

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MAISEY YATES



A Summer
to Claim Her
Cowboy

FOUR CORNERS RANCH

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Praise for the novels of Maisey Yates

“Yates brings her signature heat and vivid western details to another appealing story in the excellent Gold Valley series... Fans of Kate Pearce should enjoy this.”

—*Booklist on Rodeo Christmas at Evergreen Ranch*

“Yate’s outstanding eighth Gold Valley contemporary...will delight newcomers and fans alike.... This charming and very sensual contemporary is a must for fans of passion.”

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—*BT Book Reviews on Smooth-Talking Cowboy* (Top Pick)

A Summer To Claim Her Cowboy

Maisey Yates



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CHAPTER ONE

WALKER COLE LOOKED at his sixteen-year-old son and felt a piece of his heart come undone. It was a lot to take because he'd just left a piece of his heart in California in his oldest son Carter's new apartment when he'd dropped him off for his first year of college. And now his youngest son was leaving for the summer. Even though Sky would be back at the beginning of the school year, it was still a lot.

He was an empty nester for the summer, and he had no idea in hell what to do with that.

Raising the kids, especially as a single dad, had been all-consuming.

After losing Anna, he'd lost a dream. And so, he'd had to work at building new ones. Had to work at figuring out how to take his joy and wrap it around those kids. As tight as he could. And sometimes it was breathtakingly sad, knowing that Anna wasn't here to see this.

That she wouldn't see Sky play a mouse in the Christmas pageant.

That she wouldn't see Carter make the varsity football team. Or see him graduate from high school. Or go off to college. Move into his first apartment.

He grieved her loss in a hundred different ways every day. But in some ways, that made it easier. That was what they said, right? That you ate an elephant one bite at a time?

You didn't grieve all at once. Which should make it all more bearable.

Maybe.

Nothing was easy about it. Nothing was easy about losing your high school sweetheart. Nothing was easy about watching your kids lose their mother.

And dammit all, nothing was easy about sending your boys off into the big wide world, knowing how unforgiving it could be. He wanted to hold on to them tightly. He wanted to keep them safe.

And with Sky especially, who was headed off with dumb teenage friends for nearly three months, he wanted to lock him in his bedroom and tell him that he couldn't leave.

He'd *wanted* to do the same with Carter. But hell and damn, he couldn't.

Being a father, eventually, was about letting the kids go. He knew that. They didn't belong to him. They were on loan. He was charged with helping to make them the best men that he could. And he had done it. At least, he hoped he had.

Not that he hadn't had help.

Frankie had been indispensable for all these years.

Frankie.

That was a whole other shift that was about to happen. Frankie was a whole other problem. One that had been getting worse for the past few years. But one that was going to self-solve.

He felt like an ass, but honestly, keeping Frankie around any longer than necessary was asking for trouble at this point.

He wasn't going to think about that right now. Even though his friends were in the car, Walker leaned in and gave Sky a firm hug.

"You drive safe."

"Dad, of course we will. You know I take that seriously."

You had to when your mom had died on that familiar route home, a route she'd taken hundreds of times only to encounter a drunk driver at just the wrong time.

A drunk driver who had walked away while Anna was dead.

"I'm serious, though," Walker said. "No horsing around. No drinking and driving."

“*Seriously,*” said Sky. “I’d never let them do that.”

“Good.” He clapped his son on the shoulder.

He wasn’t going to say anything about underage drinking. Because hell, he was letting his kid go out into the world. Sky knew what Walker expected. What he thought. But that didn’t mean he was going to obey. Walker had to trust that his kid was going to take the values that he’d given him and carry them forward on this trip.

Lord.

This was the hardest thing.

“I love you, Dad,” said Sky.

That was one thing Walker was grateful for.

His sons said that. With ease. Especially compared to other kids their age. It wasn’t that they were *always* grateful for him. But they were old enough to remember clearly that their mom had gone out to dinner with some friends and not made it home. They had been introduced to how fragile life was when they were far too young to ever deal with that.

They *always* said they loved each other. They *always* said they loved Walker.

Walker always gave them an extra hug.

If there was one good thing that could be said for a sudden and brutal loss it was that it made you appreciate all the things around you.

“Text me every time you get to a campsite. If you can get away from the guys, give me a FaceTime.”

“If we have service.”

“Hike to a mountain where you have some fuckin’ service, kid.”

All right. Maybe he wasn’t always the most polished or perfect. Losing Anna had unraveled a little bit of civility in him. They were a house full of men.

Except Frankie.

Sweetness. Light.

Mischief.

Frankie.

He cleared his throat. “Hank is going to miss you. If I can’t put you on FaceTime, that dog is going to be a mess.”

“Poor Hank,” said Sky. “I’ll do my best to call, Dad.”

“All right.”

“Is Frankie here? I texted her but she didn’t answer me.”

Well, that was odd, because Frankie was always responsive to her texts.

“No,” he said. “She’s not here today. You’re out of school, Carter’s gone...”

Sky looked a little bit crestfallen. “I was hoping to say goodbye to her. She knew I was leaving today.”

And that made sense. Frankie, godsend that she was, had been... The nanny, he supposed. She had been the frequent babysitter back when the kids had been small, and she’d been in high school, and then when Anna had died, she had taken on a permanent role. She wasn’t even out of high school yet when she’d started that. She drove the kids to school, brought them home when she was out of class, made them snacks, cooked dinner. Frankie had been a constant in their lives, and she knew the boys were attached to her. So it stood to reason why Sky wanted to say goodbye to Frankie before he left.

“I can give her a call.”

Frankie was actually the last number he’d called. And so he pushed her name on his phone scroll, and it started to connect. And he heard a ringing sound coming both through his phone and somewhere else.

Just then, Frankie rounded the corner of the house and held her phone up. “I’m here,” she said.

She was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, and she looked like she’d been crying. Her hair was half-up—not in an

intentional way, like it had fallen loose—and her eyes were red-rimmed. The tip of her nose was also red.

Something in him rose up like a beast and growled.

Who the hell had made Frankie cry?

He'd have whoever did it dragged by a team of horses. He'd have them skinned. Guted.

“What brings you by?” he asked, rather than issuing threats.

Frankie scrubbed her arm under her nose. “I... It's a long story. I didn't think that Sky would still be here.”

“You didn't want to say goodbye to me, Frankie?” Sky asked.

Sky was now much taller than Frankie, who was one of the smallest women Walker had ever known. She was five foot one and petite. Large blue eyes and dark brown hair.

She was pretty as hell. In a way that was harder and harder to ignore.

She was also the linchpin that kept his life turning, and fourteen years younger than him.

He liked to remind himself of those things whenever possible. Because his issue was celibacy, not Frankie. His issue was that he hadn't ever bothered to sort out his sex life. The boys would both be gone all summer, and he had a chance to do just that.

And Frankie wouldn't be at his house all day five days a week.

Self. Solving. Problem.

“I didn't want to embarrass you in front of your friends,” she said to Sky.

“I'm not embarrassed,” said Sky.

An unspoken truth that both Walker and Sky knew all too well. Embarrassment over love was for people who didn't understand how quickly you could lose somebody. They didn't

live in fear. Not in his house. But damned if they didn't live every day with intention.

Sky bent down and gave Frankie a hug. "I'll see you when I get back."

"I expect pictures," said Frankie. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, Frankie. I love you."

Frankie blinked, and he saw a sheen of tears in her eyes for just a second, before she managed to banish them. "Goodbye, Sky. I love you too."

Then the kid got in the car, and that piece of Walker's heart went with him.

For a minute, he couldn't worry about Frankie, her unexpected appearance, or how pretty she was at all.

"Are you okay?" Frankie touched his elbow, gentle and featherlight, but it felt weighty all the same.

He looked down at her. "I'm fine," he said.

He really ought to ask her the same question since upon even closer inspection she looked like she'd been soaked, wrung out, and hung up pitifully to dry.

"Really? Because you lost Carter and now..."

"I didn't lose anybody," he said. "The boys are growing up, just like they're supposed to."

"I'm sorry. A bad choice of words." He felt like a dick, because he'd made her feel bad when she clearly already felt bad.

He looked at her and he felt his heart hollow a little bit.

He needed to talk to her.

Sky was going to be gone all summer, and now he had his driver's license. He had never wanted Carter to be responsible for driving both of them to school, because the idea of both of his boys being in an accident at the same time had made everything in him run cold. So even after Carter had his

license, Frankie had still driven Sky. But now Carter had moved out, Sky was older, he could cook for himself...

Carter was in college and that meant Walker was paying tuition. They did all right on the ranch, but it was a cost increase, that was for sure.

The truth was, Walker didn't need a nanny anymore. And if he was honest, hadn't for a long while.

He certainly didn't need Frankie this summer. And in fact, not having her around would go a long way in him getting his head on straight as far as her, women, and sex in general was concerned.

"Walker, I'm desperate." She looked at him all watery and tragic and whatever he'd been thinking of saying died in his throat.

"What?"

