him take off my top, let him kiss my throat, let him pull my hair. I gasp, arch my back, let him turn me around and push me face-first into the carpet as he slides my shorts off and teases my pussy from behind. He kisses my neck, my back, sinks his teeth into my shoulder as his fingers slide inside of me—

And I moan, raising my ass in the air.

"Look at you," he whispers as his hand works its magic, his other fist in my hair. I taste carpet fibers and smell sex. "You lovely fucking Melody, your beautiful ass up in the moonlight, your pussy dripping down into my palm." He sides his fingers in and out faster, curling them to hit my G-spot, and pleasure blasts into my mind. "You like it when it hurts, don't you?" He slaps my ass and I gasp, sitting up on all fours. "You like it when it stings, just a little bit." He teases me again and kisses me, pulling me by the hair, driving my mouth against his. "You like it when I bite you, fuck you, make you moan."

"Yes," I admit, mortified and loving it. "God, I love it."

He spanks my ass hard and pulls me onto his lap. I take off his shirt and kiss his neck, taste the sweat on his skin as he teases my breasts and licks my nipples, sucking them hard, biting

down. I groan, hair thrown back, as he licks my neck and chest and slides a hand between my legs, but this time I shuffle down and down, pulling off his belt, his pants, until his thick cock is in my hands and I'm stroking him, staring up into his eyes.

"Good girl," he croons as I lick him. His cock's massive, thick and hard, and I taste every inch of his skin before swirling the drop of precum around the tip. "I always wondered what it would feel like to have my cock in your pretty mouth, lovely Melody."

I moan and take him between my lips, sliding up and down. He grabs my hair and pushes me down deep and I gag, gasping as spits rolls down his shaft. I pull back, stroking him with both hands, slick and wet, beautiful soaking sounds drifting through the tower as I stare into his eyes.

"Careful," I say, biting my lip. "You don't want to break me, do you?"

"Yes," he says, "I do." And he pushes me back down on his cock. I moan as he slides into my throat, up and down, fucking my face before he yanks me back by the hair hard, and I gasp in pain, but it doesn't last, he's already pinning me down on the carpet, my legs spread, his mouth all over my pussy, licking and sucking me, his fingers sliding deep. I roll my hips as my eyes flutter shut, and I sink into the bliss of him as he tongues me up and down.

"Fuck, War," I moan and squirm as his fingers hit the perfect spot. "What are we doing?"

"Right now I'm pushing you up to that edge and watching your skin flush. I'm tasting your pussy, licking your sex, drinking you down and absolutely fucking loving it. You drive me wild, Melody, even when you're being selfish, even when you're a fucking liar, all I can think about is pinning you down and sliding my cock between your legs. I want to hurt you and fuck you and make you come. I want to watch you swallow my cock, over and over again. I can't stop obsessing about it, my pretty Melody."

He sits back and I stare down at him, hands pressed against his chest as his cock teases me, the tip of it against my soaking entrance. I suck in gasping breaths, whimpering, body trembling with anticipation, until he slowly sinks deeper, and deeper, and I gasp with bliss, my head thrown back. He fills me to the brim and stretches me wide, his thick cock destroying me, driving me to the edge and beyond, breaking me to pieces, making it so I can't hide behind lies anymore. Everything is out in the open, everything is laid bare, and he isn't gentle about it. No, War's never gentle.

He fucks me. Nice and deep, he fucks me and looks in my eyes and pulls my hair and bites my lower lip as he grinds his cock into me. I moan, whimpering, words totally gone, language all but forgotten as I devolve into grunts and groans, my body shaking and sweating, and he keeps going, growling his pleasure. "Fuck, you feel good," he says, and his tone sounds like gravel in a roller coaster. "God damn it, Melody, your tight little cunt is like heaven." He rips into me, again and again. "Tell me you love it."

"I love it," I whimper.

"Tell me you want me to fuck you."

"Fuck me, please," I moan. "Fuck me hard, War, you asshole. I want to feel you."

He goes deeper, grabbing my ass before pinning me down by the throat, ripping harder and harder, and I'm riding that line between safety and terror, that beautiful gray area where pure bliss resides, and I want more, I want more hurt and more pleasure. He pulls my hair and tightens his grip around my throat as he goes harder, and his face is pulled into pure rage and ecstasy. My body's a keening wail of need, and he doesn't stop, the bastard, doesn't give me a break, no rest, no kindness, not for me. This is punishment, pure and simple, a punishment I want over and over again, and finally, I feel it building between us, that gorgeous peak rolling in the air, and I buck my hips, panting for more and more and more—

And finally, I come. He chokes me as I do it, growling my name, and I come like a sledgehammer to my brain, clearing

me out and destroying me. When I can't take anymore, he turns me around, spreads my legs, and licks me from behind.

"Fuck," I say, twitching. "Oh, shit, I'm really sensitive now."

"Good," he says, lapping at me. "Fuck, you taste lovely." He presses himself tight against me, his cock at my entrance, and I gasp as he sinks inside. He pulls me up, my back against him, his cock deep between my legs as he teases my breasts and kisses me over my shoulder. "I'm going to come deep inside of you, Melody. Fucking you isn't enough. I want to *own* you, my lovely Melody."

"Keep going," I pant as he fucks me then, ripping into me from behind, pinning me down and taking me. "Fuck me, god damn it, War, fuck me." And it's the realest thing I've ever felt, past all the lies and the bullshit, it's only War and me and our bodies, and the pleasure and the pain, and I want more, so much more. He keeps going deeper and deeper until his groans and grunts and gasps drive me over the edge again, and I come in a frenzy, I come like I can't breathe, and I feel him stiffen and fill me, our orgasms mixing and mingling until I'm not sure where I am or what I want and all I care about is coming and coming and coming.

I collapse onto the rug. He falls next to me and I lean my head on his chest, listening to the rapid patter of his heart. I'm sweating, and he's damp and grinning. I kiss his skin and take deep breaths to try to calm myself before my chest explodes.

"Much better than being alone," he murmurs and I laugh, flushed with pleasure and still dizzy from coming twice.

"You know this is going to complicate things, right?" I look at him sideways and in the darkness of the room, he only smiles.

"If we let it," he whispers and takes me by the hair and kisses me.

I kiss him back, but there's a ticking clock in the back of my head: only a few more days and this is done, whatever this is, and I get paid and War can go back to doing whatever it is he does, and nothing will mean anything.



# Chapter 17

## *Melody*

**R**enee sits down behind the desk in the office and drops a big binder in front of me. “That’s everything,” she says, grinning sheepishly.

I glance back at War and he only shrugs like he doesn’t know what to do with the thing. I take the book and flip it open, looking at the rows of numbers and trying to make sense of it all. “This is everything?”

“Oh, no,” Renee says with a laugh. “This is just this year. There are a dozen more binders like this one. I’ve been trying to digitize but—” She sighs and jabs a finger at her computer screen. “I’m not exactly tech savvy.”

“This is going to take all day,” I say and keep flipping the pages. “Actually, no, it’ll take all week.”

“We don’t have a week,” War points out.

“I don’t know what you two are looking for,” Renee says. “I manage the books and it’s all clean.”

“I believe you,” I tell her, but something’s still bugging me. “Do you have the books for the years Daisy first started taking over the ranch? And maybe a couple years before that?”

“Somewhere around here.” Renee gets up and starts going through a large bookcase in the back. “If you’re thinking there’s some sort of financial impropriety—” Her tone gets harder, almost warning. “Let me just say that Daisy isn’t the only person with access to all this.”

“Who else can get in the office?” War asks.

“Mostly everyone,” Renee says and drops a few more binders in front of me. “The door’s never locked.”

“Which means anyone could’ve come in here and made changes.” I rub my face and try to get a feel for the magnitude of the task ahead of me. “If we split this up—”

“Count me out,” Renee says and comes around the desk. “Honey, Melody, I love you, you know that. I would do anything for you. But this isn’t my fight.”

I lean back in surprise. “What do you mean?”

Renee crosses her arms and glances at War, looking uncomfortable. “I’m getting old, honey. I can’t work as a ranch hand forever.”

“That’s news to me,” I say and try to play my sudden pang of sorrow off by smiling, but I’m not doing a good job at hiding it. “I figured you’d keep on going—”

“Until I couldn’t?” she asks softly and her smile nearly kills me. “I know, honey, I know. Don’t look at me like that. I’ve given a lot to this place and I’ve tried my best to help it along, but I can’t do it forever.”

“I know,” I say and stand suddenly. “If anyone deserves to retire, it’s you, I just—what am I going to do?”

“Whatever you’ve been doing all these years. Sweetie, this place isn’t your burden anymore. You don’t have to sacrifice for Leader Ranch, not like I did.”

I walk over and give her a big hug. “I missed you. Everyone else is awful, but I always loved you.”

“I love you too, honey,” she says, tightening her grip. “Catch the bastards, will you? But don’t let them drag you down too.”

“I’ll try.”

I wipe the tears from my face as Renee heads out to the main barn and closes the door behind her. War says nothing, only walks over and takes one of the books before taking the chair next to mine and flipping it open in his lap. I study him for a second and feel the tingle of him between my legs, taste his tongue on my lips, hear his moans of pleasure course through

my veins. I wonder how I let things get like this between us, where I'm not sure what's happening, if this is still business or if we're mixing in pleasure, and what that means for the future.

"This is a mess," he says softly. "I mean, not in a surprising way, but still."

"Have you looked at a business's books before?"

"Believe it or not, I have." He cracks his neck and rolls it from side to side. "Part of the job."

"Do I want to know?"

"Probably not."

"All right then, since you're the expert. What are we looking for?"

He purses his lips a second and taps a finger down on the page in front of him. "We're looking for deposits and withdrawals that don't make sense. I wish I could be more specific, but that's all we'll have at first. Withdrawals are more likely since typically when you're doing fraud, you take the money out, you don't put the money in, but you never know. So keep an eye out for strange amounts."

"This is a horse farm. There are random amounts all over the place."

"Maybe, but there are also patterns, and it looks like Renee was generally pretty good about noting where the payments are from."

I raise my eyebrows. "Here I am, thinking you were just another pretty face."

"I'm a liar, not an idiot." He tosses me a smile and leans closer. "We could always ignore the books and enjoy our sudden privacy."

"Easy," I say, brushing his hand away. "We have work to do."

"I can't tell what I'd enjoy more, fucking you right now or watching your shitty family suffer. Maybe we could do both?"

"How about we stick with the books for now."

He laughs and leans back and starts skimming the figures.

I try to get into it. Numbers were never my specialty—I've always been an outdoors girl—but ever since I started working for Kat and Ford, I've been much more involved in the financial side of things, and soon Renee's books start making some sense. War's right, there are patterns, recurring expenses scattered all throughout, and nothing crazy jumps out at me. No large numbers, no strange amounts, just typical business stuff.

I keep glancing sidelong at War. He's lost in the work and his eyes scrunch down when he's concentrating, and his mouth moves slightly as he reads to himself, subvocalizing the numbers. It's actually kind of cute and I want to straddle him, bite his lower lip, let him grip my ass and pull my hair. I want him to make me forget for a while.

But that raises more questions. Like why he'd want to sleep together when that only makes this whole situation that much more complicated? I'm attracted to him—I can't pretend like I'm not—but there are things about him that don't add up. Like if his family is wealthy, why is he taking odd jobs? Why is he here now, going through with this, instead of running far away like any rational person would? Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money, but is it worth the stress and the risk of getting tangled up with Daisy and my uncles? I'm not sure it is, at least not for him.

So why stick around? Why help me? Why snoop on Daisy and why get more involved than he has to?

Why kiss me and fuck me and get me off? Why make me want him?

Because I *am* starting to want him. War's a liar like me, but I catch little moments where he's being genuine, where he's laughing and unguarded and himself. And I like those moments, they make me feel warm and right and comfortable, and I want more of them. I could see myself with War, even though he's not really my typical kind of guy—I always thought I'd end up with a rancher—I can still picture going for hikes and picnics and laughing at his jokes and letting him bite

my shoulder as he wraps his big hand around my throat and buries himself between my legs.

“You’re daydreaming,” he says and I start. He’s right, I was staring off into space.

“Sorry. I’m not good at concentrating on stuff like this.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing important.”

His smile is maddening. “Come on. You were thinking about last night. Don’t pretend like you weren’t.”

I feel my cheeks flush pink. “I mean—”

“Oh, you were, you filthy girl.” He laughs and closes his book. “Which part was your favorite?”

“I’m not doing this with you.”

“Come on, was it when I pinned you down and—”

“Nope,” I say loudly, interrupting him. “Actually, I was sitting here wondering why you haven’t run away yet.”

He considers that a moment. “Would it surprise you if I said I’m staying because I want to?”

“That’s not exactly an answer. *Why* do you want to?”

“Because of you.”

My jaw works. I try to come up with some snappy answer, but my words fail me, and I try to parse out what he means. “For the money?” I asked. “You’re staying for me—for the money?”

He shakes his head slowly. “It started out for the money. And I’ll still take my cut when your father writes us that check. But I’m staying, and I’m getting involved, because I want to make sure you walk away from this whole mess feeling like you did something decent. Like it wasn’t all some mistake.”

“I don’t understand why you’d care.”

“Would it surprise you if I said I don’t either?” He laughs at the look on my face. “How about we just say the sex was

really good, and I want to see if I can't have another taste before this is all done."

"Keep talking like that and I promise there won't be another taste of anything."

"Good, I like a little challenge."

I shake my head and go back to skimming the books, but I'm smiling to myself and it takes a while to identify the feeling rattling around in my chest. It's warm and comforting and glows like the embers right before a fire. War is the first person to do something for me purely because it makes him feel good, and that makes me happy in a way I can't quite describe. Kat and Ford are great to me, they gave me a job and treat me like family, but it's a much more equal relationship in the sense that I try to give back to them as much as I can, and we're intertwined together. But what I have with War is much more transactional, and if he decides to do something for me, there's no obligation driving him. He's doing it purely because he wants to, and not because he has to or because he's supposed to.

And it feels good. It's nice the way he looks at me, the way he touches me. The way he stands up for me. I don't need him there lurking behind me and glaring at Daisy and my uncles—but I sure as hell like it.

After another hour of work, War finally tosses a book aside and puts his face in his hands. "I can't keep doing this."

"You're dismissed then," I say and wave at him. "Feel free to go."

He glares at me. "This isn't getting us anywhere."

"Then what do you have in mind?"

"I don't know," he says and stands, heading over toward the window. He squints outside for a few second before gesturing for me to join him. "Who's that?"

I get up and stand by his side. A woman's riding one of the old mares in the paddock, and it takes me a second to recognize Kerry. She hasn't been around much and I only saw her once

when we first arrived, but it's definitely her. "That's my cousin."

"Maybe we can talk to her." He glances at me. "Think she'll know something?"

"It's not a bad idea," I admit. "I'm not super close with her but she's been around all this time."

"Think she's on Daisy's side?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Then let's go find out."



# Chapter 18

## *Melody*

**K**erry dismounts and waves as we approach. She stands behind an old mare, a pretty horse with a good temperament. Kerry's brown hair blows in the wind and she tries to smooth it back, but the strays keep circling her head like a halo. I give her the best smile I can and take the lead with War straggling after me. I hope he's not scowling and looking all intimidating. I was never close with Kerry when I was younger, but she also wasn't one of the loud voices denouncing me and making my life hell when all that crap happened. She mostly kept to herself, and I've always respected her for it, even if I wish at least one person had come to my defense.

"Hey, Kerry," I say and wave. "How are you?"

"Doing good," she says and pats the old mare's flank. "Just taking Lily here for a little walk."

I approach Lily and gently stroke her side. She's a sweet old thing, very loving and gentle. "Do you ride often?"

"Not as often as I like." She takes Lily's reins and starts walking. "How about you?"

"Constantly," I admit. "I still work with horses."

"Lucky you. I got a job in marketing at a little boutique agency with headquarters not far from here, so I'm in the office most of the time."

My eyebrows raise in surprise. "Wow, that sounds great."

She gives me a tight smile, and I get the feeling that it's not actually *great* at all. "Pays the bills at least."

"Since when did anyone in this family need to *pay the bills*?" War asks, about as tactful as a sledgehammer to the face.

Kerry gives him a hard look. "I'm not sure what you mean. Nothing's free, is it? Sorry, what was your name again?"

"War," he says, flashing her a smile. "Pleasure to meet you. And I meant that I thought everyone in the family was taken care of."

"Not everyone," Kerry says, staring straight ahead. "And things haven't been the best around here these days."

I give War a dirty look and he only shrugs like he doesn't understand why Kerry's getting all defensive. "Sorry about him," I say before War can make things worse. "He has basically zero tact and we're just trying to get a feel for how the ranch has been since I left."

Kerry glances at me, expression softening. "Honestly? It hasn't been all that great. There was a really ugly period after everything went down and you moved away, but Daisy's got the place stabilized, except apparently we can't afford to employ everyone anymore. Which means cousins like me had to get jobs."

War's expression practically lights up as he shifts closer. "What do you mean, cousins like you?"

Kerry rubs a hand over her face. "I know what you two are doing," she says.

"Sorry, Kerry, I don't—"

"It's fine," she says, tone sharp. "Seriously, I don't care. I know you're not getting along with Daisy, and I guess you're trying to find out what the deal is with everything around here."

"Pretty much," War admits and I give him a hard look, but maybe he's right and being straight up and honest is the best approach here.

“We’re not trying to get anyone in trouble,” I say and pat Lily’s flank. “It’s just, so much has changed and I don’t understand all of it.”

“I wish I could tell you more, but I haven’t been very involved with things around here for a few years. Daisy took over, a few of us were cut out, and the rest all closed ranks around her.”

“The rest, meaning?” I ask.

“Uncles, aunts, the few cousins she kept around. You know, her cronies.” Kerry scowls and shakes her head, patting her hair flat. “I’m not trying to sound too bitter, okay? Daisy really did turn this place around. From the way I heard it, the ranch was basically on the verge of bankruptcy, and Uncle Colton —” She hesitates and gives me a strange look. “Apparently, there was talk about selling the property and the house.”

I blink rapidly and try to take that in. “Really? My dad was going to sell?”

“I’m not sure it was his idea, but everyone was talking about it as a possibility at the time. But then Uncle Colton got even sicker, and Daisy started making all these decisions and all the uncles were backing her up. People got fired and horses and cattle were sold, and they auctioned off a few of the big machines, and now it’s like—” She gestures around her at the sad state of things. “It’s not gone, but it’s not what it was.”

“Why Daisy though?” I ask, genuinely curious now. War got in my head apparently, and I can’t stop thinking about it. “I don’t get why everyone would go along with what she wanted and not one of the uncles.”

“I think she was the only one with any ideas at the time.” Kerry looks uncomfortable as she talks. “You know how everyone is. Uncle Colton was the one running the place and everyone just sort of... went along, you know? We all enjoyed success when the place was successful, and when things turned—”

“Nobody wanted to step up,” War says.

“Except for Daisy.” Kerry lets out a long breath. “Listen, Melody, I know you got treated really badly for a while back

in the day.” She stops walking and faces me, but her eyes slide off to the side like she can’t meet my gaze. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for, you know, how that all went down. And also, that I think Rosie was capable of a lot more harm than everyone was willing to admit at the time. It was just so soon after she died, and then the whole thing with you and her came out, and I guess—” Kerry sighs and looks up. “Anyway, it’s been bothering me for years. And I’m sorry.”

I blink rapidly at her, trying to make sense of what she’s saying. I never, ever expected someone from the family to apologize to me for how things went down, and to hear Kerry say that—

Tears press against my eyes. “Thanks,” I say and give her a tight hug. When I let go, she’s blinking back tears and wiping her eyes too. “I really didn’t expect that but it means more than you probably realize.”

“Well, I should’ve said it a long time ago. Everyone should’ve. But I think they’re afraid of Daisy now.”

“I don’t get it. Daisy can’t be technically in charge, right? I mean, she was so young back then.”

“The problem is nobody’s in charge. Your dad is the outright owner, and he’s the only one with any legal right to make decisions, and since he’s incapacitated, I guess it just falls to whoever’s willing to do the work. Mostly that’s Daisy.”

I take a deep, shuddering breath and try to calm myself. I grin at Kerry and squeeze her hand. “Thanks for talking to us. And thanks for saying what you said, you know?”

“Yeah, of course.” She laughs too and wipes her eyes. “Can I ask you something? You don’t have to answer, but I’m curious. Why are you back? Daisy thinks you’re trying to take over. Is she right?” There’s a strange hopefulness in her voice that breaks my heart.

“No,” I say and glance at War. His face is blank and he gives me nothing. “I don’t want the ranch.”

“Oh, right. Okay, that makes sense, I guess.” She nods to herself and I wonder if she was hoping I’d push Daisy out or if

she misses being on the family payroll. “Then what do you want?”

“It’s complicated, but I’m really not here for the ranch. I’m just here to say goodbye to my dad and for War to get paid for a job, that’s all.”

“Huh.” Kerry doesn’t look like she believes me, and I can’t blame her. Intrigue is practically baked into this place. “Well, I’d be careful of Daisy. I’m sure you figured that out already, but she’s seriously gunning for you.”

“We’re aware,” War says without smiling.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” I press. “Anything about Daisy and the way she took over?”

“Just that it was strange the way everyone fell into line. Uncle Lovett really went to bat for her early on and then Uncle Dudley stood behind her, and I guess everyone else realized the two main contenders for control were backing her and they might as well too. But it was Uncle Lovett in those early weeks that really got things going.”

I glance at War and nod. “All right, we’ll talk to him.”

“Good luck with that. Seriously, Melody, good luck. I don’t know if you’ll ever get the closure you deserve, but I hope you’re doing better now. Can I tell you one more thing?”

“Sure, go ahead.” I feel exhausted like a weight’s holding my shoulders down. Kerry starts heading out again and I stay behind with War.

“You should get the hell out of here and forget this place exists,” Kerry says without looking back. “I sure as heck wish I could.”

And then she’s gone, heading toward the woods with Lily, walking at a slow clip. I watch her for a little while without speaking, with War standing close by my side. Eventually, he breaks the silence.

“That went well,” he says.

“It did?” I look at him and tilt my head. “I only cried once so I guess that’s a win.”

“I mean we got a lead. Uncle Lovett. And you got an apology.”

“For all the good it’ll do me.”

He puts a hand out to stop me from walking past him. “Seriously, Melody. I know you’re holding onto something awful, and I’m not going to make you tell me what it is, but accept the gift Kerry just gave you.”

“And what gift is that?” I stare into his face, wondering if he could possibly understand the way I’m feeling right now.

“She gave you the right to disappear. She acknowledged that what happened to you was fucked up. At least one person that was around when it all went down understands how badly they hurt you. That’s got to mean something.”

And it does. He’s right, it does. Kerry’s apology knocked a feeling loose in me, an emotion I haven’t felt in a long time.

For years, I’ve felt only a mix of anger and fear and pride and a driving need to be believed, to be taken seriously, and above all, to be loved.

As we approach the barn, I slow and let myself take a few deep breaths. This air, I grew up in this air. I grew up on this land.

And that feeling in my body is peace, calm, and ease. I haven’t felt any of that for so long because I’ve been holding on to the hell I went through, but maybe Kerry’s apology will help me release all that ugly negativity, and maybe I can move on.

“I want to talk to Uncle Lovett,” I say and look at War. “And I want you there to back me up.”

“Gladly,” he says.

“You don’t owe this to me. Uncle Lovett’s going to be pissed, and I can’t promise things won’t get ugly. You don’t have to dig yourself any deeper.”

He reaches out suddenly and takes my hand. I startle and stare at him but he doesn’t let me go. “I don’t have to do anything, lovely Melody,” he says softly and tugs me up against him. I

stare up into his eyes, too surprised to stop this. “But I want to.”

And he kisses me. I linger in that kiss as a wave of emotion hits me. The apology, the fear, and now this excitement. It’s almost too much and I’m afraid that if I let it, I’ll drown in overstimulation.

His lips pull back and I’m breathing hard. “You could’ve just said yes,” I whisper.

“Saying yes is one thing, but showing you is another. Besides, I like kissing you, and I like that you let me.”

I smile despite myself and he kisses me one more time.



# Chapter 19

## *Melody*

I spend the afternoon at the top of the tower kissing War, letting him explore my body, letting him strip off my clothes and lick and suck and dig his fingers into my skin. I let him spank and pull and moan and bite, and I let everything pour out into him, all of my frustration and my anger. I let it build and build and release as I come shivering and sweating in his lap.

“We should sleep here tonight,” he whispers in my ear. “I’ll bring up a mattress and our things.”

“Okay,” I say, thinking maybe this is too much, maybe I’m going too far, but I want it. I want to sleep at the top of the tower with him under the stars and feel his body against mine in the darkness. He’s safety and pleasure in a place that’s devoid of all that, and I want to cling to him and hold on tightly.

But we have a job to do. Once we’re cleaned up, we dress and head back to the main house. I hold War’s hand on the way inside, feeling silly, but taking strength from it, and he doesn’t say a word, only squeezes my palm. It takes a few minutes of wandering and running into a few of the aunts and cousins, but eventually we spot Uncle Lovett out in the garage working on an old pickup alone, playing the radio loud, a cold beer sweating on the work bench beside him.

I go in first with War at my heels. Uncle Lovett doesn’t notice us for a minute. He seems smaller than I remember, thinner and softer, like the man I used to know was the toughened version of whatever he’s become now. Everyone in my family

feels that way, but particularly Uncle Lovett—he was always harsh, always straightforward almost to the point of being cold. I liked him, loved him even, and craved his approval at times, but for the most part I did my best to avoid him because I knew even back then that there was no pleasing this man, not completely.

He hums to himself but stops abruptly when he looks over and sees me standing there, watching. His expression sharpens, and he walks to the radio and turns it down. “What’re you doing here?” he asks.

“Hi, Uncle,” I say and step deeper into the garage. Tools and spare parts are scattered all over. The vehicle he’s working on looks like an old Chevy truck from the ‘50s, but it’s in bad shape, the body rusting and missing more than a few important bits and pieces. “I was hoping we could continue our conversation from earlier.”

Uncle Lovett stares at me then glances back at War. He wipes his hands on a rag, considering, eyes narrowed. I expect him to kick us out, but instead he walks to a small mini fridge beside the work bench, opens it up, and offers me a drink. “Might as well have this,” he grunts at me. “Your boyfriend too, if he wants.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I say automatically, though I pass him a beer. War accepts it, cracks it open, and takes a drink.

“Thanks,” he says.

Uncle Lovett ignores War and studies me. I hold the drink between my hands, the aluminum frosted with condensation and freezing. “I thought you’d be gone by now,” he says after a while and leans back against the bench, arms crossed. “Figured your little run-in with Daisy would drive you off.”

“That’s not the first time one of the girls tried to hurt me. I’m used to it by now.”

He runs a hand through his thinning hair and laughs. “You always were getting into trouble. Daisy’s pops hated it.”

“He’s gone and who cares what the guy thought?” I say, not feeling bad about my harsh tone. Daisy and Rosie’s father was

an alcoholic asshole that ran off when I was ten, leaving Aunt Faye alone to raise the girls. But Aunt Faye wasn't all that great of a mother, and she checked out as soon as her husband disappeared one fine day and she never recovered. I haven't even seen her since being back, and she might be gone too, for all I know.

"Yeah, well, he thought the girls should've had more responsibility. He was always talking how his girls were set to the side and you were put right in the middle. You know, he felt like his girls were always second best, but I guess look at them now."

"Look at them now," I agree and grip the can tighter. One's dead and the other's got an iron grip over a dying ranch. "Seems like Daisy got that promotion after all."

Uncle Lovett laughs quietly and moves over toward the pickup. War shifts his position, putting himself between the two of us, but Uncle Lovett doesn't seem to notice. He brushes a hand on the hood of his truck and gently knocks away some invisible dirt.

"You know, despite everything that happened back then, your daddy never had a bad thing to say about you after you left."

My eyebrows raise. "I find that hard to believe."

"I did too at the time. I pushed him on it, kept saying, Colton, that girl of yours said some bad things then up and ran away when life got hard. But your daddy, he didn't always agree with the claims you made, but he never once talked down about you. I always respected that. My brother's a lot of things, but he puts family first, and he's no liar."

"I'm not a liar either," I say quietly which only makes Uncle Lovett smile. But my heart's beating fast, and I know what he's trying to do, and it's working. I'm knocked off balance thinking about my father defending me, or at least refusing to denounce me, which couldn't have been easy back then when everyone despised me and he was struggling to hold the ranch together.

“I’ve wondered about that for a long time now,” he says and watches me carefully. “The way it all went down. At the time, we were so sure you were faking, but we were all raw over Rosie’s death and now I don’t know. Now I have questions.”

I shake my head. I can’t let this asshole get under my skin. There’s no way I’m going to believe he ever had doubts about anything in his life. “It’s too late for that. None of it matters anymore. All I want to know is why Daisy’s suddenly in charge. Why is she the one that stepped up after Daddy got sick? Why do you all listen to her?”

He shrugs like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Nobody else wanted to do it.”

I’m so frustrated I could scream. “That’s not good enough. Why weren’t you the one making all the hard choices, Uncle Lovett? I always thought Daddy looked at you as his second-in-command, but now here you are working alone out in the garage, doing a little girl’s bidding. What happened to you?”

Anger flashes into Uncle Lovett’s face, and I know I went too far with that, but his comments about Rosie and what happened to me and all his questions, it’s driving me insane because I know he’s full of shit. Uncle Lovett never once questioned whether I was telling the truth—he’s only using that like a cudgel now, trying to hurt me, trying to make me weak so I won’t press him. I believed Kerry when she apologized, but no part of me believes this.

“Nothing happened to me,” he says. “You wouldn’t know how things went down because you weren’t here, were you? You ran off to Dallas and put the family behind you, all because we wouldn’t believe your sad little story.” He makes a face, a terrible sneer. “Poor little abused Melody. You couldn’t keep your fat mouth shut, could you?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I say, shaking with rage. “I told Renee in confidence. I didn’t mean for anyone else to find out. I was only venting.”

“Good, blame Renee, that’s easy, isn’t it? Convenient that you’re the real victim in all this. Why’d you come back, Melody? Was it really just to say goodbye to your daddy?”

Because if so, go back in that house and sit with him while you can, and get the hell out of here in the morning. We're doing fine without you."