"Chad kicked me out. I don't have anywhere to go. I was trying to wait until Sky was gone but..."

"What?"

"I have a proposition for you, Walker. I need a place to live, you still clearly need someone to cook and clean and I was hoping...well, I was hoping that I could live with you."

CHAPTER TWO

FRANKIE LOOKED UP at Walker, way up, because the man was well over six feet and she was...not. She took in that chiseled, handsome face that had made her stomach tight since she was seventeen and tried to look pitiful.

She had a feeling she didn't need to make an effort to look pitiful today.

She was sweaty and weepy and disheveled.

Then there was the simple truth that she found it difficult to look directly at Walker without her face getting hot.

It was a mess.

Frankly, it had been for ten years.

She could remember the first time she'd ever seen him. He'd come over to visit her dad and talk about the good old days when he'd been a ranch hand at Running Y way back when. But also, to update her dad on his life.

She had intentionally ignored the wedding ring on his finger.

She'd only been fourteen—it wasn't like it mattered whether he was married or not. He'd never even looked her direction.

She'd just thought he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen in her life. Like something out of a Western movie. With his cowboy hat, his chiseled jaw, and his broad shoulders.

Then her dad had asked if she'd be interested in babysitting for him.

She'd been mildly devastated in a way that had been both gloriously painful and deeply romantic. Ideal for a fourteen-year-old basically. To find out that the man had a wife *and* kids.

But that was the thing. He was a *man*. An actual man, and nowhere near her age. She had an innocent crush on him. She'd known that he was impossible, which at that age, made him even better. She could be filled with woe at all times knowing the only man she would ever truly love might as well have lived on the moon.

He was the first *man* she'd ever had feelings for.

Some would argue the last. The only.

She'd tried. She'd really tried to put everything into her relationship with Chad. She'd moved in with him, intent on it being a thing. A *real* thing. And now here she was, thrown out.

Because... Well, she wasn't going to think about all the terrible, *true*, things he'd said to her. Not now. Not while she was looking up into Walker's stunning green eyes.

There were just only so many humiliations a woman could take, really.

"He threw you out?" Walker repeated, his voice hard.

"Yes. We broke up. I know I don't have anywhere to go, because since Dad sold the ranch, and him and Mom moved to Montana, I... I don't have a place here. I don't want to leave. All my friends are here..." *You're here*. "I thought maybe, since you have a room in the house that just opened up... Maybe we could shift my responsibilities."

Walker's face was flat.

She knew him pretty well. In truth, she knew him better than she knew just about anybody. She had been near enough to living with him for the last eight years. She'd been besotted with him since she was fourteen, but of course back then it had been theoretical. So much so that in spite of it, she'd genuinely liked his wife.

And when Anna had died, she'd been devastated. Because Anna had been lovely. If there had been a woman on this earth worthy of Walker, it had been her. She'd been sweet, and she'd *loved* him, the kind of love Frankie felt he deserved. She'd been a great mother to the boys. And watching Walker go through that pain had been unbearable.

Frankie had become a constant caregiver by default. She'd just wanted to be there. Her parents had worried about that. About her. Being surrounded by grief and sadness when she was sixteen. But she'd *wanted* to do it. She had wanted to help in any way she could.

But she could remember very keenly when her impossible crush on Walker had turned into something sharp, specific, and intense.

She could remember being seventeen and gathering her things to leave the house to go home for the night, and him walking her to the door. And for a moment, losing her sense of self. For a moment, wishing she could stretch up on her toes and kiss his grim mouth. It terrified her. But she gone home and turned the impulse over and over and over again until she'd been feverish. She had a difficult time looking him in the face the next day. Eventually, though, the shame that she felt over her attraction to him had just become a part of her.

By the time she was eighteen, her crush was far from innocent, and she knew exactly what she wanted from Walker. She wanted his strong hands on her body. She wanted to kiss him, and to have that kiss become *more*.

It didn't. Of course it didn't. He didn't look at her that way. She'd *wanted* him to. Desperately.

She also would never have done anything to jeopardize her position in the house. The boys depended on her. It felt like a part of her.

Walker did too.

It was all complicated.

It was more than just desire.

They became her family in a real and meaningful way. And the fact that she wanted Walker as more than a boss was a problem that she'd just decided she had to learn to cope with.

Sometimes she was more successful at that than others. She'd thought that losing her virginity at nineteen was a reasonable move on her part. One that proved she wasn't a ridiculous idiot hung up on a man she could never have. She'd

thought at least it would demystify some things and perhaps dim the intensity of her need for him. It hadn't. She'd just been lost in the disappointment of that experience, completely forgettable and less hot than every fantasy she'd ever had about Walker.

Then when she was twenty-one, she'd met Chad and she liked him. They had a lot in common, and she thought he was handsome. When she'd slept with him for the first time—and second and third—she'd decided that she had to accept the problem was maybe her.

That she couldn't have an orgasm with a guy was perhaps a flaw in her wiring. A side effect of the years of fantasy she'd indulged in, perhaps more than the man himself.

But being in a relationship with Chad made her feel safe, and that she didn't feel so dangerously close to blowing things up with Walker.

But now everything with Chad had blown up.

At the end of the day, Walker was the person she had to depend on. Which perhaps reinforced the wisdom of having never tried to kiss his mouth, no matter how grim it was. No matter how badly she wanted to soften it.

No matter how heated her fantasies of him were.

“Frankie...”

She decided best practices would be to say everything she possibly could before Walker could mount objections. “I can be a housekeeper. I can clean and cook and take care of you. You're really busy, Walker. And yes, mostly I've taken care of Carter and Sky, but they *are* grown-up. I'm not saying that it has to be forever, me living with you. But just for right now...”

He looked defeated. She found that encouraging.

She wasn't aiming for enthusiasm here. Defeat would do.

Walker sighed.

“Let's go into the house, Frankie,” he said.

“Okay.”

She hightailed it after him, having to take two steps to his every one as they went into the house, a well-worn ranch-style home with a broad porch, and a living room with a couch that had seen better days, but that was comfortable for the spaces worn into it.

The house was more familiar to her than her own. She'd spent almost all day every day, five days a week at this place. For the past eight years. Every Christmas, she came over after Christmas at her own place, brought presents and stayed for the afternoon. When her parents had lived here, she'd gone home to have dinner with them, but when they'd moved four years ago, she'd ended up spending Christmas day entirely with Walker and the kids. Chad may have had some points.

She couldn't deny them.

But they *hurt*. Especially... The ones about her and sex.

“Frankie,” he said. “Carter is in college now, and that's... It's expensive. I don't think I can afford a whole housekeeper.”

“I'm not asking you to up my pay. In fact, you can decrease it if I'm going to stay here. Or keep it the same, and I'll pay the rent.”

He shook his head. “I'm not charging you rent and I'm not paying you less. But I was just thinking that...the boys are grown-up. Before you showed up today, I was thinking we might need to have a hard talk about the fact that I don't really *need* you anymore.”

Frankie felt like her already bruised heart had been grabbed, thrown hard against the wall, and shattered. Chad breaking up with her and the prospect of having to be homeless could never have hurt as much as Walker saying he didn't need her.

And anyway, it wasn't like she would be homeless. Her friend Carly would take her in. It was just that Carly lived in a one bedroom above the bar in town. So it wasn't like she had a lot of space.

She would have a temporary solution, but she wanted something a little bit more long-term.

You want to be with him. Admit it.

She didn't want to admit it. It was too hard. It hurt too much. Especially in the face of him telling her that he didn't *need her anymore*.

"Oh. I..." She was such an idiot. It had never occurred to her that the boys growing up meant she wouldn't be here all the time. She just... She hadn't been able to face that. Because in many ways she felt more like a surrogate mother than a nanny. And a mother didn't leave just because the kids were grown and...

You're not their mother. You never have been.

No. But she loved them like she was. She loved them so much. She loved this house so much. And she...

You love Walker. That's the problem. It's always been the problem.

No. She was *infatuated* with him. It was foolish. He was a grown man. In a very intense way. A man who had been married. Who had loved. Who had lost. She was twenty-four. She didn't have any kids of her own. She didn't have a permanent situation.

She'd *wanted* it. She had set Chad up as a method to have a second-best life. And the truth was, he called her out on it. She felt completely hard done by, but if she was honest, she hadn't been good to him either. What she'd done hadn't been right.

She'd just hoped that she could hide it. From him. From herself.

She hadn't done a good enough job.

She had moved in with Chad, said she'd loved him, knowing that he would always occupy second position in her life. Because Walker and the kids would *always* be first. They always had been.

At every stage of her life, Walker and the kids had been number one.

And now he was saying he didn't need her. She couldn't bear this. Losing the kids—having them grow up—was

already so painful. To go from being an integral part of their lives to...not being. To having them with her every day to them having their own lives...it was devastating in a way she hadn't anticipated. And now Walker didn't want her either?

"I..."

She sat down on that well-worn couch, shock rolling through her. "I..." And to her horror she began to cry.

She'd already cried today, so her tears were close to the surface. It was mortifying.