"I don't think you are," I say, and my voice is an anger-fueled whisper. "I think the ranch is falling apart. I think you're standing back and letting it happen because you're old and tired and you can't handle this place anymore."

"And you're some little lying bitch that doesn't know when enough is enough," he snaps, voice rising, and War steps forward, his hands curled into fists. Uncle Lovett laughs at him, his voice throaty and harsh. "What are you gonna do, boy? Beat up an old man?"

"I've done worse," War says.

"Stop it," I say, and War hesitates, glancing back at me. "Enough. That's enough."

War grunts in acknowledgment and steps aside, but I still feel his animosity, his rage, like a tiger prowling behind bars.

I stare at Uncle Lovett and try to order my thoughts, but the way he's whiplashing around between hating me for what I said about Rosie and wondering if maybe I was telling the truth—it's messing with my head. Even after all these years, even now that I see this man for who he is, some little pathetic part of me wants to make my uncle proud like I did back when I was a girl.

I need to take that part, carry her out to the river and drown her.

"Something is rotten here," I say and keep my voice as steady as I can. "This used to be my home and I hate what happened to it since I left."

"But there's the problem, isn't it? You left and you have no claim to the ranch anymore. Go back to Dallas, Melody. Go back and live your life and forget about this place. Your daddy's not going to be around forever, and neither will the rest of us. Let Daisy and the cousins run the ranch the way they see fit. This isn't your home anymore."

Not my home. I stare at my hands. Not my home. He's right and that's the hardest part. The ranch hasn't been my home for a long time, and even though it feels so familiar, there's also so much that has changed. I don't fit in here anymore, and I keenly miss Ford and Kat and Bomber and everyone else. I miss my life.

But this place, it's too important and it's too good, and it could be something better if it weren't being mismanaged by a bunch of selfish assholes.

"When you're ready to tell me what's going on here, I want to talk," I say and turn my back on Uncle Lovett. I put the unopened beer down on the work bench. "You know where to find me."

"Hiding at the top of your momma's tower like you always used to," Uncle Lovett says as I walk away. "You don't change, Melody, and that's the problem."

Once outside, War puts an arm over my shoulders. "Hey. You okay?"

I shrug away from him and keep walking. Past the driveway, the cars, the main house. Past the tower and toward the paddock. I reach the fence and stare at the moon and the stars. It's past twilight and into the early night hours when the fireflies are active, their lights twinkling through the field, tiny lanterns dancing in the black. War stands next to me and we watch them buzz and flutter, and I even reach out and manage to catch one. It's glowing tail brightens my fingers and fades, brightens my fingers and fades, pulsing like a slow heartbeat.

"I want you to listen," I say without looking at War. "Can you do that?"

"I can," he says.

"And don't say anything until I'm done."

"I won't."

I take a shuddering breath and let the firefly go. It takes off and flutters away, flashing as it rises. "Rosie liked to play a game with me. I was maybe ten or eleven, this was right after her dad left and her mom fell apart. She was older than me by

a couple years, and I looked up to her even though she was always kind of mean. We weren't really close, but the cousins all played together so we were friends the way young kids are friends, basically because of proximity. But things changed one night when she lured me into her room and told me we should play doctor." I squeeze my eyes shut against the tears and feel disgusting all over again.

"I was old enough to know that it was wrong," I say and try to control the tremble in my voice. "I knew I shouldn't let my cousin touch me like that, but she said it was fine, we were just playing a game. She said we were exploring and fooling around, and it was no big deal. Looking back, the way it happened right after her dad left, I think something was going on with him. She never said it, nobody ever did, but I think her dad was doing something like that to her, and she acted out once he was gone. She did it to me, maybe thinking that's what you were supposed to do. I don't know. I've obsessed over it for years, trying to make sense of why she picked me and why she touched me like that and why I let her, but I still don't understand it. We were stupid kids."

"Melody," War says quietly and I hold a hand up.

"Please," I say. "Just let me get it all out. The doctor stuff, that lasted for a few months. It never went past touching. It was inappropriate touching, and it still makes me feel wrong, but eventually it stopped. But I wonder if that's all it was, just some weird stupid crap with my cousin, maybe I could've put it behind me and moved on. But that's when the bullying started." I take a deep breath and slowly let it out. "She was brutal. I mean, absolutely brutal. It was always couched in jokes and pranks but she was relentless, calling me fat, calling me stupid and worthless, basically going out of her way to make me as miserable as possible. One time she held me under water in the pool for over a minute until Daisy started crying and made Rosie let me go. I'm pretty sure Rosie would've drowned me, then and there. She turned my life into a living hell, and I still wonder why the sudden change, from the just-exploring doctor stuff to suddenly hating me so much it was like it ate up her entire world. Before her dad left, Rosie was pretty normal. A little harsh, a little mean, but not like she was



after he was gone. It's like something changed in her, and she turned all that rage and hate and dumped it on me, and the doctor stuff was only the beginning.

“When she died, I didn't know how to feel. I was angry, and sad, and some sick part of me was relieved because the bullying would finally stop. Rosie made my life terrible, she made me think about killing myself when I was fifteen. She was always chewing that gum, always coming around to mock me and hit me and hurt me. And when she died, I was just so mad that everyone was sad, because Rosie as a monster. She was a *monster*, War. That's what I told Renee back then.

“I told her about the bullying, about the pain and the torment, but I also told her about the earlier stuff. About the doctor stuff. I just, I couldn't handle the way everyone acted like Rosie was a saint, when she was a fucking *psychopath* to me. I couldn't stand everyone saying such nice things about poor dead Rosie, when Rosie had touched me in ways a cousin should never touch another cousin, and she'd tormented me to the point that I couldn't leave the tower anymore without being terrified she'd find me. That's why I was always locked up there. It was my only safe space.”

I lapse into silence. An odd weight feels like it lifts from my chest, like I can finally breathe now that I told someone about what happened to me back then. I haven't gone into it all with anyone, not since I let it all out to Renee and that backfired on me so horribly, but I'm suddenly tingling and buzzing with the release of saying it all out loud. Those memories, what Rosie did to me, they've haunted me all my life, and when it all came out, I was called a liar, a faker, an attention whore. They mocked me, tore into me, and I couldn't take it.

I ran away, and I haven't properly dealt with any of that for years now.

War touches my arm. “I'm sorry,” he says softly. “And if it means anything, I believe you.”

I laugh sharply, an ugly, angry laugh. “Weirdly, that helps.”

He moves closer. “I think you're right about her dad. If it all happened right after he left, he was probably touching her too.

Maybe doing even worse. Maybe that's why he ran off."

"I'll never know now because she's gone. But I think that's also why Daisy's mother never really recovered. And you've seen the rest of my family. They'd rather act like I'm a piece of trash than admit something terrible was going on. They just won't talk about it, nobody will."

"I'm sorry," he says again. "And none of that was your fault. Rosie did something bad to you, and I think that pushed her into a very bad place, made her spiral, and she started taking it out on you in worse and worse ways. She hated you because you were a victim and she knew she was a monster. But you're right, we can't ever know, and you don't need to carry all that weight alone anymore."

I lean my head against his shoulder. "Thanks for listening. And for understanding."

"It wasn't your fault," he says and hugs me tighter. "If you had a normal family, you might've gotten help instead of being called a liar."

"But I was stuck with these people."

"It's all the more reason to stay," he whispers, his lips near my ear. "Do they deserve this place? Does anyone, except for you?"

"War—"

"I'm not asking you to do anything right now, but I'm telling you to think about it. I know you're dead set on putting this place behind you, but isn't it your dream to own a ranch? Hell, to own *this* ranch? Your daddy wants to give it to you, and all you have to do is say yes."

"There are always more strings attached." I put my hand on his chest and gently push away. "Come on, let's go inside. It'll get chilly soon."

He looks at me for a long moment like he wants to say more, but he nods and takes my hand. We walk together to the tower, and I can feel my story ringing between us like a bell, the horror of my past bouncing back and forth, but it's like I put

new shields up and it can't crack though. I have a distance, and it's a good distance, and it's like I can finally breathe.

"I'll get the mattress," he says, and I climb the stairs alone, light as a feather.

# Chapter 20

## *War*

**H**er hips rotate as she slides down my shaft.

It's pitch black at the top of the tower. There's no light except for the moon and the stars. Melody's a shadow on top of me, a beautiful shadow, all curves and soft skin and the smell of grass and sex. I kiss her and taste her tongue and push her down. I want to be inside of her, every inch of me buried between her legs, and I want her to wiggle and moan as her soaking pussy drips down my cock.

I pull her against me and kiss her neck. I breathe her smell and whisper in her ear. "Lovely Melody. Keep going. I need to feel you. I want to taste your moans."

She whimpers and goes faster, beautiful and wild, hair falling down her back, and her face lit up in bliss. I crave this moment like something bitter and dark, like a drug I know will kill me, because every motion, every beautiful kiss and lick and bite, every sensation is tinged with guilt.

A deep, terrible guilt.

This started out as a game. I needed to bring Melody home and convince her to marry me. I had to seduce her, and I tried my hardest, and slowly, it began to work. We grew closer. We shared things. We kissed, I got her off.

But I didn't stop there. I got to know Melody, got to know her laughter and her smiles and her hopes and dreams, got to see the place where she grew up and understood how she became the woman she is today, got to glimpse the strength she keeps

locked up inside of her waiting to break free, despite the trauma she's only just beginning to process.

And I felt this. Her body, her warmth, her tight, slick pussy clamped down around my shaft and grinding up and down. Her moans, her gasps, her fucking whimpers. I got to know it all, and I fell for her.

I fell for her hard, even before she told me that story outside.

That terrible truth she's been carrying around all this time.

I hate her family. I hate them like I've never hated before. I want to murder her uncles and smash her cousin's face into a wall. I'd gladly leave Daisy a red, pulped smear at the bottom of a very long staircase. I've committed violence in the past, and I'll do it again in the future, and I'd gladly turn all that remorseless hate against Melody's asshole uncles.

Except I'm the real monster here.

I'm the beast playing with her heart. I'm the creep smashing down her walls hoping to win a game.

All for money. All to save my asshole addict father and my poor mother.

I know I need to stop but every time I want to, I think of what I stand to lose. The Greeks will kill my father, there's no doubt in my mind. They'll murder him, and it'll break my mother's heart, and I doubt she'll survive. Despite everything, Mom still loves Dad, even though he doesn't deserve an ounce of her.

And here I am, stuck in the middle of it.

Stuck with lovely Melody.

Her body, her moans.

Pinning her down and fucking her. Licking her soft skin. Biting her swollen nipples.

I should be burned for this. I should be beaten and killed.

But I want her. I really, truly want her, not only for this place or for the money, but for her. Melody's so much better than I ever dreamed possible, stronger than I ever imagined. Anyone that could survive that she's been through and what she's still

dealing with deserves respect and adoration, and I want to worship the ground Melody walks on. I need her and want her, and I despise myself for being trapped in this lie.

“Come for me, lovely Melody,” I whisper as I fuck her, my fingers in her mouth. She sucks on them, moaning. “Come for me, lovely girl. Come for me, you beautiful, filthy girl. Come for me, come for me.” Her back arches and it’s bliss, fucking bliss, watching her turn pink and moan, and I can’t help myself. She pushes me over the edge and I match her orgasm with my own, exploding between her legs and filling her to the brim.

We lie on the mattress in a tangle of sweaty limbs. The room smells like sex and it’s intoxicating. I kiss her, breathe her sweat, kiss her neck. I want to grip her hair and guide her mouth to my cock. I’m still half hard and twitching, and she smiles as I press myself against her flank.

“You really don’t get enough, do you?” she asks, grinning.

“I really don’t. It’s the only time I can stop thinking.”

“Yeah? What do you have to run from, huh?” She kisses my neck and I’m horribly tempted to tell her everything, the whole truth.

Instead, I settle for only a piece of me. Even when I want to be honest, I can’t bring myself to give away everything. “My family has no money.”

She pulls back, eyebrows raised. “Really?”

“That’s why I take these jobs.”

“I figured you were hard off, but—you really have nothing?”

“Not a dime. My mother lives in the last piece of property we own and everything I make goes toward her expenses. I pay for everything, and she lives as simply and frugally as possible to help me out. I hate that I can’t give her the comforts she’s used to.”

“What about your dad? I thought he was like a hedge fund manager or something.”

“No,” I say with a laugh. The idea of my father investing other people’s money is hilarious and terrifying. “He’s an addict. Gambling and alcohol mostly. My parents spent half of what they inherited, and my father lost the rest chasing a series of bad investments. And now here we are. I spend my time taking well-paying but awful jobs, paying for my mother’s groceries and bailing my father out of trouble.”

She stares into my eyes and brushes her fingers down my face. I catch them and kiss them. “I wish you’d told me that sooner.”

“Why?”

“It makes you more human. I thought you were just—I don’t know, another rich guy having fun.”

“I am having fun.” I smile at her and kiss her bottom lip, biting it gently. “This is very fun.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do.” I pull her against me. “But nothing about my life is easy. I’m not complaining, just telling you the truth.” Or at least the part I can bear parting with.

“That’s not easy for you, is it?” she whispers. “Telling the truth.”

“About as easy for me as it is for you.”

She laughs and kisses my collarbone. “Then it’s the hardest thing you ever have to do.”

We lapse into silence. Her heart’s racing and so is mine. I want to tell her that I love her, that I want to keep her, that I’m falling for her like I never imagined I could. But the barriers are still there, and I can’t seem to climb them. I can’t quite overcome what I am.

A liar and a thief and a fraud.

We stay like that for a while, holding each other, getting closer to sleep. I’m right on the cusp of drifting off when I hear a noise from down at the bottom of the steps.

It’s a door opening and closing.



“What was that?” Melody whispers, suddenly awake.

I get out of bed and grab my clothes. I pull them on, listening intently, and I hear it: the sound of someone climbing the steps. More than one person, if I had to guess.

“Don’t move,” I say right into her ear. “I’ll handle this, okay?”

“War.” She sounds afraid now. “What’s going on?”

“Just don’t move.” I head over to the trap door, glancing around for a weapon, but there’s nothing, only old books and puzzles and games.

I yank it open and step down onto the staircase.

It’s pitch dark. There’s no moon, no stars here. Whoever’s climbing up is getting closer, toward the middle, and I shut the trap door behind me, plunging the place into pure black. I move by feel, groping along at the walls as the stairs twist and turn.

I stop about ten steps down and listen. Two people, still coming on.

“Whoever you are, if you don’t turn and go back now, I will hurt you.” My voice is calm and startling in the blackness.

But the footsteps pause. I hear furtive whispers. Then the climbing continues.

“All right,” I say and ready myself for violence. “If that’s how you want to play it.”

I move down another couple steps and press myself against the wall, waiting. My eyes adjust slightly and I can see maybe five feet into the gloom. Whoever’s coming up is moving faster now, maybe afraid, maybe thinking they can surprise me with speed. I stay where I am, straining to listen and see, and suddenly, they’re right there, a vague shape in the darkness. I hold back, keep on waiting, let them get parallel to me, then slightly past—

Before I reach out and grab them by the collar of their shirt and pull as hard as I can.

There's a retch, a gag, and a grunt of shock as they fall backwards. The second person's further down below, and I hear them crash to the steps, followed by some thuds as they tumble. But the falling stops quickly, not too far, and they're cursing as they get up.