"Oh, hell. Frankie, don't do that." She looked up at Walker, who looked...frankly, terrified.

"You don't need me," she said, to fat tears rolling down her cheeks. "I... I should've expected that. But I didn't. And..."

"Shit, Frankie." He sounded a little panicked now, which really wasn't helping. "Please don't cry. Hell. I didn't mean it to come out that way. I mean in a practical sense..."

"But I can still be there for you. I can still clean. And cook. I'll do more. I'll figure it out. I'll be your ranch hand."

"Dammit. Frankie, you don't need to be my ranch hand. You can be my housekeeper. *For now*, you can be the housekeeper. And we'll figure out the rest of it later. But if you need a place to stay, of course you can have it."

Out of pity. He pitied her because she'd cried.

And she really wasn't above taking his pity right now.

"You won't regret it. I promise. I'll make it work."

"Do you need help moving your things?"

"Almost all the furniture is his. I just got a couple suitcases full of my clothes."

"All right. You can... You can bring it into Carter's room. But you know when he comes back for break, you can't... You're going to need to have other arrangements."

"When is that?"

"Not until November."

“Okay.”

“Just... Don’t cry, Frankie. I’m going to go out and do some work. You can get your things moved in. You can... Cook dinner. And we’ll talk more then.”

Frankie nodded. And she tried not to think about the sadness of all this. That she was sadder at the idea her employer didn’t need her anymore than she was about her breakup. That her things fit into two suitcases, because she’d never actually made her own life. Because Walker’s house had always felt more like hers than anywhere else. Because if she had bought something for a kitchen, it had been for this one.

November. That was when Carter was coming back. She needed to draw a line under this. She needed to make her own life. Because Walker had one, and it was clear to her that he didn’t actually have a place for her in it.

This was buying her some time, but in the end, she was going to have to sort herself out. She was going to have to figure out how to extricate herself from this. From the delusion that this was her family. And from the impossible feelings that she had carried for this man for ten years. At least now she knew. He didn’t need her. And even if he let her stay out of pity, she couldn’t forget that.

CHAPTER THREE

WALKER SIGHED AND set down his shovel. He had been moving manure all day, and it wasn't even a metaphor.

Frankie had looked so fragile and vulnerable earlier, and he'd wanted to take her in his arms and shield her from it. That didn't bother him too much.

It was the way his body felt when he let himself imagine how it would feel if hers was crushed up against him. She had a lush figure, even if it was petite like the rest of her.

He could still remember the day Frankie, the solution to everything, had become a problem.

He hated himself for it, because it was basic. And his life, Frankie's place in it, and Frankie herself, weren't basic at all.

But as for seeing her as a woman?

It had been the first day of summer two years ago and he'd heard a howl of outrage coming from the front of the barn and had run out to check.

Which was when he'd seen her, pulling her sodden T-shirt away from her body, exposing her midsection as she tried angrily to wring it out. "*Sky! Carter! I swear to God!*"

She'd been furious, and she'd let her top fall back into place and it stuck to her, and he was right in the middle of a wet T-shirt contest he hadn't asked to be invited to.

He'd been forced to look. *Forced.*

But at least for a moment he'd been aware only of her taut midsection, the outline of her breasts, and—God help him—her nipples, tight from the cold. Because that preoccupation could be written off as generic. He was a man who hadn't actually touched a pair of breasts in far too long so he could be forgiven for focusing on any set in the vicinity.

But then she'd looked at him.

And there was no denying it was Frankie.

Pissed, wet, and prettier than he wanted to admit.

“Did your boys run through here?” she asked.

“Not that I saw.”

“Are you covering for them?”

“I would never.” He tried to keep his eyes firmly focused on hers, but that didn’t even help.

Because when had her eyes gotten so beautiful? And how had he missed it? When had she grown into this? This beautiful *woman*.

He shook off the memory, because he did not need to dwell on that right now.

He took a breath, took off his gloves and took his phone out of his pocket. He had one text from Sky updating him on his current location—as if he wasn’t also going to track the kid’s phone. He also had a text from Carter about how he’d gone on a tour and that there was shitty food on campus, and Walker fired back a response about how he wasn’t getting Uber Eats every day, and he just had to deal with the meal plan. It was unsympathetic, maybe. But as Walker had devoted his twenties to raising his kids, having never actually gone to college, he felt strongly that his kid could deal with the indignity of being sent away to a nice school. And then, he decided to call Frankie’s dad.

Steve Davis was a good guy and had been Walker’s employer when the kids were little. He had given him more than a fair wage to work the place and Walker would always be grateful to him for helping him and Anna get a start. He’d really given Walker passion for ranching, and when Walker had saved up enough money to buy his own place, Steve had always been on hand to give advice. It was through Steve that he knew Frankie, who had been one of the most important people in his life over the last eight years. Without Frankie, everything would’ve fallen apart.

Which was why he owed Frankie better than the lust-fueled thoughts that had been creeping up on him lately.

It was why he owed her more than he'd given her back at the house too.

He was going to make sure she was taken care of.

"Hey," said Walker when Steve picked up the phone.

"Hey there. How's all going back in Mapleton?"

"It's going. Has Frankie called you?"

"No," said Steve, his voice tinged with concern.

"That boyfriend of hers just broke up with her. Kicked her out of the house and everything."

"Hell," said Steve. "No. She did *not* call us about that. She needs a place to stay?"

"Yeah. Carter just moved out for school. So she asked if she could move into the extra bedroom and do some more housekeeper-type work. I said she could. I just wanted you to know that was going on with her, and also that she's taken care of."

Maybe he was also looping her dad in to ground himself. Remind himself of exactly who she was to him.

"I'll have to give her a call," said Steve. "She knows she's welcome to come here if she needs anything."

"Yeah," said Walker. He thought of how devastated Frankie had looked when he'd said he didn't need her. It had been cold. He understood that. She had taken care of the kids for half their childhood. Actually, it wasn't going to work for the kids to just have her be gone either. They might not be home as much, they might not need her in the same way that they had once, but she had been the stabilizing factor in their life when she had become their caregiver after Anna died.

"I put my foot in my mouth earlier," said Walker. "The truth is, Frankie is like family. The kids are crazy about her. They're older, though, and I was thinking we didn't need her in the same way that we did, and I think I hurt her feelings. The truth is, Sky didn't even want to leave without saying goodbye to Frankie. And I know someday she might want to move to Montana to be with you all. But I think right now, her

absolutely leaving the kids would be... I think maybe they both need to get used to the idea.”

“Definitely,” said Steve. “She loves those boys. She sends us pictures of them all the time. She was like a proud mother at their graduation.” Steve paused for a moment. “Sorry, Walker. They had a wonderful mother.”

“No offense taken, Steve. She has been their mother figure.” Not that he’d ever said it to Frankie. But the dark days around Anna’s death were...they were something he didn’t like to think about or revisit. And what Frankie had done for him in those days—those blurry days he couldn’t remember—had saved him. She’d been his lifeline. She’d been a teenager and yet she’d been the rock. He’d never really thanked her for it because it would mean confronting how bad it was. “I didn’t fully consider that when I told her I didn’t need her anymore. So I’ll keep her here for now. I’ll take care of her. Don’t worry about it.”

“Appreciate it. Thanks.”

Walker sighed. The truth was, it was hard to imagine his house without her in it. But she worked for him. In a position where her job was to take care of the kids. So what good would it do to keep the arrangement up when they were gone?

Hell, it would be *dangerous* is what it would be.

Frankie was the only woman who’d been in proximity with him for years, and she’d become a problem. But she was... *Frankie*. He couldn’t do anything about the attraction. She mattered too much to him, to the boys, to ever risk it.

Hell, she’d probably laugh if anything. He was a stereotype. A father of two, closer to forty than thirty, lusting after the nanny in her twenties?

Hell.

Or maybe trying to justify what he’d said to her. After he hung up with her dad, he finished up the chores and headed toward the house, sweaty and aching like a man ought to be after a good day’s worth of work.

And when he opened up the door, the smell that greeted him was heavenly. It wasn't that Frankie didn't bake for him often. But when she was running around picking the kids up from school, she didn't have the time for fresh-baked bread.

Right now, he could smell fresh-baked bread. And stew.

And when he rounded the corner into the kitchen, two things hit him square in the chest. The first was that Frankie was something *more* than beautiful. Right then, she was leaning against the oven, facing away from him, holding onto the door as if she was impatiently waiting to open it. Her brown hair was caught up in a messy bun, with tendrils hanging down the back. Her trim waist was highlighted by an apron she was wearing, and the jeans she had on cupped her ass like a strong pair of hands, highlighting the shape of her. He had never once looked at Frankie's *ass*, and there was a reason for that.

Because it was hot, and he hadn't been with a woman in a very, very long time.

He'd tried to tell himself Frankie wasn't a woman. At least not like *that*.

But she was.

And the second realization, right on the heels of that, was that they were alone in the house together for the first time. Completely alone. No kids napping in the next room, and no one walking through the door imminently.