"You motherfucker," one snarls, a male voice. I recognize it vaguely, distantly. I heard it before within the last few days. "You little bitch. I'm gonna fucking kill you."

"I have a feeling you were planning on doing that already."

He comes charging up at me. It's Melody's cousin Evan, the oldest of the trio, and he slams into me, knocking me back. He hits me twice and it's hard to dodge in the darkness, so I ram my knee into his balls until he screams in pain and rolls off. I try to get on top of him and slam my forehead into his nose, but the second guy grabs my ankle and yanks me down.

I thump against the stairs hard then Dean's on me. He's burly and heavy and he tries to pummel me with his fists. I manage to get my arms up and protect myself, and his blows aren't very accurate in the darkness. I wiggle sideways and he punches the stairs, and as he howls in frustration, I reach up and jam my thumb into his left eye.

His howl turns into a scream. I jam harder, shoving him back, and he hits the stairs and goes down. I turn in time to take a fist to the mouth as Evan comes at me. It turns me and I nearly fall, but I manage to grab onto the railing. Evan follows up by punching me in the ribs, and I barely manage to dive at him, tackling him to the stairs and sending us both sprawling.

I crawl past him, panting and in pain, tasting blood. He swings and misses, and I get the high ground before kicking down hard. I connect with his shoulder, and follow with a punch, cracking him in the jaw. He grunts, and I brace myself against the walls, lift myself in the air, and kick him as hard as I can in the chest.

He flies into the blackness. I hear him hit and roll, thumping down and down, followed by another scream of pain.

The lights come on then. Blinding and intense. I blink against their brightness as I limp down the steps and find the cousins near the bottom in a tangle of limbs. Dean's not moving, but Evan's conscious and groaning, his wrist at an awkward angle.

I drag him off his brother and leave him slumped against the wall. I check Dean and let out a relieved breath to find his heart still beating. Fucker might be a mess after this, but he'll live at least.

Evan groans as I kneel down on his chest and stare into his eyes, fury dripping from me like sweat.

"Who sent you here tonight?" I whisper. "Why'd you come here?"

"We were gonna scare you," he says, moaning in pain. "Fuck, I need a doctor. I think Dean needs a doctor too. Please, War, let me go. We need a doctor."

"You fucker," I say, getting in his face. "You came here in the middle of the night to hurt Melody, didn't you? I bet you didn't expect me to be here."

"Please, War," he begs. "Let me go."

"Why does your father listen to Daisy? Why does everyone go along with her shit?"

His eyes widen. "I don't know. I don't—please, Dean's in trouble. War, he might not be dead yet, but if you don't call for an ambulance, you'll be a murderer. Please, War."

"You think he's the first person I ever killed?" I lean closer. "Tell me why you all listen to Daisy." I show him my bloody teeth and he lets out an ugly sob.

"She's blackmailing them," he says through his teeth. "Please, War, I swear it's true. My dad, all the uncles, they were stealing from the ranch. She found out and used it against them. That's how she took over back then, and now I guess everyone just goes along with it. Please, that's all I know. Please, call an ambulance."

I shove off him and stand. It hurts to breathe and my face feels like mush. I step over Dean and stop as I stare up at Melody.

She's standing on the steps, her eyes wide, in a tank top and shorts, staring at the mess of her cousins. Slowly, our eyes meet.

"Blackmail," she says.

I nod slowly, grimacing. "Makes sense. What do you want me to do with these two?"

"Can you kill them and dump their bodies?"

"Melody," Evan says, sobbing now. "Please, Mel, we just wanted to scare you, that's all."

She gives me a hard look and I return it, eyebrows raised. "You sure?" I ask.

"No," she says, turning away. "I'll call an ambulance. You should head into the main house and pretend like you were never here."

I nod and turn away. Evan's still crying, and Dean's still unconscious. I pause as I move past them and lean down. "If you mention my name, I'll finish this. Understand me?"

"I understand," he says, nodding over and over, and I limp out of the tower and away from the mess. I don't know what Melody's going to tell everyone, but she'll come up with something good. That's the beauty of being a liar.

# Chapter 21

## *Melody*

Uncle Dudley drives Evan and Dean to the hospital. Nobody asks what happened—nobody even mentions calling the police. Uncle Lovett stands in the parking lot and watches the truck disappear down the long driveway and doesn't turn in my direction. "No need to talk about this any further," he says before he turns and walks back to the house, looking small and sunken. "No need to make this worse."

"She sent them," War says with rage burning in his voice. "You know she did."

Uncle Lovett says nothing. He only disappears inside with everyone else.

I stay outside for a little while longer. My head spins with the implication of what happened, and I don't know how I'm going to make sense of this. I wrap my arms around myself until War pulls me against him and hugs me tight.

"It'll be okay," he whispers in my ear.

"I don't think it will." Something in me breaks, and I sob into his chest. He holds me tightly as tears rack my body, and I keep hearing the fight, keep seeing my cousins lying at the bottom of the stairs bloodied and beaten, and keep thinking that they were there to kill us. They can claim it was only to make some kind of point all they want, but I know and War knows and everyone knows, they were there to murder me, all to make sure I couldn't take over the ranch.

"Uncle Lovett was in on it," I say when I get myself under control. "He knew."

“I have no doubt about that.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Right now, we’ll go back into the tower and put the heaviest bookshelf we can find on top of the trap door. We’ll be safe until morning. Then we’ll visit with your dad, tell him everything we’ve found out, and get the fuck out as soon as we can.”

“But the week isn’t over.”

He laughs bitterly and kisses my cheek and wipes away my tears. “Fuck the week, Melody. This is about survival now. And besides, I’m not convinced your father has any money to pay us with at all.”

I let him pull me from the blacktop. Blood stains the carpet at the base of the stairs. We climb together, and War covers the trap door with a desk and huge pile of books, and we curl up on the mattress in silence. I keep thinking about my family trying to kill me, about my own cousins coming up to murder me, and it’s not so different from what I did all those years ago.

Sleep comes and goes. I wake when the sun’s streaming through the windows. War’s already up and sitting nearby, staring out at the landscape. I kiss his chest before getting dressed. “Walk with me,” I say and he stands wordlessly, bruises blooming on his face from the fight the night before.

We head down the steps and into the main house. Nobody else is awake yet. I make coffee and we sit out back drinking it, watching the sun get stronger and stronger. I take War’s hand in mine and hold it, and he smiles at me.

“Almost getting murdered makes you appreciate stuff like this,” he says, and I lean my head on his shoulder.

“Almost getting murdered makes me question all my life choices, frankly,” I say and he laughs, but my stomach is boiling and I come to a decision, one I don’t think I’ll ever be able to walk back. But it’s finally time. “I was there when Rosie died.”

He doesn't move for a moment. Then he brushes my hair aside and kisses my forehead. "How'd it happen?"

"We were in the woods." I stare out toward the forest where it all happened. It was so long ago but the memory's still fresh. "I was out there like usual reading a book when she came stomping through the underbrush toward me. I tried to run, but she yelled and told me to stop. She was always chewing this gum, always had a big mouth full of the stuff. I panicked a little bit, and I threw my book at her, and I guess that pissed her off because she grabbed me by the hair and yanked me down into the dirt. She put a knee on my face and held me there and called me a disgusting waste of space, and that's when I elbowed her in the stomach.

"She let me go and I scrambled away. But when I tried to run, she chased after me. I was a stronger runner, faster, and I was used to the woods, so I put some distance between us, but after a minute I stopped hearing her coming after me. It was totally quiet, and I circled back, confused why she wasn't chasing.

"I found her on her knees at the edge of the clearing, her hands around her throat. She was bright purple, her eyes red and bugged out. Choking on that gum. I watched her motion for me, begging for me to come help her, and I stood there, staring as tears streamed down her face. She tried hitting herself in the gut, but it didn't help, and I didn't move. I couldn't move. I told everyone that I panicked and ran to the house but that's not true. I wasn't panicking, War. I wasn't even upset. She was dying right there in front of me and I could've helped, I could've done the Heimlich or at least hit her on the back or something, but I just watched. Calm, not feeling much of anything. Mostly just resigned to her dying. All this time and I don't know why I didn't try to help, but she choked and choked and fell to her side, thrashing, struggling, staring at me with those wide and terrified eyes, and I watched her die. I said nothing, I did nothing. I didn't scream or call for help. I watched her go still, watched her body shut down, watched her eyes go cold. I watched her die. Maybe I even killed her, I don't know. I think if she managed to spit that gum out, I would've finished her myself."



My story ends and I lean back in my chair. The last piece of my story clicks into place and, finally, it's all out in the air, every word of it. Like my cousins tried to kill me the night before, I killed Rosie, and I've never felt a bit of guilt over it. Which I know is wrong and means I'm broken, but after what she did, I don't care. None of it matters anymore. She's gone, and I watched her die.

"We've all done things we aren't proud of," War says after a short silence. "I can give you a very long list of my sins."

"Ever kill your cousin?"

"No, but I've pushed the plunger on an overdose of morphine for an old dying woman. I held a pillow over the face of an addict high on fentanyl. I've done horrible things, Melody. Things I'm not proud of."

"Then I guess we have a lot more in common than I realized."

His smile is bitter but I take his hand between both of mine and kiss his finger. He leans down and kisses my lips, lingering there. "I never should've let this happen," he whispers and strokes a thumb down my cheek.

"Let what happen?"

"This." He kisses me again. "I've avoided this for a really long time, but now, I think I'm falling for you."

"You think?" I ask as a thrill runs down my spine. I just confessed to watching my cousin die and not trying to help her, and he confessed to at least two murders, and all I can think about is him loving me. That's sick and twisted, and I can't bring myself to care, because War's like me, he wraps himself in stories and lies to keep the terrible things he's done as far away as possible, and I want him in my life. I want him, and I'm falling for him too, and I don't know where this can possibly end.

"I know." He leans into another kiss and we hold it there, two killers, two sinners, two liars.

The door to the main house opens. I break off the kiss and look back at Daisy appears, pushing my father in a wheelchair.

I stand suddenly in surprise. My father looks emaciated, shrunken, barely sitting upright, but his eyes are lucid. He stares at me with a cold, calculating squint. War twists in his seat before climbing to his feet, and the look on Daisy's face sends a cold horror into my toes.

She looks triumphant.

"Colton," Daisy says, "why don't you tell your daughter what you just told me?"

Dad clears his throat. "I didn't want it to come to this," he says. "I wanted you to come home, Melody."

"What's going on?" War asks. "Did you mention your little attack last night, Daisy?"

She ignores him. "Go on, Colton. Tell Melody what you told me about Warren here."

I take a step back. War goes very still, his face flattening into nothing. The anger's gone, the surprise is gone. The love and tenderness is gone. It's drained and emotionless, and that scares me more than anything else.

"Warren's been working for me," Dad says. "I sent him to bring you home. I offered to pay him to keep you here."

"I knew all that already," I say looking from Dad to Daisy to War and back around again.

"Tell her the rest," Daisy presses. "Go on, Colton. Doesn't your daughter have a right to know?"

"The ranch is everything," Dad says and sounds so defeated it breaks my heart. I've never seen him like this, shriveled and weak and small. "It's all I ever loved. I hoped if you returned and set down roots, then maybe it might turn around."

"But that won't happen," Daisy says. "She told me already. Over and over again. She's not interested in staying."

"I offered Warren a deal," Dad says and struggles to sit up straight. "I told him to bring you back. I told him to keep you here. I told him to convince you to marry him, and then he could inherit everything I have left. He'd get you, and the

ranch, and the rest of our money, if only he could marry you and convince you to take over.”

I blink rapidly and slowly look at War.

His face reveals nothing. He’s staring at Daisy, staring at her like he’s never seen her before. I don’t know what he’s thinking but everything clicks into place—the missing piece of the puzzle slots down and fits perfectly, and now it all makes sense.

This is why War wanted to bring me home. And wanted to keep me here. And wanted to kiss me, and confess his love for me, and seduce me. It was a game from the start, from the very start. He was manipulating me like Daisy’s been manipulating everyone else, and a sick horror swells in my guts, churning in my soul.

“Was any of it true?” I whisper.

He slowly looks at me. “All of it.”

“Liar.” I turn my back on him.

“Now you get it,” Daisy says with unfettered glee. “This whole time you were being manipulated. You think I’m the bad guy here, but your own father dragged you home under false pretenses and tried to trick you into getting married. I mean, god, how sick is that?” She laughs and I stare at my father, but he only sinks down into himself, defeated, the big man I knew now totally gone, the cowboy disappeared, leaving behind this husk. This shell of a person.

“Why?” I ask, my voice almost a whisper, and I’m not sure who I’m talking to.

But Dad answers. “Because you’re the only one that loves this place as much as I do.”

“Not anymore,” I say and take a step back.

“Go home, Melody,” Daisy says. “Forget about the ranch.” She turns my father away and wheels him back inside. The door closes behind them and I stand there in shaky silence. War doesn’t move, and I don’t move, and I don’t know what to

do. My mind's racing, spinning in a thousand directions, but one thing is eminently clear.

War is a liar. And I am a liar. And there's no money.

"I should've told you," he says. "I should've said something sooner. But I knew how you'd react."

"You manipulated me from the start."

"Melody—"

"Admit it. You manipulated me."

"Yes," he says. "I did."

"Go to hell, War. Go to fucking hell."

"Melody—"

"No," I say and start backing away, nearly stumbling and falling over. "No, I don't want to hear it anymore. None of this was real, was it? It was all some elaborate game. All you wanted was money, and I don't know if you're desperate to get paid because of your family, or if that was all a lie too."

"I didn't make it up," he says and his sorrow-filled stare nearly breaks my heart. "I didn't make any of it up."

"Too late," I whisper and turn, walking away. I'm not going to run, not this time, because I've made up my mind.

I'm finished with Leader Ranch. I can put all this behind me. The place is a dysfunctional hell, and I never should've subjected myself to it. Kerry's right, I need to run away and never look back, because if I let it then the ranch will consume me like it consumed everyone else.

I'm done here, and I'm done with War.

I opened myself to him in ways I've never been open with another person and all I got for my trouble was a knife in my chest. And I can't even act surprised, because that's what he is, a snake and a liar and a fraud.

I should've seen it sooner, but at least Daisy had one last kindness in her.

Now I'm gone, walking away, and never looking back.

# Chapter 22

## *War*

I find Colton alone in his room. No nurse, no Daisy. The TV's playing a Western on mute, the black and white patterns flicking across his bed. He's staring into space but he doesn't look like he's seeing much of anything. It smells like vomit and something rotten, and I sink into the chair beside him and sit there in silence as his head lolls toward me.

"Why'd you do it?" I ask.

He grunts once and lets out a rattling breath. "It went too far."

"You don't give a fuck how far things go," I say with more anger than I actually feel. Right now, I'm too numb to have much of any emotion in me at all. "You only ever cared about your precious ranch. What did Daisy promise you?"

Colton's head dips down, chin to his chest, and he takes big, heaving breaths. I wonder if he's on his way out, and I don't move to help. But finally, he grunts and sighs and leans back.

"She promised to sell," he whispers. "There are big ranching consortiums. They've been trying to buy for a long time, and I made her swear she'll let me finally sell. You think I can do anything alone in this room? She controls what comes in and what goes out."