What a fucking shitshow pair of realizations.

He didn't even think to announce himself, because he was caught so off guard by the moment. By the feeling. And when Frankie turned, she startled, her eyes going wide, and her whole body bouncing, which drew his eyes to her breasts. Unfortunately, a part of Frankie he *had* looked at before. Wet and highlighted by a sodden white shirt. But then, his boys had been lurking around with water balloons.

And now they weren't.

Now they were alone.

Just him, Frankie, and her gorgeous rack.

He looked back at her eyes quickly.

“Sorry,” he said.

He hoped she took that as an apology for startling her, and not checking her out. He was hoping she’d missed that he was checking her out.

“Oh. I just... You’re not usually sneaky. You’re a big man with big boots.”

“I didn’t mean to be sneaky,” he said.

And he felt distinctly like a little boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar, which he was not. He was a grown ass man.

He was thirty-eight years old. Frankie was twenty-four.

He had known her since she was *fourteen*. He repeated those facts in his head like they meant something. Like they would make her ass less round, and her breasts less tempting.

Walker had left sex behind him. Not *forever*. Not *intentionally*. But he’d been raising his boys. And at first there had been grief tangled up in that. Anna was the only woman he’d ever been with. He had loved her so very much. At first, the idea of sleeping with someone else seemed like a betrayal. Like something he would never want to do because that part of him had belonged to her. He’d let that go quite a while ago. But he hadn’t been done parenting. And he had never felt like asking Frankie to stay with the boys overnight so he could get laid.

Now it was all coming home to roost in a very bizarre way.

No. A moment of attraction, a moment of looking at her ass didn’t mean anything. It certainly didn’t erase the long term, totally appropriate connection between the two of them.

It hadn’t been erased two years ago when he’d seen the dark shadows of her nipples through her T-shirt, so it could hardly be erased now.

“You called my dad,” she said. She sounded vaguely accusing, though not really angry.

“Yes I did. Because he’s my friend, and I thought he ought to know that his daughter was having issues. I sure as hell would want to know if one of my kids had been broken up with and kicked out of their house.”

She frowned. “I know that you’re my dad’s friend. But aren’t you my friend too?”

He gritted his teeth. “Yes. I’m taking care of you. As a friend.”

“Kind of seems like maybe it’s a favor *to my dad*. And actually, I don’t want a favor either way. I think I can help you. You wouldn’t have been home to make yourself food.”

“No, I wouldn’t have been. That is true.”

He also wouldn’t have had to stare his own personal midlife crisis in the face. Or tits.

“I don’t need my dad worrying about me. I don’t want them to ask me to go to Montana. I’m not interested in Montana.”

“I get it. Your life is here.”

It wasn’t her fault that he’d noticed her body. He shouldn’t take that frustration out on her. It wasn’t fair.

She nodded slowly. “I should say I’m not interested in Montana right now. But maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s time for me to figure out what to do next.”

“Frankie, all that came out all wrong earlier. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I think you might’ve been thinking. It’s true. I’m the nanny. You don’t need me when you don’t have *kids*. I just hadn’t accepted that.”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound how it did. Like it wasn’t a big deal. It is. And I don’t want you to just up and leave. If Sky comes back from this trip and you’re gone, he’ll never forgive me. He didn’t even want to leave to go camping until he could say goodbye to you. The kids love you.”

Frankie wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. Well. I love them. Anyway.” She turned back to the stove and opened the oven

door. She pulled out two loaves of bread that looked delicious, and he chose to focus on the bread, not her ass.

“Dinner is ready.”

“Good,” he said. “Good. I’m starving.”

He just hoped she didn’t notice all the ways in which he was starving.

“Yeah me too. I hope it’s all right if I... Do we still eat together?”

Frankie had always taken dinner with them when the kids were here. Frankie had been much more part of the family than an employee, and that had been his big boneheaded mistake. He reverted to treating her like this hadn’t been something more than a working relationship. In his attempt at practicality, he’d been a dick. And so he decided to try and rectify that.

To push his own discomfort aside, his own issues, and be there for her. For the woman who had been there for him all these years. He owed her.

He went and got some bowls out of the cabinet, while Frankie lifted the pot of stew off the stovetop and brought it over to the table, setting it down on a trivet.

He stared at it.

He couldn’t figure out if that was something Anna had bought, something that they had before, or if it was something Frankie had gotten for them. God knew he had never bought a damn thing for the kitchen.

For some reason this felt heightened now that they were the only two people here.

“Frankie,” he said. “How much of this stuff have you bought for us?”

Frankie looked at him, then quickly turned away. “Oh, I don’t know. It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“I think it might. Did you buy the trivet?”

“I think so. A couple of years ago. You have them, but they were old. And I just thought these ones looked nice in the

kitchen.”

“And that pot that the stew is in. You bought that, too, didn’t you?”

“Well, I have to cook here.”

“All the stuff that you bought for me, you can take it with you after.”

Her lips twitched. “Thanks.”

He’d said something fucked up again. Great.

“I’m not rushing you,” he said.

“It’s fine, Walker. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m worried about it. I keep putting my foot in my mouth. I’m sorry. We don’t need to talk about what’s next.”

“Great,” she said, sitting down at the table and smiling at him.

The smile hit him somewhere uncomfortable. He turned away.

He went to the fridge and took out a couple cans of flavored sparkling water, another thing he was pretty sure Frankie stocked for him. Then they sat across from each other at the table, and Frankie did not dish herself. He stood and made sure to serve her first. She started to protest, but then got up and grabbed the bread, and began slicing it vigorously. She brought it back to the table, along with some butter. The two of them slathered butter on those bread slices like it was a competition.

“So what happened with Chad?” There. He could be helpful. He could be normal.

Frankie paused mid bite. She pulled the bread out of her mouth, and he noticed that her teeth had left little grooves on the butter.

He did not know why he noticed that.

She set the bread slice down in her bowl of stew. “Oh. Well. I... I don’t know that you actually want to hear this.”

“I do, Frankie. As you pointed out, I’m your friend. I’m your friend, why the hell would I not want to hear about it?”

She was silent for a moment, and he could swear he saw wheels turning behind her eyes. She picked up her slice of bread again and held it poised in front of her mouth.

“He broke up with me because I can’t come during sex.” Then she took an aggressive bite out of the bread and chewed slowly.

CHAPTER FOUR

WELL, *THAT* HAD HAPPENED.

She'd said it.

But she felt like something was brewing. Felt like he was *pushing* her.

She needed to do something decisive, say something decisive. She'd been roiling with upset all day.

Coming to terms with the fact that her life had to change after this. That she needed to make a clean break from Walker at some point. That she had to accept the fact that this part of her life was coming to an end.

Carter and Sky would always matter to her. But she wasn't their nanny anymore. Walker was right about that. The fact that she felt cut up about it had to do with her unresolved feelings for him. So in that moment, she decided to just throw the bomb into the middle of the table and see what happened.

Something *did* happen. Walker fully choked on his drink.

"Sorry," she said, keeping her tone bland. "Was that too much information for you?"

"*Fuck,*" he said.

The word reverberated through her and she did her best not to react to it.

"Sorry. I didn't know that you had a delicate constitution. I just had to have someone look me in the face and tell me that my sexual performance fell so far short of what he wanted, that he could no longer be with me. I know why I'm triggered by it. I just didn't expect you to be."

"It's a bit..."

"Too much information?" He looked like he was seriously thinking about that.

“No. But... I’m sorry, I feel like you’re telling me this guy just broke up with you because he’s shitty in bed.”

“It’s not just him. Unfortunately.”

Well, if this was supposed to be a seduction, she was maybe ruining it by telling him what a bad lay she was.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“He’s not the only guy I’ve ever slept with. I didn’t have an orgasm with the other guy either. At a certain point, you do have to accept that maybe you *are* the problem. I figured maybe if I was still...you know, it’s not like I *ignored* him. Sexually.”

Walker looked a little bit like he’d been hit upside the head with a hammer.

“Well,” she said. “You asked.”

“I did,” he confirmed.

“You asked and I’m telling you. Apparently, I’m a great nanny, I’d say a decent housekeeper, but a starfish in bed.” She held her arms out limply, demonstrating the starfish pose.

He cleared his throat. “I’m not sure if this is something we should...be talking about.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t have a good answer for that, she could see. He looked a little bit tortured. And that *actually* offended her. He was acting like a father figure or something. But he had never been a father figure for her. Was that how he saw her? Was she like another child that lived in his house?

You are closer in age to Carter than you are to him...

She violently rejected that thought. It might be true, but it was completely different. Unless it wasn’t. For him.

In which case, she supposed he wanted to hear about her sex life as much as her father would. She hadn’t thought that it was possible to be lower than she had been only a moment ago, but telling herself that the object of her desire might see her as a child...

“I’m not a child,” she said.

“I am aware of that,” he responded.

And that was when another thought occurred to her.

The possibility that Walker was uncomfortable because he absolutely *didn’t* see her as a child. But because he saw her as a *woman*.

She didn’t know what to do with that. But the simple truth was, if she was going to leave...

She wanted him.

Every so often, she was overcome with it.

She had tried.

She had tried to be normal. She’d slept with other men. She’d had a long-term relationship. She’d done her best to try and make sure she wasn’t confusing proximity for feelings. And while in the deepest part of her, she felt like she was probably in love with him, she also accepted the fact that the love bit could truly be attributed to the situation.

That she lived with him during the day like they were part of the domestic household. That she took care of his kids. That she saw what a great dad he was. It was... It was hard not to fall in love with a gorgeous man who she’d seen wounded, who she’d watched love his kids through it anyway. Who she knew was just *good*.

She challenged a woman to not fall in love with him, honestly.

She could accept that those feelings might be situational. That they might resolve if they were to have some distance. And maybe they hadn’t resolved when she had a boyfriend, but the problem was, she’d never had distance.

The one thing she wasn’t entirely sure she could work out was the attraction. That was something else. It was electric. *Chemical*. It had become all-consuming for her from the time she was eighteen, and she had never wanted another man the way she wanted him.

Her greatest and dearest shame was that even with Chad, who she had dated for three years, she preferred an orgasm solo to sex with him.

Well, possibly because she couldn't have an orgasm when she had sex with him, but also because...

When it was fantasy, when it was just her, it was Walker's hand she imagined. His mouth, she felt more than she did when she was with a partner.

She had a rich fantasy life. And she felt a little bit guilty about it. But she was also just so used to it. One time she closed her eyes tightly and imagined Walker when she was kissing Chad, and it had made her feel dirty, in the least fun way possible. She had stopped immediately. She felt guilty because of what she was doing to Chad, and somehow, bad because Walker didn't deserve it either. Not that he really deserved her vigorously pleasuring herself to thoughts of him either. But it somehow felt less intrusive than projecting his image onto another man.

Whatever.

Maybe her bar for appropriate behavior was low.

She couldn't help it.

But maybe also, it was something that she needed to work out. Maybe it was something she needed to do. A line that finally needed crossing.

Once they did, they would be able to go back.

What's it going to do with your relationship with Sky and Carter?

Okay. She was like twenty steps ahead of herself. She wasn't even totally sure yet if that was why he was reacting strangely to this.

She had never seduced a man in her life. She had to proceed with caution. And then she could do some risk evaluation.

"I don't really have anyone else to talk to about this."

“What about your friend,” he said. “Carly? What’s her name?”

“She’s a virgin.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“I know. I don’t know what she’s waiting for. But then, maybe there’s something to that. Because all I have is a history of mediocre sex. And now it’s sabotaged my relationship.”

A lie. *She’d* sabotaged a relationship. The fact that she was hung up on another man had sabotaged her relationship.

“Here’s what I know,” said Walker. “If a man can’t make a woman come, that’s his problem. All right? Him blaming you is some bullshit. Good sex isn’t rocket science.”

“It isn’t?”

That was a genuine question, because honestly it felt a little bit like rocket science to her. She wasn’t *deliberately* holding herself back from satisfaction during sex.

But you are holding back pieces of yourself.

“No,” he said. “First of all, rocket science sounds like boring ass shit. Sex is not boring.”

“I mean, sometimes I find it boring,” she said. “There’s whole constellations in my textured ceiling that I have memorized because sometimes it’s more interesting than what’s going on in bed.”

“Honest to God,” he said. “That’s... What a fucking waste.”

“Of what?”

“Sex,” he said.

He looked a little bit offended.

“Well,” she said. “*Sorry*. Definitely not intending to waste sex.”

“It’s a commodity. A pretty precious one at that.”

“Bleh. I’m kind of over it.”

“Because your boyfriend is a dick. You’re better off without him.”

“*You* never liked him,” she said.

“I don’t think he ever liked *me*.”

It was true. She ground her back teeth together. And it was kind of fair. Because when that final stroke had fallen on their relationship, the last thing he’d done was point out the truth she was trying to hide, even from herself. That her *issue* was she was hung up on Walker. Well, he’d said it even meaner than that. He’d said if she wanted to *work her daddy issues out on the old man that she spent all her time panting after*, maybe they needed to be separated.

And while she did not think she had *daddy issues*—her dad was great, thanks—she did have a *Walker* issue.

The worst part about Chad was he was right. He’d broken up with her because she wasn’t as in love with him as she ought to be, and he wasn’t wrong.

“He didn’t,” she confirmed.

“Really? And why didn’t he like me?”

“You just said he didn’t,” she said, taking a bite of bread. “Like you knew already.”

“Yeah, because I got that feeling, but I didn’t know it was a discussed thing.”

“It came up today.”

“Why?”

She took another deliberate bite of her bread. Because if she was going to do it... God help her.

“Well, he thought the problem in our relationship was you.”

“Why?”

Well. Here it was. The gambit to end all gambits. She took a deep breath.

“Because he thinks I want to fuck you.”

CHAPTER FIVE

WALKER WENT STILL.

And his whole brain went blank. It was like he was twenty years old. His brain totally nonfunctional because all the blood had rushed to his dick.

And he couldn't think of anything except the lush, beautiful lips across from him at the table saying she wanted *to fuck him*.

Well, technically she hadn't said that. She'd said her boyfriend thought that.

He wasn't going to touch her. But everything inside of him felt lit up with the whole conversation they'd just had. She couldn't come when she had sex?

He couldn't stop himself from thinking of all the ways he could make her come. And also he wanted to go punch Chad in his damned smug face. He'd had this woman for what? Three years? He'd been given that beautiful body and he'd never made her come?

It was a crime against humanity. The asshole should have his dick confiscated.

Walker clenched his hands into fists underneath the table. That was wrong. It was just wrong. This was Frankie.

His Frankie.

She'd been working for him since she was a kid. She... Well *hell*, she'd brought his kids up, basically. She was sweet and wonderful and pretty, pretty as hell, actually. But the thing was she was so much younger than him. He might have a high opinion of himself, and how good he was in bed, but the simple truth was he hadn't actually been with anybody for eight years.

He just let that part of himself go. And that was one reason why his whole brain was going haywire now, he knew it.

Because it felt like a solution to a couple of different problems, right in one.

This was Turkish delight. He knew it.

He was thinking about *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He and the kids had always watched the cartoon, and he had read them the book. Edmund betrayed his entire family for the promise of power and Turkish delight. Right now, the idea that he could give Frankie an orgasm during sex and end his celibacy felt a lot like the same.

Power. And Turkish delight.

No. *No*. He was wrong in the head. Absolutely wrong in the head.

“Are you okay?” Frankie tilted her head to the side.

“Frankie, give a man a minute after you say something like that.”

“Why?”

“I... I don't know what to say to you.”

“Why don't you know what to say to me, Walker? We've known each other for more than ten years.”

“Ten years ago, *you were a kid*,” he said.

She looked like he slapped her. All the color drained out of her face, and her eyes went dewy.

“I'm not though now.”

“But you were. And now you're sitting there talking to me about stuff like this.”

“Walker, do you trust me to take care of your kids? Did I drive them to school every day and pick them up every day?”

“Yes.”

“And would you hand that same responsibility over to a random thirty-year-old that you met in town?”

“*No*,” he said.

“So I must somehow be more responsible.”

“I know you,” he said. “And yeah, you’re responsible.”

“So it doesn’t matter what I was ten years ago, does it? We both know that I’m not a kid. We both know that I’m damn well mature enough to handle myself. And I definitely don’t need to be talked down to just because *you’re* uncomfortable.”

“Well, it’s an uncomfortable thing to say.”

“*I’m* not uncomfortable with it.”

“Well, I am.”

“Why? Is it because it disgusts you? Or is it because it interests you?”

“Don’t ask me that,” he said, knowing right away that that response was the biggest mistake he could’ve given. He should’ve just told her *no*. Because the truth was, while his mind had gone to some bad places real quick, she was still Frankie. And the idea of actually touching her...

Lust kicked through his stomach. Hard. And that made him angry. Because he wanted this to be more complicated than that. He wanted Frankie to be a damn sight more *off-limits* than that.

He didn’t want that moment with her wet T-shirt, and that moment she’d been by the stove in those jeans, and this moment to be bigger than the last ten years and everything else they’d been.

But it felt like it might be.

“I’m a man, Frankie.”

“That only means something if you don’t think I’m a child but recognize that I’m a woman.” She was stubborn and mutinous and he wanted to throttle her.

“Obviously you’re a woman,” he said.

“So what are you trying to say? That you’re interested by virtue of the fact that you’re a man and I’m a woman? And that’s it?”

“Interested is taking it a step too far.”

“It’s making you uncomfortable because it turns you on?”

“What the hell is wrong with you? I’m giving you a place to stay—are you trying to get kicked out of your second house in one day?”

“You won’t kick me out.”

“I might.”

“I’m just saying what Chad said to me. If it bothers you, that’s hardly my problem. That makes *two* men who are oppressed by the idea of who I may or may not want to fuck, and I actually didn’t say that I wanted you at all.” She crossed her arms and pushed herself back from the table. “I’m going to go clean the kitchen.”