"Huh," I say and study him. "Why sell? How's that better?"

"Because at least this place will run again. With Daisy in charge, it's falling apart, and the longer she holds on, the worse it'll be. It's time to let go. I'm going to die soon, and so will the ranch."

I cross my legs, studying the old man. I hate him for breaking down like this and ruining everything, but I understand his sick logic. If he loves the ranch as much as he pretends, then he should do anything he can to make sure it keeps on functioning, even if it means selling it to some investment banker.

“You know this means the Leader family will be finished. The name will keep on going, but—” I shake my head. “No more ranch. No more money.”

“It’s already done,” Colton says with a sigh. “How many mistakes have I made? How could this place have gone from thriving to this in only so many years? I don’t understand how I could fail so miserably.”

“I do,” I say softly and lean toward him. “You didn’t believe your own daughter. That’s how.”

His eyes roll to meet mine. “What?”

“She told you the truth, old man.” I get closer, showing him my teeth. “But you know that already, don’t you? Everyone figured it out by now. Melody wasn’t lying back then, but you all shoved her away, and the guilt’s been eating this family from the inside ever since. How much did you know back then? About Rosie and her father?”

His face twists in agony and he looks away from me. He falls into a coughing fit that ends with him spitting blood into a tissue. I watch him, curious about how much time he has left, but he finally clears his throat enough to speak.

“My sister told me everything after Melody was already gone. Her husband was a drunk and an asshole, but I thought it ended there. Turns out he’d been abusing Rosie for years, and my sister only found out toward the end. She made that piece of shit leave and held the secret for years and years, and I think it was only after Rosie was gone and Melody started telling everyone about what happened that she realized how badly it had messed everyone up.”

I shake my head, astounded at the dysfunction. “You knew,” I say. “You could’ve called Melody up and apologized and

admitted that you knew, but you didn't."

"It's not easy," he says, sounding like he's going to cry.

I have no pity for him. "You deserve this, old man." I slowly stand up.

"Going to leave now?" he asks. "Can't say I'm surprised."

"I want my money."

"There is no money, Warren." He chuckles darkly. "Never was any."

"You hired me for a job. I did the job."

"Go ask Daisy. Maybe she'll pay."

I stare at him and my hands curl into fists. I want to cover his face with a pillow and choke him out, but this house has seen enough death already and I don't need to make my hands any dirtier than they already are.

I turn and leave the room. My father's going to die because of this. I banked on making enough to pay off the Greeks, or at least enough to buy myself some more time to make the difference, but now Dad is completely fucked. I have nothing to give him, and the Greeks have no reason to hold back.

They're going to murder him.

I steady myself against the doorframe. Melody's gone, Colton fucked me, everyone in this family is a psychopath and monster, and my father is going to die, and my mother will likely follow him into the grave. My life is falling apart, and all I can think of is Melody, and her mouth against mine, and how close I finally got to feeling something real.

Only for my lies to fuck it all up again.

I pause in the hallway outside of Colton's wing. It's quiet in the main house—most of the family's at the hospital with the cousins. I hope those fuckers think twice about trying something so fucking stupid in the future, but I suspect they're not the types to learn much from their mistakes.

"What are you still doing here?"



I look down the hall and there she is, head tilted in curiosity. Daisy's studying me with narrowed eyes, and I'm suddenly tempted to stalk down to her and shove my thumbs through her eyes, but instead I only straighten and move a little bit closer.

"Wanted to finish some business with Colton before I headed back to Dallas."

"Melody already left?" she asks.

"Took my truck."

"Poor guy. Need some money for an Uber?"

"No, thanks. I'll manage."

"Good." She frowns slightly and smooths her hair. "So that was the whole end game, huh? Get my cousin to marry you and take everything over?"

"Pretty much. But I guess that's over now."

"Guess so. She doesn't seem happy with you."

"Can you blame her?"

Daisy's smile is tight. "Melody's not happy with anyone in this house. Poor girl, she's been through a lot."

I let out a soft laugh. "You don't know the half of it."

"Actually, I do." Daisy comes closer, narrowing the gap between us. "You think Melody's the only one Rosie hurt? I was Rosie's first target back in the day. All those things Melody said after my sister died? It all rang absolutely true because it all happened to me, too."

My eyes go wide. "But you—"

"Called her a liar? I'm not fucking stupid. I could tell the second Melody opened her mouth that everyone was going to turn against her. Oh, poor dead Rosie, gone too soon. Good fucking riddance. My sister was a sick bitch, probably because my pedo rapist Dad fucked her up really good, but at last I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut. Better than that, I sensed an opportunity. A chance to get Melody out of the picture."

“You did it on purpose.”

“Well, I stoked the flames, at least, and it didn’t take much. Some tears, some moping around, and everyone turned on Melody real fast. Poor girl doesn’t even realize, but oh, well.”

I shake my head in amazement. If it weren’t so utterly and disgustingly twisted, I’d be impressed. If I’m a liar, Daisy’s something even worse.

“What will you do now?” I ask. “Colton says he’s selling the place.”

Daisy rolls her eyes. “He’s been threatening that for years. He’ll never do it.”

“Of course not,” I say, shaking my head. “He claims nothing comes in or goes out without your approval. The old fuck’s going to die and all of you are going to rip each other to shreds fighting for the scraps.”

“Actually, no. The uncles are mine. The cousins too.”

“I heard about the blackmail.”

Her lips pull back. “Dean talked?”

“Evan, but don’t hold it against him. I made it very hard for him to keep his mouth shut.”

She grins and tilts her head like she’s studying me. “You’re useful,” she says. “And you need money. How about we make a deal?”

“I’m not interested.” I start to turn away, but Daisy speaks up.

“How much do you need? I’ll give it to you.”

I pause and stare at the carpet. A second ago, I was writing a eulogy for my father in my head, but suddenly a new opportunity just appeared. It would involve working with Daisy, which is extremely distasteful, and yet—

“A lot,” I say without looking at her. “In the low millions.”

“We can make that happen if you can convince Melody to sign some paperwork.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Paperwork.”

“I’m worried Colton’s still going to leave the ranch to her. I’ve been working on him, and the old bastard’s a wreck, but he’s not so far gone that he’ll do whatever I tell him. And hey, maybe I’ll get lucky, but I don’t think so. I have a feeling I’m going to get screwed in the end.”

“What sort of paperwork do you need signed?” I’m already doing calculations, trying to figure out an angle, trying to imagine how I can pull this off and make it work.

“I have a buyer lined up for this place, and unlike the dying cowboy in there, I’m ready to pull the trigger. Only I don’t own it. If I convince Colton to sign now, the money goes to him and I don’t see a dime. But if we wait for him to die, and whoever inherits this place signs—”

“And you think that might be Melody.” I nod slowly, hate roiling in my guts. “You want me to convince her to sell the place and split the money with you.”

“That’s the deal. Offer her a cut of the proceeds. Something reasonable, maybe an equal share, but start lower. You make it happen and I’ll pay your fee.” She laughs like she’s having a good time. “Who knows, maybe this won’t matter, but I like to have some insurance in place just in case.”

My whole life’s been like this, one long string of bad choices after another. I can turn this down and let my father die, and frankly, he’d deserve it. But that would hurt my mother, hurt her so bad that I doubt she’d come back from it, and I don’t think I could live with myself if she withered away over my worthless father’s murder. Especially not if I could do something to stop it.

But this means working with the girl that ruined Melody’s life. That helped get her to leave the ranch. That gaslit her, tried to kill her, took everything away from her.

It would be the ultimate betrayal.

And yet that’s all I know. Lies and backstabbing and more lies.

“I’ll do it,” I say and start walking away. “Send over the papers and I’ll get it done.”

“I knew you were useful, War,” she says and laughs, high and unhinged, and I hate myself as I leave the ranch.

# Chapter 23

## *Melody*

I stroke Bomber's side as he snorts and eats some feed from my hand. The big horse looks good, better than I expected, and Kat says he's healing great. "We had the vet come take a look at him just a couple days ago," she says, sitting up on stall railing and kicking her legs. "He says he's pleased about the progress Bomber's making. Could've fooled me though because he looked annoyed the whole time he was here."

Relief floods over me. I was terrified I'd come home to find Bomber an absolute wreck and all my work would've been for nothing. Well, it *was* for nothing, since I didn't get paid, but still. "I'm really happy to hear that."

"How was the trip? You were pretty quiet that whole time. You know, maybe it's crazy, but I kind of expected like a text or two just so I knew you were still alive."

"I know, I'm sorry," I say and try to avoid her gaze. I feel guilty about not keeping her in the loop but I was too busy keeping my head above water to think about touching base. "It was just, it was a lot." How could I explain any of that to her? I faced down my dying father, had sex with War and developed serious feelings for him, told him all of my deepest and darkest secrets, stood up to my family, all of whom apparently still hate me, and finally found out that War was manipulating and using me from the start, and it all crashed and burned and left me drained and hating myself even more than I did from the start.

At least I learned there are people in this world as fucked up as I am.

“I get it, family can be really hard,” Kat says and I can’t help the laugh that bubbles up from my guts. “What did I say? Why’s that funny?”

“Nothing, that’s just such a huge understatement is all.”

“I’m sorry it was that bad. But at least you got to say goodbye to your dad, right? I mean, that’s got to be worth something?”

I nod slowly and lean my head against Bomber’s flank. I breathe in his musky smell and nuzzle against his soft hair. The horse’s heart is a steady thump deep between his ribs and I wish I could wrap my arms around him and hug him close. “At least there’s that.”

“Did you figure out the succession stuff? You mentioned you were worried about what would happen to the ranch.”

“Nothing’s solved,” I admit, which only makes my guts twist more. “Dad wanted to leave it to me, but I didn’t want it, and now I don’t know what’ll happen.”

She whistles and shakes her head. “You turned down an actual ranch? Like, your own ranch? You must really hate your family.”

“You have no idea.”

“Where’s War these days? I half expected him to follow you home. You two had a bit of chemistry the last time I saw you together.”

I shoot her a look. “It’s not like that.”

“No? Could’ve fooled me.”

“I don’t want to talk about War.” I pat Bomber and move away from him, leaving the stall. Kat hops down and follows me, hands shoved into the pockets of her jeans.

“Which to me says you and him did something you shouldn’t have.”

I pause in the paddock and take a deep breath. “That’s one way of saying it.” I think of War’s hands on my body, his lips at my neck. Those hours we spent at the top of the tower together were some of the best of my life. I didn’t know I could feel

that way, that overriding and incredible passion. I thought I was stuck in this gray area, never quite feeling anything, always running away from my own emotions.

Instead, War woke something up. His touch, his kiss, the way he loved my body and praised my every move, it was addictive and overwhelming, and now he's like a song I can't get out of my head, but it's a song I love to sing.

"What happened out there, Melody?" Kat asks and stands close next to me. "I just want to know if you're okay, and what I can do if you're not."

I squint into the distance and wipe away tears. "I'm not okay," I admit. "I'm really, really far from okay."

Kat leads me to the picnic tables, sits me down, gets us both some tea, and hold my hand. "I'm listening," she says.

And I tell her. Some of it, not all of it, but I tell her about hooking up with War and catching feelings, I tell her about Daisy and my uncles and how everyone treated me like I was a monster, and how even after all this time that place is still a nightmare, and those people are still awful, and going back there only made me certain I never want to go back again.

"But if things were getting good with War, where is he now?" Kat presses and I sip my tea to buy myself some time.

I could come up with a story, and I could even make it convincing, but I'm tired of lying and making shit up and wrapping the truth in a pretty veneer. "He was working for my dad the whole time," I finally say.

"Didn't you know that already?" she asks.

"Turns out, my dad wanted War to convince me to marry him." I clear my throat, trying to stop the stone that lodges there. I tell her what I know and how it all came crashing down.

Kat sighs and comes around to sit next to me. She hugs me tightly, really tightly. "Fuck him," she says. "God, Melody, I am so, so sorry. I've never seen you care about a guy before and now suddenly it's like—you really fell for him, didn't you?"



I nod, feeling so stupid, but she's right. I fell for War in a way I never imagined. I thought I loved him, and I thought he loved me too, or at least I believed him when he said it and I wanted it to be true so badly.

But I knew he was a liar. I knew it, and I decided not to think about it, because I liked his lies and I wanted them to be real.

Instead, I ended up burning myself, and I don't think I'll ever trust again.

"I just want to put it behind me," I say. "It's over now."

"If you want, I can have Ford put a hit out on him. We know some people." Her eyebrows shoot up. "Dangerous people. You know what I mean?"

"No, thanks, I don't think using your mob connections will help me now."

She laughs and shrugs. "Offer stands."

"War has his own problems. Or at least I think he does. The problem is, I don't know what he told me was real, and what he said just to trick me into liking him."

"You're home now. You don't have to worry about him anymore. I just want you to heal, and move on, and don't let that lying asshole break your heart and leave it broken."

"I'm not sure if I can glue back the pieces."

"You can," she says and leans her head on my shoulder. "And you will. Just give it time."

Except I've been giving it time since I left Leader Ranch all those years ago. I gave it time and I waited and I never quite healed, at least until War appeared back in my life. Dangerous, mysterious War. The boy that dropped out of school and disappeared. The hurricane that tore my life to pieces. The liar and the killer.

It's sad how much we have in common.

"It doesn't matter anymore," I say and finish my tea. "I'm finished with War and I just want to forget he ever existed."

“That’s the spirit. Fuck him.” She gets up and stretches.  
“Come on, let’s go for a walk and talk about how much he sucks. Or about whatever you want.”

“Fill me in on what happened when I was gone,” I say and squeeze her hand. “And thanks for listening.”

“Anytime. And you didn’t miss too much.” She talks as we wander away.

But I look back over my shoulder toward the barn, toward Bomber, and I wonder how I’m going to pay for that horse, or if I’m stuck leaning on the kindness of Kat and Ford forever.

# Chapter 24

## *War*

“**Y**ou don’t have to do this,” Dad says but I don’t see him offering to go inside in my place.

“It’s fine.” I put the car in park and listen to the Chicago traffic buzz past. Men and women hurry by on the sidewalk, and I stare at the Greek restaurant on the opposite side of the street, at the big blue sign that says ZORBO’S and the men sitting out front drinking from small coffee cups. Two big guys wearing the kind of jackets that can easily hide a gun.

“You’re a good son,” Dad says, grinning and awkwardly pats my shoulder. “You’re really saving my life here, you know that.”

I take a slow, deep breath, and let it out. “When this is over, I’m driving you to the airport.”

“Sorry?” I look at him and his smile falters.

It’s been a week since I left Leader’s Ranch. One week, and in that time I haven’t heard anything about Melody or Daisy or her father. I’ve been out of communication with them on purpose—I can’t stand to face that mess, not yet at least. I still have the paperwork Daisy gave me and the job’s rustling around in the back of my mind, but I have other plans for that.

Right now, I need to deal with this. If there’s anything I learned from Melody, it’s that family can kill faster than a bullet, and letting those wounds fester only makes it worse.

Which means I need to take care of my problems, and do it fast, because I’ve let them hang around for long enough

already.

“This is the end for you, Dad.”

He tilts his head, looking confused. “End how?”

“There’s cash in the glove compartment. Enough for a flight and a few months of living expenses. You’re going to take that money, buy an international ticket somewhere far away, and you’re never, ever coming back to the States.”