“You didn’t eat.”

“I don’t need to eat. I have already been insulted, thrown out of my house, and condescended to today, so I’m going to pass on any more of that. I’m just done.”

He stood up and grabbed her arm, pulling her toward him, and her eyebrows shot up, her mouth dropping open. “Be honest. What response were you hoping to get out of that? It was bratty, and you know it.”

She blinked, and he couldn’t ignore the tears in her eyes. “I wasn’t... I wasn’t trying to be bratty.”

“What were you trying to do?”

“Nothing I just... Walker, I thought... I just wanted to see...”

“Bullshit,” he said.

She wanted a reaction out of him, and hell, she’d gotten it.

The truth was, his and Frankie’s relationship didn’t have a neat designation. She was, in many ways, a hired housewife. She was younger than him, but she’d been there and supported him when things were the darkest. He had given her a fair amount of life advice, but he wasn’t a father figure. She had a great dad. He had kids, and she wasn’t one of them. Clearly. And when she quit working for him, she would probably stay

in touch with the boys, but... What were they to each other? Maybe he was the one who'd made it weird and uncomfortable. Except... Maybe he was, but her behavior was still strange.

“Why did you say that to me?” he pressed.

“Because it's true,” she said, her words tight. “I... I tried to get over it. I tried to be with other people. But I can only come when I'm by myself. Only when I think about you. And Chad is an idiot but he isn't stupid. So he knows that the problem in our relationship is you, whether that's your fault or not.”

Then she went into the kitchen without another word and started to clean up. He was left standing there, dumbfounded. Unsure of what the hell to say.

CHAPTER SIX

FRANKIE HAD GONE to sleep with her head underneath the covers, and her feet curled up beneath her. No part of her body was exposed to the air. As if she was afraid that the monster of the humiliating word she had spoken right to Walker's face would appear as a specter and eat her.

It was possible.

She had been kind of unhinged last night.

Because she had looked that beautiful man in the face, that man that she wanted more than anything, and saying it out loud to him *did* make her feel like a child.

Unequal to him.

In fact, the whole thing did.

She realized that she didn't actually know anything about Walker's life.

She knew he was a good dad. She knew the things that he did in the house, for his family, but she didn't know anything about his personal life. She had made that man into a fantasy, and she had decided that he belonged to her, and she didn't know a damn thing. He could have a girlfriend. How would she even know?

Well, she had a fair idea of how he spent his time, so it seemed unlikely, but she didn't take a full accounting of all that he did. The kids were old enough to stay on their own now. They hadn't really been kids in some time. It would be easy for Walker to carry on personal relationships.

She had given thanks when she got up that morning and saw that he wasn't in the house.

She was debating simply running away. Going to stay with Carly, because that at least wouldn't come with the side of humiliation.

Except... She didn't want to leave things with him like this.

What do you want then?

Him.

That was scary. But when she weighed out what she had to lose, right now the answer was...nothing.

She wasn't going to be in his life anymore after this. She hated that, but she couldn't stop that inevitability. If he said no today, she wouldn't be any more humiliated than she already was.

She and Walker had a real relationship. It wasn't like he'd throw her out.

She might want to kick herself out, but that was another issue.

So she spent the morning making cinnamon rolls, and when afternoon rolled around, she put them in a basket, put on the cutest dress she owned, and went out into the June afternoon.

Maybe it wasn't the most seductive, but ended above her knees. She didn't think Walker had been immune to her. He'd just been kind of pissed off at her. She walked out of the house to the barn, where she hoped she might find him.

And there he was. Black cowboy hat, tight white T-shirt that showed off his glorious physique, all broad shoulders, deep chest, and narrow waist. The battered denim he had on showcasing his muscular thighs.

Like tree trunks. Very sexy tree trunks.

"I brought you some cinnamon rolls," she said, holding the basket aloft.

He narrowed his eyes. "What's that? You're attempting a peace offering?"

Leave it to him to be direct.

"Maybe. Or maybe less of a peace offering and more of a conversation starter."

He flicked his cowboy hat back with his knuckle. "And what conversation do we still need to have, Frankie?"

“I want to start over.”

“How far back do you want to go?”

“Just last night before... Before I said what I did about Chad.”

“And forget it ever happened?”

“No. No. More like approach it from a different angle. You’re right. Things are different. You don’t need me anymore. You don’t need to keep me around. And the truth is, I’m attracted to you. And if I don’t... If I don’t do something about this, I don’t know that I am ever going to be able to have a functional relationship. I don’t actually want to be hung up on you for the rest of my life.”

Okay, she had clearly gotten ahead of herself again. And he had that hit with a hammer look.

“What exactly are you asking me?”

“I have yet to meet a man who, in the flesh, can live up to the fantasies that I have of you. And I think I need to know if you’re disappointing, or if... I think you might be the key.”

“The key to what?”

“Me being able to have an orgasm with a man. I really want to. I do understand that this is impossible. I do. We are not in the same place in life, and I actually do get that I’m younger than you, and you’ve been through things that I can’t even imagine. I don’t know why you would be interested in me.”

“Back up,” he said. “You don’t know why I would be interested in you?”

“No. Because you’re...together. And stable. And yes, I am lobbying for you to see me as a grown-up. An adult. But I’m not like the level of adult that you are. I’m sort of experiencing the first major disruption of my life and trying to figure out who I am on the other side of it. But like I said, fantasies of you are better, hotter, than anything I’ve experienced with another person. And... Basically what I’m saying is, will you please teach me how to have good sex? Before you throw me out of the nest?”

“This is the most fucked up thing anyone has ever asked me to do.”

She cringed. “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. I can hear myself, actually. And I feel a little bit bad about it. But not bad enough to not ask.”

“Frankie,” he said. “You are young and beautiful, and you don’t have the messed-up shit that I do. I don’t think you want what I have to give. I don’t think that I’m a good candidate for this.”

“Why not?”

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. The sound he made was halfway between a groan and a sigh. A surrender. Then he looked at her. “I haven’t had sex since Anna died.”

She had not been expecting that. She felt like she’d been hit with a brick. Actually, she understood that look on Walker’s face a little bit better now.

“What?”

“There wasn’t time at first. And I felt like I couldn’t. Like I shouldn’t have anyone else.”

Her chest felt frozen. He had loved her that much. So much that there hadn’t been another woman since. She was the luckiest woman, and then she had died. It was unfair, really. She had the two best kids, and the most amazing husband, and she lost it. And they’d lost her.

The breath of the tragedy almost took her breath away.

“Walker... I’m sorry.”

“So yeah. For a while, it felt impossible because of that. And then it just felt like it was impossible because I had to take care of the boys. And I was never going to ask you to stay overnight so that I could... And the boys were old enough. But at that point, it’s a conversation. At that point, I’m the guy who hasn’t been with anyone since his wife died. I’m the guy who’s only been with one woman. And that’s a conversation I don’t want to have with just anyone.”

“You just had it with me,” she said, her heart feeling tender. Bruised. This wasn’t actually what she wanted. To feel things. Because she did have feelings for him, more intense feelings than she would like. Because she wanted to believe that they were proximity-based, and that they would go away. But this was pushing her. Testing her.

“We should just forget this happened.”

“Or,” she said, taking a step toward him. “Hear me out. We fix this for each other. You don’t have to have the conversation. If you’re with me, you don’t ever have to say those words again. Because you and I...will have sex, and then it won’t have been eight years since you’ve been with a woman. You’ll have been with me. And... And I’ll never have to tell a man that I’ve never had an orgasm before. During sex. I’ve had orgasms by myself.”

His mouth had gotten even grimmer, and perversely, it made her want to kiss it even more. “Walker,” she said. “Don’t think of it as doing something for me. Don’t think of it as trying to fix something for me. How long has it been since you’ve done something for yourself?”

He made a low sound in his chest.

“You’re the best man that I know. The best father. You’ve given up everything for those boys.”

“I never gave up a thing for them.”

“You gave them all of yourself. The best of yourself. And we’re kind of both in the same boat, buddy. They don’t need either of us as much as they used to. I guess that means we don’t really need each other. So maybe it’s just time. To move on, and maybe this is going to help us do it.”

She set the cinnamon rolls down.

And she finally did it. She finally took a step forward and did what she had always dreamed of doing. She reached out and gripped his face, bracketing it between her hands, got up on her toes and kissed that grim, beautiful mouth that had haunted her dreams for years.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WALKER FELT LIKE he had been gut punched. Or something more. Something deeper.

Or *worse*, something softer.

Because Frankie was kissing him. Sweet and slow, tentative. She'd made a big deal out of having experience, but she didn't exactly kiss like a seductress.

Not that he needed her to.

The press of that soft mouth against his, that first kiss in eight long years, was enough to reduce him to a pile of ash right where he stood. And when she darted her tongue out to lick the seam of his lips, he was pretty damn sure he was near enough to an explosion. All that would be left behind would be a crater in the earth. The only evidence that Frankie Davis had ever kissed him.

In spite of himself, he cupped the back of her head, held her to him and angled his position so that he could take the kiss deep. So that he could allow her entry into his mouth. So that he could give her everything she was offering, and then some.

There were alarm bells going off in the back of his head. Warning him to stop. Demanding that he stop. He didn't listen. Because he just didn't want to.

What he wanted was to be kissed.

It had been so long. He knew he missed sex. And he knew he missed Anna. There were long, lonely nights where that just ached. Because he was supposed to have a partner. Someone by his side raising his kids.

It wasn't the same kind of sharp grief that it used to be, but there was a sense of wrongness to that empty bed sometimes.

They were two separate things, and he didn't often associate one with the other. One was missing Anna. The other was missing a woman's touch. Right now, he realized he had

missed intimacy. Holding hands. Being kissed. Having somebody rest their body against his.

He'd been thinking about satisfaction. About the feeling of thrusting inside of a tight hot body.

But it was more. He hadn't even let himself fully realize that. Probably because it was just too damned painful. Because it was the kind of thing that would make a man lose his mind if he wasn't careful.

He was losing it now. Who was he kidding? This was *his* Frankie.

The sweet girl that had shown up to his house the day after Anna had died and just asked what she could do. And he'd been in too reduced a state to tell her to leave. He had been dependent on her when she was a teenager. He had been such a wreck. He couldn't even remember those first few weeks after Anna. He hadn't been able to be there for his boys, not really. He'd been like a robot. If Frankie hadn't been there, everything would've fallen apart.

She meant more to him than he could readily say. But in some ways, Frankie was like the air around him. Something he needed, but something he didn't think all that much about. Except right now, she was running hot, and he couldn't ignore her. Not at all. Couldn't ignore this.

He said he didn't need her. What an idiot. What a damned idiot.

She moaned, deep and long in the back of her throat, arching against him. And he answered that with his own groan of pleasure. Her breasts were tempting, so gorgeous pressed against his chest he wanted to tear her shirt off of her so that he could see them. Those objects that had tormented him these last couple of years.

And this was him and Frankie in a nutshell. Basic. But complicated all the same. Because when she was in his arms like this, she was a woman. She was also Frankie. And he was a man, he wanted her naked, he wanted to taste her breasts. Wanted to suck her nipples. Wanted to feel how wet she was

between her legs. But he was Walker. And he also wanted to take care of her, to pay her back for all the things she had done for him. Wanted to hang on to her, and never do anything to hurt her.

He pulled away from her, breathing hard. “Damn, Frankie,” he said.

“Please,” she said.

He should say no. He should do something. Something other than wrap his arms around her and pull her back against his body, kissing her again.

They were out in the open on his property, anyone could roll up. Except they wouldn't. Because his boys were away for the summer, and everything was different now. Because he and Frankie were alone. Because she didn't need to be here, but she was.

Because when everything had gone wrong in her life, he was the port she'd come to.

If he could be proud of something, maybe it should be that. But he wasn't proud of much. He was just hard. Desperate.

Frankie was whimpering, rubbing her body against his. She was so short he knew that she wasn't quite able to rub that needy place between her legs against his arousal. Knew that she wanted to. So he did the sensible thing. He gripped her thighs and lifted her up, wrapping her legs around him, and pinning her up against the side of the barn.

He kissed her neck, and she let her head fall back, panting as she rolled her hips forward.

“That's a girl,” he said, only dimly aware of the words that were coming out of his mouth. “Good girl,” he said. “Get what you need.”

“Yes,” she whispered, pushing her fingers through his hair, and it felt so damned good. To be touched like this. To be touching Frankie like this. She was just... She was special. This girl.

And he cared about her. He wanted to make her feel good. In fact, he wanted it so much that he almost couldn't think about his own needs. But only almost. If he wasn't so damned driven to see to her pleasure, he might've come then and there. He was on a hair trigger. He hadn't felt anything like this in so long. The striving, intense need to be with somebody.

The truth was, he had been married quite some time before his wife had died. He still wanted Anna. He wanted her every day of his life, but they had had a life and a mortgage and kids. They'd had those things more than they had a desperate need to tear each other's clothes off. A good night's sleep was more important than sex till sunrise. They had been in a different phase of life.

And this was so many things.

His first time with another woman. His first time touching someone in eight years.

The excitement of the new, sweet body underneath his hands. The excitement of being touched at all.

Damn. God *damn*. He moved his hands down to Frankie's ass and ground her hard against him, moving his hips forward and making firm contact with that sensitive bud between her thighs. She was wearing a short dress, and it had ridden up, and he could see she had white panties on underneath. He was hungry for what was underneath those panties. The fabric was damp, and he growled, moving his hips in a circle. And then she gripped his shoulders, a hoarse cry escaping her mouth.

"*Oh*. Walker," she said, her nails digging into his shoulders.

She was shaking. Trembling, and he realized she was coming apart in his arms. He realized she was coming.

He watched her face, watched as her eyes shadowed with pleasure. As everything centered on this moment. On her.

He was the first man to ever see her have an orgasm, he realized. The first man to ever give her one.

That had been true for him before. He and Anna had been each other's first and only. But this was different. He was older now, and there were very few novelties left in his life.

Frankie wasn't a high school virgin. Where others had tried, he'd succeeded. It felt like a damned miracle. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face just there next to his jaw, kissing him. "Oh wow," she said.

"Yeah," he said.

He didn't quite know what to do. She was curled around him like a spider monkey, and what he wanted to do was strip her naked and have her. But she was full on shaking now, and he was so close to the edge he knew that if he took her now...

First of all, he didn't have any protection. He hadn't needed it for too long.

"Frankie, there's some stuff I've gotta..."

"No," she said, tightening her hold on him. "Don't. Please don't leave me."

"That's not what I meant. I wasn't going to. I swear. I just... I haven't needed condoms in a long time. And we're going to need some."

She looked up at him, looking dazed, full of wonder. "Oh. You mean you want to..."

He *shouldn't*. He should let this be it. He should call it good. He could see that she was surprised he wasn't. That would be the honorable thing, after all. But the truth was, he was too selfish to turn back. He could not go back to his room and work this out on his own. It had been too many years of that. He had denied himself so totally, so completely, that he hadn't even been touched by a woman in eight years. He would love to be that selfless. To have given Frankie her orgasm, and to leave it at that.

He wasn't that selfless. Not now. Not anymore. He needed her. He just fucking did.

"Yeah, I can see why you should think that. Because I should tell you I'm too old for you. I should tell you that I'm taking advantage of you. And that it's wrong. That you should go find somebody closer to your own age. Somebody a little less messed up. But I can't. I just... I need you."

She bit her lip, swollen from kissing him.

It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

“Thank you. I'm glad that you aren't going to get all noble on me.” She let him set her down, but she still clung to his arms, clearly a little bit shaky. “Walker, how long have you wanted me?”

He closed his eyes, a rough sound escaping his mouth involuntarily. “Remember when the boys threw those water balloons at you?”

“They were always doing stuff like that. So no.”

“I do. It was two years ago. July. It was out here by the barn, and they absolutely ambushed you. Threw I don't know, hell, it must've been ten water balloons at you using a slingshot. And they were gigantic. You were wearing a white T-shirt, and you were completely soaked. I could see through your shirt. You had a bra on but it wasn't very thick. I could see your nipples. They were tight.” He was getting himself totally hard just talking about that. “And I told myself I was a cliché. Lusting after my nanny. That you'd be horrified if you knew.”

“I would've taken my clothes off then and there and begged you to take me,” she said.

“You had a boyfriend.”

“I would've had you. Believe me. I would have cheated on Chad without even thinking about it. You... You saw that. All you had to do was kiss me.”

“It was a little more than kissing.”

“Either way,” she said. “It was effective.” Her cheeks turned pink.

“What?”

“It's embarrassing,” she said. “How much I want you. I just... I've had fantasies about you since I was eighteen.”

“Don't tell me that,” he said. He took a deep breath, trying to get a hold of himself. “I mean, it's hot. It's really hot.”

“Why does it bother you?”

“Because it feeds into the whole thing.”

“Our age difference bothers you,” she said.

“And the power dynamic.”

She rolled her eyes. “Walker,” she said. “I take care of *you*.”

He couldn't deny that. The way she said it made it seem so simple. Made it seem just fine.

“I have condoms,” she said.

“Shit. Where?”

“In the house. In my suitcase. I took his condoms. It was a little bit petty.”

“Thank God you're petty,” he said.

He knew that he should give this some space. Hell, he figured he should probably try to be the gentleman that Frankie thought he might be.

But he was a man who hadn't been with anyone in eight years. And he realized it never could have been with anybody but Frankie. He was glad it was going to be.

Frankie took his hand and led him back toward the house.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FRANKIE'S HEART WAS still beating hard from her orgasm. If Walker had wondered whether or not she had long-held fantasies about him, that question was definitely thoroughly answered. She had never come so easily in her life. But with that hard body up against her, it had been too delicious to hold back.