His eyes narrow and he leans back against the door, studying me. “I like it here,” he says. “Why would I leave, especially after you solve my problem?”

“Because I’m not going to solve it. I’m kicking the can down the road and taking the risk on myself. And in return for buying you more time, you’re going to disappear.”

“I don’t think so.”

My hand snaps out. I catch my father’s shirt and grab it tight, yanking him toward me as my lips pull back in a snarl. Dad’s eyes widen in shock and I slam my forehead into his nose, ramming it hard with a sharp crack. He gasps in pain and I shove him back, breathing hard. His hands fly up as he groans, but I didn’t hit him hard enough to break anything, the lucky bastard.

“The fuck did you do that for?” he asks, prodding at his nose and cheeks.

“I need you to understand how serious I am. You are going to leave the country. You are *not* going to contact Mom ever again.”

“That’s my *wife*,” he says through his teeth. “God, this is going to freaking bruise. When did my boy become so damn violent?”

“Since I had to fend for myself, thanks to you. And she’s not your wife any longer. I’ll send you the papers to sign.” I lean closer, holding my old man’s gaze. “Before you tell me no, here’s the deal. If you leave the country and cut all ties, you’ll keep on living. But if you speak to Mom, if you set foot on American soil, if you do anything to piss me off, I will tell

Kazan where you are, and I'll hire him to go kill you myself if I have to. Do you understand?"

Dad holds my gaze. I don't look away. I've finally reached my limit, and now I'm ready to get rid of my father and move on with my life. For so long I kept waiting for him to fix himself, to become the man I wanted him to be, but I'm finally realizing that nothing ever changes and nobody ever gets better. My father will always be this way, always be a problem, at least until he finally crosses a line and gets himself or the people around him killed.

Which means I have to be finished. I won't let this wound fester, not forever.

"How much cash?" he asks.

I push open the door. "Just go now. Key's in the ignition."

He moves over to the driver's side as I stand in the street. "You really got me good there, son." Dad grins at me out the window. "You know, maybe I could go back to Spain for a while."

"Forever."

"Sure, right. You wouldn't really kill me, would you?" I turn and stare at him. He clears his throat and starts the car. "Well, uh, I guess this is goodbye."

"Don't call. Don't contact Mom. I'll find you, and I'll send the divorce papers."

"Sure, kid, sure. Sounds good. And hey, good luck in there." My father pulls forward and I watch him drive off. The brake lights flash and he makes a right, and I wonder how long it'll be before I have to make an example of him. I hope forever. But knowing my dad, it'll be sooner rather than later.

I stalk across the street and approach Zorbo's. The two goons out front give me a wary look but say nothing as I push open the door and head inside. The lighting's bright and everything's painted in blue and white. Tables line the right side, small tables packed tightly together, and the floor's done in black and white tiles. The men and women behind the counter ignore me as I walk past them, breathing in the smell

of lunch meats and lamb skewers and olives and hummus and a dozen delicious-looking breads and sausages and more.

The man sitting in the table at the very back waves me over. I slow and approach, heart racing. He's big, broad, muscular, with dark eyes and dark hair, and he grins jovially at me. "Warren?" he asks. "Or do you really go by War?"

"War," I say. "It's good to meet you, Mr. Kazan."

"Call me Evander." He stands and shakes my hand. I catch a glimpse of a gun in a holster at his hip. He doesn't bother trying to hide it. Evander's dressed in all black, a nice shirt, nice slacks, with a gold chain around his neck and a watch worth more than people make in a year on his wrist. He gestures and I sit down and briefly wonder where his bodyguards are, but based on the size and apparent strength of this man, I doubt he really needs any.

"Thanks for taking this meeting," I say and try to push my nerves away. I've dealt with men like Evander before, criminals and thieves and killers, though Kazan's Greek mob is one of the more powerful organized crime families in the country. I'm aware that I'm swimming in the deep end now, and there are shadows of monsters lurking beneath me.

"I've heard your name before, War," he says and waves at a guy behind the counter, who brings over a small, dark coffee for me. I take a sip out of respect, then another when I realize it's really good. "I hear you perform services. You take hard, ugly jobs, and you do them well. You do them discreetly. When I realized who your father is, and heard you wanted to talk, well, I'll admit that I was curious."

I nod slowly. "My father owes you money."

"A lot of money, yes, he does."

"I'm here to ask for a favor."

Evander's eyes flash and he studies me. "I don't know you. I know of you, I have heard of your reputation, and that got you in the door. But that's not enough to earn a favor."

"I want to take on my father's debt."

That gets his attention. Evander's eyebrows raise and he folds his hands over his stomach for a long stretch. I sip the coffee, genuinely enjoying it, and trying not to let the big Greek mob boss see my trembling hands. I'm not afraid of Evander, and I don't fear death, but I know I'm on the edge of something right now and if I fuck it up then all my plans are worth nothing.

"Tell me why you would do that. And don't say out of a son's love for his papa, because while that is admirable, it's also stupid and I wouldn't believe you."

I nod and adjust the coffee cup before speaking. "My father is going to get me killed one day. He's going to get my mother killed too. He has been nothing but a problem since I was a teenager, and I'm tired of him. I'm so fucking sick of him."

"That's an interesting reason," Evander says, sounding amused.

"This is my way of making him leave for good. I gave him money for a plane ticket, some extra for expenses, and we made a deal. I do this, and he disappears. If he comes back, I kill him. Simple as that."

"Interesting." Evander touches his face with one palm. "And this way, you don't have to look your mother in the eye and tell her that you let a man like me murder her dear loving husband."

"That's the general idea, yes."

"Very interesting. But you know what this will mean, don't you? You know how much he owes?"

"I'm aware, yes."

Evan nods to himself and drums on the table with his fingers. "Very well then. I'd rather get paid than have to murder a man, and I suspect you will pay me long before your father ever does. I will accept this deal and you will take on your father's debt. I will also be so kind as to give you some time to gather the funds, or at least to come up with a suitable way to begin repayment."

"Thank you, Evander. That would be appreciated."



“Three months should be enough,” he says and checks his watch. “Come back to me in three months, whether you have the cash or not, and we will negotiate from there. Does this work?”

“That works.” I push back and stand. “Thank you again.”

“And, War? Family is very important. You would never forgive yourself if you killed your dear old papa, yes?”

“You don’t know my dad,” I say and walk off as Evander laughs behind me.

# Chapter 25

## *Melody*

I'm alone in the office doing some end-of-the-week accounting when Ford knocks and pokes his head inside. "Hey, Melody. Got a second?"

I'm tired. I'm sore. I've been working myself raw because that's easier than thinking about War and my family and the mess I left behind. All I want to do is finish up and go home, but I can't exactly turn away the boss.

Besides, Ford never visits me when I'm in the office.

"Come on in," I say.

Ford takes the chair across from my desk. The room is cramped and small but I keep it neat and orderly which helps. He leans back and gives me a charming smile, and I close the accounting book to give him my full attention. "How are you holding up?" he asks.

"Not bad, just getting back into the rhythm," I say and try my best to give him a charming smile.

He nods to himself and runs a hand through his hair. It's a nervous gesture and I'm suddenly on edge wondering what this is about.

"Don't get mad at Kat," he says suddenly. "Okay? But she told me a little bit about what happened with you and War."

I groan and tilt my head back. "She shouldn't have done that."

"She didn't go into detail, but I understand that things ended in a weird place, and I just—" Ford sighs and leans forward, putting his hands on my desk. "I did some digging."

I deadpan at him. “Digging? Now? You couldn’t have done some *digging* before I got mixed up with him?”

“He’s my cousin,” Ford says defensively. “Well, sort of my cousin. We’re distantly related. But yeah, fine, you’re right, I should’ve looked into him some more from the start.”

“It’s fine,” I say and let out a long breath. “I just don’t want to talk about War, okay?”

“Right, totally, I understand. Stuff happened between you two and you’re still raw.” He sits there, staring at me, and I stifle a groan.

“But?” I prompt.

“*But* you might want to hear this.”

“I have a feeling you’re going to tell me whether I agree to listen or not.”

“Pretty much.” He grins sheepishly and keeps talking. “I was in this organization back in college. We called ourselves Atlas, and we had this grand plan. We pledged to keep in touch, to remain good friends, and together we’d grow and push past the barriers that hold most people back. We swore we’d reach the next level. The real game.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, eyebrows raised. “I’m gonna be honest, Ford, that sounds super weird and suspect, like science fiction villain sort of stuff.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “It’s not as nefarious as it sounds, but I told you that so you’d understand that I know people with connections. Important people.”

“Kat has mentioned some of your friends,” I say and lean back, crossing my arms over my chest. “Not by name, but I understand they exist.”

“Right, well, War’s name popped up the other day when I was meeting with some of those friends. Apparently, War is currently in heavy debt to Evander Kazan.”

I stare at Ford without reacting. “Oh, uh, who is Evander Kazan?”

“A very good friend of mine and the head of a very influential Greek mob family out of Chicago.”

My turn to be surprised. I stare at him like he’s gone insane. “War owes him money?”

“In a sense. It’s a long and convoluted story, but the basic version is, War took over his father’s debt. Apparently, War’s father owed a lot of money to Evander and wasn’t paying any of it back, and Evander planned on making an example of him. At least until War stepped in a couple days ago and offered to take over his father’s debts.”

I don’t move, completely stunned. I knew War’s family had no money, but I didn’t realize War’s father was in debt to the Greek mob. “Did War know?” I ask. “All this time?”

“Probably?” Ford shrugs. “I can’t be sure, but Evander says War’s father has owed him money for a while now, so I have to assume War’s been aware of it for months at least. Well before you two ever met.”

I let that sink in. War’s father was going to be murdered by Greek gangsters, which means War needed money and he needed it fast, and suddenly a lot of connections burn bright in my head. I rub my eyes and my hands curl into fists, and I stare up at the ceiling, taking deep breaths to keep myself from screaming.

“That was it the whole time,” I whisper to nobody, but Ford clears his throat.

“Yes, I think so. War probably got involved with your dad, and then with you, because he felt it was his best shot at paying his own father’s debts. I’m actually surprised he didn’t tell you any of this, but I just—I thought you should know.”

“Thank you.” I blink away tears. “I just wish I heard it from him.”

Ford hesitates before he stands. “I don’t want to overstep here, but I will anyway. People do things for all sorts of reasons. They lie and cheat and steal, and usually those reasons are petty and selfish and stupid, but trying to save the life of your father is probably one of the better reasons I’ve ever heard. I

know War hurt you. I understand he misled you. I'm not advocating for full forgiveness here. I'm only saying, I think things were more complicated than anyone realized, and maybe War felt like he didn't want to endanger you by telling you about the Greeks."

"Right," I say and wipe my face, feeling stupid and angry. Why the hell didn't he tell me from the start? I could've helped him, worked with him, done anything. I would've understood at least when I learned about his deal with my father. "How much influence do you have with Evander?"

"If you're going to ask me to intervene on War's behalf, I really shouldn't. We make it a point not to get involved in each other's business unless it's mutually beneficial. I could ask him for a favor, but you don't know Evander. Favors don't come cheap, not even to his best friends."

"That's okay," I say, shaking my head. "Thank you. I'm happy you told me at least."

"Yeah, I figured you'd want to know. And, Melody, you're a good person. I know things are complicated right now with your family and War and all that, but you're a good person. I feel like you should keep that in mind." He nods and leaves the office.

I sit there and cry into my hands. I sob, feeling stupid and angry, feeling somehow even more betrayed. He tried to seduce me, he lied and fucked me, and he did it for money. But he also did it for a good reason, to try to save his father. That doesn't change the fact that he broke my heart, but at least I can understand his motivations. At least it wasn't just for money for money's sake.

After a few minutes, I get control of myself, wipe my eyes, blow my nose, and make a call. The number rings and rings, and I'm about to give up when Renee answers. She sounds exhausted.

"Hello? Leader Ranch?"

"Renee," I say and a deep unease blooms in my chest. "How's everything going?"

“About what you’d expect,” she says and clears her throat, sounding exhausted. “It’s a mess here. Everyone’s stunned even though we knew it was coming. I loved your father, you know, we all did, and we all knew the ranch would never be the same, but now it feels like a piece of my heart’s been scooped out. I’m just grieving, sweetie, that’s all.”

My mouth falls open and a hollow terror settles over my body. “Renee,” I say slowly. “What are you talking about?”

A pause. Then: “Your uncles didn’t call you.”

“Nobody called me. I was calling you to talk about War and to vent and I guess—”

“Sweetie. Oh, god, honey. Your piece of garbage uncles. Oh, god, your piece of freaking trash family.” Real anger burns in her tone.

“Renee, what happened?” But I already know. I knew the second she picked up the phone. Coldness builds in my feet, a numbness spreading up my legs, threatening to stop my heart.

“Honey, your father died this morning. I’m so, so sorry.”

I sit there and stare at the wall as my mind runs laps trying to process what she just said. She’s still talking, but I can’t hear her anymore, and all I can think is, Daddy’s gone, Daddy died, that giant of a man, that titan, that blinding light, he’s gone, he’s all gone, and I left things the way I left them, the way I always leave them, messy and horrible.

“Sorry, I have to go,” I manage to say and hang up.

My father is dead, and I can’t pretend like I don’t care anymore.

I lean forward, put my face in my hands, and I cry, tears rolling down between my fingers. I cry for my lost father, for my lost childhood, for the ranch, for everything that’s gone and will never be again. I cry, sobbing so hard my stomach twists like I might be sick, and I don’t know how I’ll ever come back from this.

# Chapter 26



## *Melody*

**D**addy's buried in a family plot not far from the ranch.

It's a hot Texas day. I'm sweating in my black dress as I walk toward the gravesite. The rest of the family huddles together ahead of me—Daisy crying like she really gives a shit, Uncle Lovett and Uncle Dudley both staring like they're shell-shocked, Dean and Evan limping and looking bruised and battered and unable to meet my eye—but I stay away, off to the side with Renee. The old ranch hand looks like a dozen years were sucked out of her in just the last few days, and that breaks my heart even more. Leader Ranch was my father, but it was also Renee, and all the other men and women that worked with them.

I put an arm around her, and she smiles sadly at me. "Never thought I'd see the day," she admits. "Your daddy was one of a kind. He held that place together."

"He *was* the ranch," I agree and try not to gaze over at my aunts and uncles and cousins.

It's hard to listen to the priest as they lower my father's casket into the ground. There's so much rage and hate in me, and I don't know what to do with all this churning madness. It's like someone lit a match and held it to a fuse and now I'm burning down, burning bright, and I'm going to break apart when it reaches the end.

None of them will speak to me. Not the uncles, not the cousins. Kerry squeezed my hand and said sorry, but that was all. She was the only one that seemed truly broken up about

my father's death—the others are all playacting. And I hate them for it.

The funeral was packed. Daddy was popular in the area. His old employees, his clients, the other ranchers, men and women from his various points in his life, they all packed into the big Catholic church to pay their respects. I heard stories about Daddy I'd never heard before, and some of them made me laugh, but most of them made me cry. I stood apart from the family like a leper, like a rat.

Not that I care. None of it matters. Daddy's gone and I have no ties to the ranch anymore.

He didn't leave the place to anyone. Not to me, not to Daisy, not to anyone. It's not in the will at all, and arguably the language is vague enough that we could all lay claim if we wanted to fight it out in court. I'm sure Daisy and the uncles already hired counsel and plan a long and protracted legal battle, the winner of which will walk away with the deed to all that prime land, but I don't give a damn. Ford offered to fund my own claim if I wanted, even said he knows an extremely talented lawyer that would take on the case for a reasonable price, but I told him no.

Let my family rip themselves to shreds.

When the priest finishes and Daddy's in the ground, I spend a minute by the grave, saying my goodbyes. I remember him as he was: tall and proud, laughing and harsh, lifting me up on his shoulders and swinging me around and telling me that he loved me, and all the hours we spent riding together, and all the hours we spent sitting at the top of the tower reading together, and all that love and all that affection. I try not to think about the later stuff, with Rosie and with War. I focus on the good, on my daddy as I think he'd want me to remember him. As a good man, a father and a ranch hand. A real leader.

"You sure you'll be okay?" Renee hugs me tight and kisses my cheek.

"I'm okay," I say. "I'm just gonna head home."

“Your no-good, worthless family should be bringing you back into the fold.” She shakes her head. “But I bet they think that would muddy their legal claim.”

“It’s okay,” I say and hug her again. “I’m going to keep in touch, okay?”

“Please do. I’m going to be bored in retirement.” She laughs sadly and walks off to her truck. I watch her go, feeling like a piece of the world is ending, a piece that’ll never come back again.

As I turn toward my car, I spot him standing at the far side of the lot alone, leaning against a black pickup. I do a double take, unwilling to believe it’s actually him, but War raises a hand in greeting like we’re meeting on the street.

He’s in a black suit, perfectly fitted to his athletic frame. I consider turning my back on him, but I can’t help myself. I drift over, feeling sick and lost and miserable, the parking lot mostly emptied out by now. My family couldn’t wait to get out of here. They couldn’t wait to start bickering and fighting over the scraps left behind.

“What are you doing, War?” I ask and stop a few feet away.

“Paying my respects,” he says. “And I wanted to see you.”

“Go away. This is out of line. You shouldn’t have come.”

He grimaces slightly, but shades his eyes. “Daisy wanted me to work for her,” he says. “I told her I would.”

I let out a crazed, bitter laugh. “I’m not surprised.”

“My father is a con man,” War says, and I go very still. “You know how I dropped out of school back in the day? Well, I left because my dad lost all our money and we couldn’t afford tuition anymore. I didn’t actually get kicked out, but the rumor was useful so I never corrected it.”

“Really?” I ask, surprised, but I shouldn’t be. I knew his family had money trouble and that makes sense, only it undercuts the idea of War I’ve had in my head all these years as this rebellious mystery that rolled into my life and disappeared just as fast.

“My dad’s been doing this over and over for years,” he says, and for the first time I can hear real pain in this voice. “And this time, he went too far. He owed some dangerous men a lot of money, and your father happened to come to me at the right time, when I was desperate and willing to take on any job at all so long as it paid well and paid quickly. He made his crazy offer and I thought, I could do the right thing and turn him down, or I could do the stupid, immoral, awful thing, and maybe save my dad in the process. I’m fucked up, Melody. I always have been, but this time I did it to save my dad, if that makes a difference.”

I let his words sink in. It’s nothing new—Ford told me already—but hearing it from War makes the story shine brighter somehow, because I know it’s a struggle for him opening up like this. “It’s hard for you to admit that, isn’t it?” I ask and step a little closer.

He nods. “All my life I’ve been lying to people. Sometimes I think I’m just like my dad, except I’m forced to funnel my lies into neat little boxes in order to keep my game running. I’ve been doing my best to blend in with high society so that they’d be comfortable enough to keep on hiring me. I pretend like I’m something I’m not, and after a long time, I forgot who I really am.”

“Which is who?”

“I’m War and I’m a liar. I’ve lied about everything, all the time, constantly. Except when I told you that I was falling for you. That I didn’t lie about.”

I wrap my arms around myself. “I don’t want to hear that, War.”

“Your father’s dead. I’m not playing any games anymore. I took on my family’s debt and I don’t know how I’ll ever pay it, which means I’m not sure I have all that much time left. So here I am, telling the truth for once in my life, and even if it’s the last thing I do, at least I’ll walk away from this feeling like I tried. I fell in love with you, Melody, and I’m still in love with you, and I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness or anything at all, but I wanted you to hear it. This is who I really

am. I love you. Falling in love with you is the only good thing I've ever done in my life and I won't regret it, even if I already screwed it up. Oh, and I think I know how you can fuck over Daisy."

I stand there dizzy with a strange, heady rush, trying to decide if he's telling the truth or if this is another one of his complicated games, but the way he's looking at me, the way he's talking, it's like he opened himself up and he's showing me the raw and unvarnished insides. This is War, this is only War, and nothing else.

I shake my head and rub my face. "I don't know what to say," I whisper, even though a voice is screaming at me to tell him how I feel. "That was a lot and I'm trying really hard to process."

"You don't have to say anything. All I need for you to do is hear me. I love you. And this is how you fuck Daisy." He takes out a stack of papers and shoves them at me.

I take them with numb fingers. "What is this?"

"It's a contract. She wanted me to get you to sign it."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Daisy hired you for this?"

"That was her stupid mistake. She didn't realize that you were the real thing and all that other stuff was bullshit." He smiles and he looks like he's lighter, like a burden's lifted from his back. "She also didn't think I'd outsmart her, but here we are."

"What did you do?"

"I went behind her back and told a few lies like I always do, but this time I did it for a good reason." He turns away and gets into his truck. "I'm sorry, Melody. I said what I came here to say, and now it's all up to you. If you want to get back to Daisy, there's your ammunition. If you want to let your family fight over the ranch and tear each other to bits, throw those papers away and wash your hands of all this. And if you ever want to talk—well, Ford will be able to find me, assuming I'm still alive." He pauses and looks at me like he's committing my form to memory. "Good luck. You deserve better than all this. You always did."

He starts his engine. I flip through the papers, feeling overwhelmed, tears in my eyes for the first time that day. They roll down my cheeks and splatter on the pavement, and how am I going to let this man drive away now? After he did all this? War didn't have to get involved again, not after what happened, and yet he tricked Daisy and he gave me these papers and he's saying everything, all the right things, and I just—

“Wait,” I say before he can put the truck in gear. “How about giving me a ride?”

He hesitates, and he smiles. “Climb in, lovely Melody. Where to?”

“Anywhere,” I say, getting into the passenger seat. “It's been a long, miserable day. Take me somewhere nice.”

“Let's go,” he says and drives off.

# Chapter 27

## *Melody*

**D**aisy's townhouse is on the edge of Dallas in a cute little private community. It's not expensive, but it's not cheap either, and I can only imagine that Daisy feels like she's slumming it for the time being.

Nobody lives at the ranch anymore. The family moved out the day after the funeral in anticipation of the place getting sold. I don't know where everyone else is living—only Kerry reached out with a friendly text and standing invitation to dinner, which I haven't accepted yet, but I think I will sooner or later—and I honestly don't care. Daisy's the only one I need, and the only one that matters.

War stands by my side as I face down my cousin's door. "You okay?" he asks and slips his hand into mine.

"I'm okay," I say, nodding to myself, before I knock.

Daisy answers after a few seconds. She looks tan, her hair cut shorter, and she's wearing jeans and a lightweight blouse. She looks good, happy, as if leaving the ranch was like banishing an evil spirit that was sucking away her vitality. I squeeze War's hand, but I don't let it go, and I tighten my grip on the folder under my left arm. "Hey, Daisy," I say.

"Melody. Warren." She looks between us and her eyes narrow. "What's this about?" But then her face brightens. "You signed the paperwork, didn't you?"

"In a way," I say, trying not to smile. "Can we come inside?"



She ushers us into the kitchen and we sit at the table. “Something to drink?” she asks. “Coffee? Tea? Ginger ale?”

“Nothing, thanks,” I say, and War only leans back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, looking around with a smug little smirk like always.

“I’m glad you showed up,” Daisy says and sit across from us. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and soul-searching ever since your father died and we left the ranch, and there’s a lot I want to talk about.”

I almost burst out laughing. Daisy, doing soul-searching? And now she wants to talk? I swear, if she apologizes, I’m going to punch her in the mouth. I don’t care if she had some kind of spiritual awakening and realized that she’s been manipulating everyone and hurting me for years—she doesn’t deserve forgiveness, and she won’t find any from me.

“I’m actually only here on business.” I take out the papers War gave me a month ago at the funeral and slide them across the table. “I had these looked over by a few lawyers, including my dad’s estate lawyer, and everything here is legitimate and enforceable.”

Daisy’s eyebrows raise in surprise as she takes the pages. “I don’t understand. Aren’t these the sale documents I gave to War?” Her expression tightens as she starts to flip through the pages. Each one is marked with a couple sets of initials, including *CL*. “This doesn’t really matter anymore, since your dad didn’t leave the ranch to anyone in his will. We’re going to court over it and—” She pauses, frowning. “What is this, Melody?”

“You wanted to sell the ranch. Well, we sold the ranch.”

Her expression darkens. She flips faster and finally reaches the last page in the bundle. I watch her eyes as they read the words and get to the bottom, my heart racing, my palms sweating and hands trembling. War sits close and I take heart in having him here, even if we’re not totally okay yet and I’m not sure I can let my guard down, but having him next to me and on my side gives me a ton of strength.

“Colton Leader?” Melody asks and shakes her head. “I don’t understand. Your dad died. How did he—” She looks at the date and her eyes widen. “You have to be *fucking* kidding.”

War speaks up then. “Here’s the thing, Daisy. When you gave me that job, you know, your little insurance policy, I realized something. I could do what you asked and hope for the best, or I could fuck you over. Obviously, I chose to fuck you.”

Daisy slams the papers down and smacks her palm flat down on top of them. “What the fuck is this?”

“It’s pretty obvious,” I say, terrified but loving Daisy’s confusion and rage. “War went to the buyers you had listed on those documents and had them draw up new contracts. He did his thing, you know, told a few white lies, and that big farming conglomerate faxed over the updates the next day.”

“You son of a bitch,” Daisy whispers.

“Then I went to see Colton,” War says. “I made sure you were all out on your nightly excursion to town. I told him the deal—he could sign now and sell the place and list Melody as the sole beneficiary, or he could do nothing, let the ranch go to nobody, and the whole thing would fall into chaos. I told him it was the only moral thing to do. And the only way to keep this place out of your hands.”

“This is fake,” Daisy says, shoving her chair back. “You forged these documents.”

“We didn’t,” I tell her. “And those are copies. Feel free to tear them up if it’ll make you feel better.”

“You bitch,” she snaps and her lips pull back. “I’m going to fight you. I’m going to rip you to fucking pieces in court.”

“Good luck,” I say and stand, meeting her gaze. “The thing is, we took this long to tell you about it because we wanted to make sure this was ironclad. There’s no judge in the world that’ll side with you, not after we confirmed Colton’s signature, the beneficiary statement, the sale agreement, everything. My father sold the ranch right under your fucking nose, and you’re not going to see a dime.”

Daisy screams and comes at me. Her fists fly, aiming for my face, but I'm ready for her this time. I drop my shoulder, step forward, and ram my weight right into her midsection the way War taught me. She lets out a shocked *woof* of air and flips over my shoulder, over my back, and slams onto the floor behind me.

She tries to jump to her feet but War puts a boot on her chest and holds her down. "Stay there for a while," he says. "I fucked you, Daisy. And I have to admit, I enjoyed every second of it."

"I'll sue you both," she wheezes from the floor. War lets her go and we head to the door. Her unhinged screams and shouts follow us to the street. "I'll kill you! I'll find you and kill you, Melody, I fucking swear! Rosie couldn't do it but I fucking will, you bitch, you fucking bit—" I slam the door, cutting her off, and lean against War.

I'm shaking with excitement and fear, and I don't know if that was the right thing to do. I didn't go back to the ranch to get revenge on my family—that'd never been part of the plan. All I wanted was to see my father, say goodbye, and deal with my past.

Instead, they chose to drag me back into hell, and I'm done letting them yank me around.

"How'd that go?" War asks, leading me down the steps and back to his truck.

"I think it went well," I say as we climb inside. "Daisy seems to have taken the news well."

"She's going to fight you, you know," he says as he puts the truck in gear and starts to drive. "She won't make this easy."

"I know, but it doesn't matter. She can make a bunch of noise and delay things in court, but in the end the ranch is sold and that money is mine."

He laughs and rolls around a curve. "I'm happy for you, Melody. I really am."

"You should be happy for yourself, too. You earned your commission."

His eyebrows raise. “What commission?”

“I believe there was a two-million-dollar bonus involved, if I’m not mistaken.”

He says nothing, only keeps driving, his face suddenly impassive, and I wonder if I said something wrong. I expected him to be happy about this since it means paying off his father’s creditors and getting a bunch of dangerous Greek mobsters off his back, but he looks like I just told him I’m going to have to amputate his leg.

“That’s not why I did this,” he says, voice pitched low. “I can’t take that money from you.”

“You can and you will. You might be an asshole and a liar, but you don’t deserve to get killed.”

He lets out a throaty laugh. “I think there are some folks that’ll disagree with you. Daisy, for one.”

“Daisy doesn’t matter. Are you turning me down, Warren Temple?”

“Never,” he whispers and looks at me, the truck idling at a stoplight. “Let me take you out to dinner tonight.”

“Dinner? That’s all?”

“Dinner, movie, sleepover, camping trip, vacation to Paris, whatever you want. So long as I can do it with you.”

“Let’s start with dinner,” I say, smiling like an idiot. “Maybe if we act like normal people—” I shrug, like, what do we have to lose?

“Dinner it is. I’ll pick you up at—well, how about we skip that part and go right out from here?”

“Sounds good to me.” I reach across the truck and slip my hand into his.

The light turns green and he starts driving again.

# Chapter 28

## *War*

**T**wo months pass. Evander's not kind of patient, but I manage to push him off until, finally, I agree to meet with him at another restaurant in Chicago. This time, it's an Italian place, and Kazan's with a table filled with other gangsters, all of them eating way too much and laughing with their mouths open, pouring wine down their throats like they're feeding at a trough.

"Boys," Evander says as I approach. "Our guest of honor is here. Get him a chair."

One of the gangsters vacates his spot beside Evander and I sit in his place. I'm intensely aware of all the men staring at me, their expressions ranging from openly hostile to openly bored.

"I have a gift for you, Mr. Kazan," I say and he laughs loudly.

"Call me fucking Evander. And lucky for you, I love gifts. What did you bring me today, War?"

I take out a check and slide it over to him. Evander's eyes widen in surprise as he waves the check in the air like he's trying to find out if it's some kind of joke. "Is this for real? All of it?"

"Every penny. You'll have to figure out a reasonable way to cash that though."

Evander bursts out laughing and slaps my shoulder hard before shoving the check at the man to his right. It disappears into the man's jacket, and suddenly all the angry glares and boredom

disappears as Evander pours me wine and raises a toast in my honor.

“To paying your debts and saving your father’s life,” Evander says. “Let’s pray you never have to do it again, though I’ll gladly take more of your money.”

The men laugh and I drink. The wine’s good, and maybe it’s the congenial atmosphere or the smoke in the air, or maybe the alcohol goes right to my head, but an idea bursts into my mind. I lean closer to Evander and speak softly. “Actually, I was hoping for a favor.”

His eyebrows raise. “A favor? Well, shit. You just gave me a two-million-dollar check plus reasonable interest. What kind of favor?”

When I tell him, he laughs all over again and snaps his fingers. One of his lackeys comes over and Evander tells him to go to a nearby shop owned by a guy named Giuliano and ask for the piece up front, he’ll know the one. After that, Evander pours more wine, they order more food, and I listen to gangster after gangster tell stories about shakedowns, violent confrontations, and hilarious altercations. I laugh and drink and enjoy myself, at least until the lackey comes back with a brown paper bag.

“Here you go,” Evander says. “Your favor. I won’t be so crude as to discuss payment, but—” He tilts his head to the side, grinning like a shark.

“I’ll bring cash next time,” I say, which makes everyone burst out laughing again.

A bottle of wine, more pasta than I ever wanted in my entire life, and more mob stories later, and I head outside. It’s a nice day in Chicago, lots of sun, moderately warm. I head into the coffee shop two blocks away and find Melody sitting where I left her, sunk down low in a booth with her laptop in front of her, scrolling through pictures of Bomber she uploaded to Instagram.

“Sorry that took so long,” I say and sit down across from her. She closes the laptop lid and blinks at me.

“You’re done? It’s over?”

“It’s over.” I put the brown paper bag down in front of her.  
“Except for this. I owe them for this.”

“War. What did you do?”

“This is my debt to pay back. Don’t you worry about it.”

“Seriously. War. What did you *do*?”

“I made the easiest decision of my life.” I reach into the bag and get down on one knee right there at the edge of the table. Her eyes widen in confusion. “I want to swear something to you, Melody. I swear I will never lie to you again. I might lie to other people, but never to you, no matter what, no matter how small. I love you, I need you, and you will always have the real me, no stories, no half-truths. Everything, no matter how ugly.”

“War,” she whispers, hands over her mouth. “What are you doing?”

I flip open the box. The ring is much nicer than I expected—simple, elegant, probably insanely expensive. The diamonds sparkle in the low cafe light and people are staring, but fuck them. All I can see is Melody.

“I love you. I want to love you until the day that I die. Marry me, Melody.”

She holds a trembling hand out. “Yes,” she says and laughs once sharply. “Yes, I will!”

I slide the ring on. It’s big—but it slips down and she cries as I pull her to her feet and kiss her hard.



# Chapter 29

## *Melody*

**B**omber limps from the stable and I walk alongside him, leading him by the bridle. He moves gingerly, gently, each step probing and uncertain, but I coax him on. Ford, Kat, and War watch from the fence, the late summer sun beating down on my back.

“You’re doing so good,” I say softly as we make our way around the paddock. “Good job, Bomber, you’re so good, you’re such a good boy.” I keep praising him, talking softly and calmly, trying to make sure he doesn’t spook and hurt himself. The vet says the leg is all healed, and now it’s a matter of whether the mended bone will carry his weight without cracking all over again. We’ve been doing some minor rehab work, strengthening the atrophied muscles, getting him ready for the big day.

And now it’s finally here. Nerves jangle in my chest and sweat rolls down my back, but I don’t let him sense how uneasy I’m feeling. We keep up a slow but steady pace, and Bomber seems comfortable, almost eager to be outside. I can’t blame him—the poor guy’s been cooped up for months now, and I’m sure he’s itching to get back out into the world again, even if he has to move as a snail’s pace.

“You did so good,” I say as we head around and back into the barn. He snorts in response like he’s accepting my praise and heads right back into his stall. I take off his kit and wipe him down, and go meet the others at the picnic benches when I’m done.

“That looked really good,” Kat says, sounding relieved. “Think it’ll hold?”

“I think so,” I say and lean against War. The engagement ring sparkles on my finger. “The vet says he’s ready, and I can’t keep him locked up inside forever, right? Time to get him moving.”

“You’re doing great,” Ford says and checks his phone. “And now I have to run. Seriously, Melody, great job.” He stands, kisses Kat’s cheek, and heads off with a wave.

Kat watches him go. “He’s really proud, you know,” she says, glancing back at me. “The Instagram page you set up for Bomber has been driving a lot of interest to the farm. Seriously, we’ve gotten, like, dozens of interested buyers just from your posts alone.”

“Tell me about it, I’ve been fielding all their emails, and those are just the ones you guys know about.”

Kat laughs and stretches. “Good work today. I think I’m going to go for a little walk before I have to hunt down my husband and pry that phone from his ear.”

“Poor guy’s always busy,” War says with a lazy smile. “Must be nice.”

Kat walks off, and I lean over to kiss War. He kisses me back, lingering for a second longer than he needs to. “Hello, handsome,” I say.

“Hello, beautiful. You really did great with Bomber, you know.”

“I hope so. He seems like he’s doing good, but it’s always iffy, you know? Breaks like that sometimes just never heal right, no matter what you do.”

“You’ve done everything you can. I think you should be proud.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I let him wrap his arms around me and put my head on his shoulder. We sit like that for a little while, and I admire the ring on my finger, breathe in his musky smell,

and let myself enjoy the brief moment of quiet and contentment that washes over me.

“I’m thinking we should make this official soon,” he says and startles me from my meandering thoughts.

“Make what official?”

“The engagement. I’m thinking end of September.”

“Uh, you mean, in a month?”

“Exactly.” He kisses my neck and cheek. “How’s that sound? Want to be my wife in a month?”

“But we have to plan a wedding, invite guests, get a venue and catering and—”

“All that’s just money, and what’s money matter these days? We’ll do research together and pay whatever it takes. I don’t want to wait a second longer.”

I take a deep breath and let it out. Something uncurls in my chest, some worry I’ve been carrying this whole time. Even though War promised he’d never lie to me when he proposed, I still can’t help but wonder if maybe he’s holding things back, or if he’s falling back into old habit, but for some reason the way he looks at me right now makes all those doubts disappear.

This man loves me. He truly, genuinely loves in me in a way I’ve never experienced before. And I love him back like he’s a piece of my own flesh. When I think about rehabbing Bomber, I also think about doing it with War by my side. There’s no future without War, no future all alone.

“I can plan a wedding in a month,” I say with a shrug. “How hard could it be? It’s just money.”

“Damn right.” He kisses me and holds it for a long time, and I drift into him, my War. He knows me like nobody else ever has, all my flaws and horrors, all my trauma and my mistakes, and he loves me even more because of them.

“We’ll have to teach you to ride though,” I say and stand up, holding out my hand. “There’s no way I’m marrying a man that can’t ride a horse.”

“Hell, no,” he says and stand beside me, squeezing my fingers.  
“Horses are terrifying. I’ll stick with walking.”

“We’ll see about that.” We head together back to the main house, laughing as we go, his arm wrapped tightly around my shoulders.

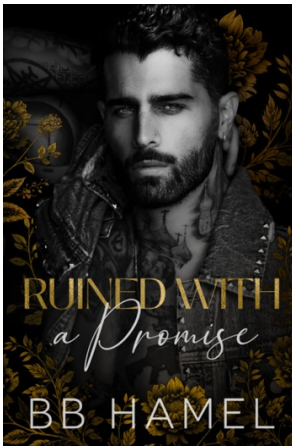
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## Preview: Ruined with a Promise



### Chapter One: Kat

If my cousin Sara Lynn fell into a vat of boiling Pepsi, I'd stand back and watch her drown.

I wouldn't even feel bad about it.

While she begged for my help, I'd remind her about the time she pulled my chair out from under me and I fell straight onto concrete and broke my tailbone, or the time she recorded me

sleeping and sent the video to all her friends with the caption 'Neanderthal Snoring,' or the time she broke into my room and stole my pillows and refused to give them back until I admitted that I was the ugliest girl in the whole family. I gave in and said it, and she still wouldn't return them and I slept on an old stuffed bear for a week before Grandpa made her hand them over.

Which is why I never should've gone with her to this homecoming football game.

But the offer was too tempting. She's a senior and I'm barely in eighth grade and I'd never been to a high school football game before. She said she'd take me in front of the whole family at dinner, which meant it was really happening, and I was too excited to really think through what it meant. That I'd be at her mercy there with no adults to help. At the time I figured her mom and dad made her do it out of pity.

Now I'm pretty sure it was another in a long line of torturous practical jokes that aren't funny and only prove that she's an actual monster.

Sara Lynn's smirk is vicious. Light and shadows play across her face as people above us on the concrete bleachers move around between plays. "Stop staring at me like that, Kit-Kat. If you wanna get out from under here then you're gonna have to eat the whole thing, start to finish, and you'd better do it in under ten seconds." She shoves the mustard-drenched hot dog at me and wiggles it up and down. "Come on, Kit-Kat. Get to it. We all know you love to scarf down food."

She cackles and her friends join in. My jaw works but I don't answer. Saying anything right now will only make it worse. Sara Lynn knows I hate hot dogs ever since Grandfather loudly informed me that they will make me *even chubbier and nobody likes a chubby girl* and now the sight of a hot dog repulses me. But Sara Lynn shoves it in my face with a wicked grin while her friends, Laurie and Bronwyn, watch and laugh.

Sara Lynn says, "Come on, it's just food. It's not like I'm asking you to eat bugs. Although—" She bends down and scoops up some bleacher dirt and sprinkles it on top. A little piece of discarded, ancient popcorn adheres to the mustard. "There we go, now it's got a little seasoning. Get chewing, Kit-Kat."

I hate that nickname. It's a dig against my weight, which isn't my fault, I'm only thirteen and it's not like I eat too much junk or whatever. Grandfather won't let me. Tears well up in my eyes, and I blink rapidly to try to stop them from rolling down because crying right now will only make this worse but I'm trapped and cornered and hurt, and I don't know what to do. Sara Lynn's not going to let me leave until I eat all that gross food. Even if I do it, she'll just call me fat and her friends will cackle, and I'll hate myself just as much as I hate them.

Except a voice cuts over the crowd. A guy's voice, low and loud. "What are you doing?"

Everyone looks over as he walks toward us.

Bradford Arc. Or just *Ford* now. He's big, pushing six feet, with broad shoulders and muscular arms. He's a star on the lacrosse team or else he'd be out there on the football field right now playing quarterback or something. Ford's one of the most popular boys at school, and I've never been this close to him before, let alone ever heard him talk, but Sara Lynn and her two little witch cronies know him. They hang out in the same social circles, and I used to be so jealous that she's popular but if this is how the popular kids act then it's better that I'm a loser.

With Ford here, suddenly I'm mortified. Now I can't stop the tears even if I despise myself for crying in front of him, but at least Sara Lynn isn't paying attention to me anymore.

"We're just having some fun with my little cousin," Sara Lynn says and strokes her hair with her free hand. "It's not a big deal."

"Seriously, Sar? You're bullying a little kid?"

Sara Lynn rolls her eyes. "Whatever, it's not bullying. She's just my stupid little cousin. And she's thirteen, so relax, she's not, like, a baby anymore." She looks at me and her lips curl in distaste. "Wow, seriously, Kat? You're fake crying right now to get attention? That's so pathetic."

Sara Lynn's friends laugh nervously but Ford's staring at them like he wants to break both their perfect little noses and force their parents to let them get even more plastic surgery.

"Leave the girl alone," he says and his voice is almost lost in the roar of the crowd above. "This is pretty sad, Sar. Even for you."

"You're *such* a dork, Ford." Sara Lynn tosses the hot dog on the ground and walks over to him. "What are you doing after this? Are you going to Tommy's house? I hear his parents aren't home and Dean got a keg."

"I might."

Sara Lynn puts a finger on his chest. She smiles seductively, or at least I think that's what she's doing. I've never actually *seen*



someone try to be seductive before and it grosses me out that Sara Lynn's acting this way.

Ford stares at her for a long moment and I think he's going to do something like kiss her or touch her hips or something like that, like what boys do to girls in movies. Sara Lynn's pretty in a way I'll never be: tall, skinny, long blonde hair, big blue eyes. She looks like a member of our family, like an illustrious Stockton, while I look like *the mistaken bastard mix of a junkie daughter and some gutter-rutting stranger*, according to my grandfather.

Instead, Ford grabs her wrist tightly and twists it sharply to the left.

Sara Lynn yelps with pain and surprise. Nobody moves—her friends are too horrified to say anything, and a sudden pulse of excitement runs down into my core as my hands fly to my mouth. My tears are all forgotten as I stare at Ford bending Sara Lynn's wrist to the side, her teeth clenched down in a terrified and pained grimace. She tries to struggle, tries to hit him, but he's twice her size and not smiling at all, only staring at her with a grim expression, as he wrenches her wrist up behind her back and holds her there like she's a child.

"How does it feel to be pushed around by someone bigger?" he says and leans closer, his lips practically kissing her throat. "I can tell you that it feels good to do the pushing. Should I break your wrist? I wonder if I'd like that. I think I'd really *love* to hear you fucking *scream*, Sar. God, that'd be hot."

"Ford," Sara Lynn groans. "Get the fuck off me, please. Don't do this."

"Would you stop if your cousin begged? Would you let her go?"

*No*, I want to say, *she wouldn't stop*, but I keep my mouth shut. Something tells me this is bigger than I realize. This is Adult. This is Grown-Up Stuff, and I definitely don't understand the dynamics at play here.

"Yes," Sara Lynn gasps. "Please! Let me go! I'd totally stop!"

“Are you going to cry now for some attention, you pathetic loser? You’re small, Sar. You’re fucking tiny. I could snap your delicate little wrist and I’d love it. I want to watch you roll around on the ground and fucking *sob* your pretty little face off. Nothing would be sexier than to watch you squirm in pain. Don’t forget it.”

After another beat, he lets her go and shoves her away. She staggers, holding her wrist, and groans as Laurie and Bronwyn run to her side.

“You could’ve really hurt her,” Laurie says fiercely as she runs a hand through her long, dark hair. “What’s wrong with you, Ford?”

“Fuck off, Laurie. All three of you, fuck off, or else I’ll decide I haven’t had enough and take it out on all of you later at Tommy’s.”

Laurie hesitates, looking uncertain, and Bronwyn finally pulls Sara Lynn away.

“Asshole,” Sara Lynn mumbles with tears streaming down her face as they pass and head out from under the bleachers.

Ford watches them go.

I stand there trembling. I’m not crying anymore. I’m too scared to cry. My legs shake so badly I need to sit down but I can’t move. Ford is like a giant and whatever just happened was bad, it was really bad, boys aren’t supposed to hurt girls like that, but Ford did it and he seemed to really enjoy it. That’s not right and I don’t get why he would do something like that for someone like me.

“Uh,” I finally say. Ford’s busy staring off at them and he starts when I speak like he forgot I was there. “Thanks.”

He narrows his eyes. “Sara Lynn’s really your cousin?”

“Yeah. She’s not usually—” I stop myself because that’s not true. “Yeah. She’s my cousin. And seriously, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I didn’t do it for you. For all I fucking care, Sara can throw you off a cliff next time. Good luck with that.”

Ford turns and walks away, his hands shoved in his pockets, his shoulders hunched forward.

I stand there stunned, not sure what to think, caught between happy that Sara Lynn got what she deserved and horrified at Ford's sudden and sadistic violence.

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