She wanted him to touch her. She had seen the moment he looked down between them, looked at her. And she'd wanted to grab the fabric of her underwear and pull it to the side to give them more intimate contact, but she needed to hold on to him so that she wouldn't fall.

She wanted to get her clothes off. And the faster they got to the house, the sooner that could happen.

So she practically dragged him, at least part way, and then she found herself being picked up. She squeaked, and Walker held her close and jogged them into the house.

"Impatient," she said. She looked up at him, and suddenly he was not the Walker that she had known all these years. It was confronting. Almost terrifying. To see the predatory glint in those familiar green eyes. To look up at him and see not just a handsome cowboy she painted fantasies about for years, but a man. In her fantasies, she controlled what Walker did. What he said. Where he touched her.

In that moment, she realized she had no control. He let her play like she did out there. He'd let her take the lead. He let her rub her body against his just how she wanted. But her moment was over. She could see that clearly. This was about him. What he wanted, what he needed to take.

And right then, she knew exactly what to do. She pulled her dress up over her head, reached behind her and unhooked her bra. He growled, low and hard in his throat and she exposed herself to him. Then, she kissed his neck, his chest, and

lowered herself to her knees in front of him. And discovered that he was way too tall and she was way too short.

“Well, shoot,” she said.

“What?” His voice was hard.

“I’m going to need you to sit down,” she said. He moved to the couch and sat, those thick thighs spread wide, his gaze hard.

He pressed his hand over the outline of his arousal in his jeans.

He was big. Bigger than either of the guys she’d ever been with. She loved that. She really did. Her fantasy man was superior in every way.

She moved forward, her hand shaking, and undid his belt. Undid the button on his jeans and lowered the zipper. She reached into his underwear and took him out and sighed. Because he was just so beautiful. He was everything she’d ever wanted. She leaned in and flicked her tongue over the head of his arousal, before taking him into her mouth and bobbing her head, taking him as deep as she could. He grunted, moving his hand to her hair and tugging hard as she continued to pleasure him and herself.

One thing she liked always about giving blow jobs was that it took the pressure off of her. It wasn’t about her pleasure, and it was the one time she didn’t feel like she had to put on a show and pretend that she was about to come, or whatever. Because men were too lost in the moment to really worry about her.

She didn’t need to perform pleasure now.

She was slick and wet, aching from pleasuring him. Maybe this was how it was supposed to be. Maybe you were supposed to want the other person so much that pleasuring them pleased you too.

She felt like she was having a revelation.

A very good one.

Abruptly, he pulled her away from him. “I don’t want to come like that,” he said.

“I wouldn’t mind if you did.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t,” he said, moving his thumb over her lower lip. She knew that he was calling her out on how eager she was. But it didn’t make her feel embarrassed. It just made her feel hot. “Later. I promise.”

“I’ll get the condoms.”

He sat on the couch, watching as she turned away from him and walked into the bedroom. She was going to have sex with him. On the couch maybe. The couch where she’d watched countless movies with the boys. Or maybe in his bed. His bed. That room was the one room she wasn’t all that familiar with. It was his domain.

She...

She went to her suitcase and took out the box of condoms. She brought the whole thing out with her.

While he was looking at her, he took his shirt off. And Frankie was stunned by his body. That hard chest, his rippling ab muscles.

“Talk about a waste,” she said.

“What?”

“You should’ve been out there banging women as a community service.”

He laughed. A shocked, short sound.

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“It’s true. You’re too hot to be celibate.”

“Tragedy doesn’t seem to give a shit.”

She bit her tongue. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said... I’m sorry.”

She probably needed to give the proper weight to the moment. He’d said that Anna was the only woman he’d ever been with. It was strange. It made her feel like something

between them was a little bit more balanced. Because she'd had more partners. Because she'd had sex more recently. Though it had been shitty sex. So maybe it balanced nothing. And he'd definitely been having sex for more years.

Maybe those were scales she didn't need to try and work out.

All she knew was that right in this moment, she knew she couldn't make light of it.

"It's fine," he said. "That's not why. It's a habit you get into. And like I said, then you have to explain it."

"And you didn't want to explain it."

"No. Because it's not something I want to think about in the moment."

It probably would've been better for him, she realized, to have sex with a woman who didn't know. Then maybe later, he would. They would do this, and she would... Get on with things. Go on and have a life. Find a man who wanted to marry her, love her, have kids with her. She'd spent so many years raising someone else's kids, and she ached for her own. Her own house. Her own life. She'd been a guest in somebody else's for so long.

A surrogate. Surrogate wife, surrogate mother. This was hers, at least. She knew that. His desire was for her. She couldn't doubt that at all.

She held the condom box out, ready to end the conversation. He took it from her. He kicked his boots off, shucked his pants off the rest of the way, and she admired his whole body as he stood. He was muscled. Every inch of him. Big and brawny and every bit the fantasy.

And then he scooped her, still clutching the box of condoms, up off the ground and held her against his totally naked body. He carried her to the bedroom. She felt overawed by the whole situation. By being faced with the reality of her fantasy. This was the man that she had wanted for more years than she'd ever wanted anything.

And now he was looking at her like he desired her. Looking at her like he might die if he couldn't taste her. It made her want to cry.

But she wasn't going to cry, because that really was going to ruin the moment. Men didn't want you sniveling all over them when they just wanted to get laid.

This was a big deal for him. A different kind of big deal than it was for her. For him, this was about sex. His person was gone.

That thought stunned her motionless.

His person was gone and all he had left was sex he didn't want to have as much.

When for her...

This was it. This was everything. It wasn't just an orgasm, and it wasn't just pleasure. It wasn't just him being beautiful.

It was him being the love of her life. He always would be. No matter where she went after this. No matter what she moved on to. If she went to Montana to live with her parents, or ended up bunking with Carly above the bar, it didn't matter. It would always be him.

He was that defining thing for her. Her first love.

It was desperately sad to think of it that way. The way that they'd missed each other.

But she did her best not to cry. Because he just really deserved to have some awesome sex, and at least in this sense she got to be significant to him. There would be women after her. But she was the first of this phase of his life. He would remember this. That mattered to her.

Even if it would never be as momentous for him, it mattered to her.

"What are you thinking about, Frankie?" he asked, reaching out and taking the condoms from her hand. She hadn't realized how tightly she'd been clutching them.

"Nothing important."

“You look a little freaked out.”

“I’m not,” she said. She took a big, fortifying breath. “I have never been so ready for anything in my life. I have overprepared for this.”

“In what way?” he asked. And that was when she decided to just leave it all on the floor. Hadn’t she done that this whole time? She shimmied out of her panties, leaving herself entirely naked before him.

“Do you know many times I’ve put myself to sleep at night fantasizing about this? Do you know how many times I have touched myself thinking of you? It is this deep groove of shame that I’ve worn inside of myself that stopped feeling quite so bad a long time ago because I just accepted that I couldn’t do anything about it. That I couldn’t deny it. I have never wanted anyone the way that I want you. You were quite literally the first sexual fantasy I ever had. Back when I was a virgin.”

“Frankie... You are so beautiful.”

But she couldn’t stand it. She didn’t want him to try and give her words when he didn’t really have them. What he wanted was sex and she was convenient and female and wanted him.

So she closed the distance between them and she kissed him on the mouth. Pressed her bare breasts to his chest and luxuriated in the feeling. They didn’t need words. Because if they began to pull words out of the deepest parts of themselves then she would be left with no choice but to confess that she loved him.

And there was just a limit to what she was willing to do. To what she would allow herself to say. So she kissed him, because she could show him, even if she couldn’t tell him. Kissed him deep and hard and long because it made her feel everything.

Because she wanted him. Because she needed him. She moved her hands down his back, down his arms, down to that tight masculine ass. He was so beautiful. He lived up to every

promise. Every fantasy. More than. She hadn't thought she would have an orgasm just from kissing him. But that was how good he was.

That was how much he was just everything for her. Perfect for her.

They parted for a moment, and she looked at him. She really would never get tired of looking at him. Of Walker looking at her like she was beautiful. Desirable. Of Walker wanting her.

It knit together something inside of her that had torn a long time ago. And maybe it would tear again. Maybe this was a temporary fix. Maybe she would end up wounded even worse after they had to say goodbye.

It was worth it. He was worth it.

He picked her up and placed her on the bed, kissing down her body until he arrived at the juncture between her thighs. He licked her there. She arched up off the bed, holding his head as he began to lick her, suck her. He pushed a finger inside of her and she cried out with pleasure. And she shattered all over again and she wanted to weep with it. Because Chad had tried this once, and when it had also failed to make her come, he had never bothered again. Had made her feel so small and bad about herself. About her body. About the way that she failed him. And she had honestly been worried that she would feel pressure, but she hadn't even thought of that when Walker had put his mouth on her.

And then, he was back in her mouth, kissing her, moving his rough hands over her body.

He tore the box of condoms open, and took out a packet, opening it quickly and rolling it down his length with accomplished muscle memory. It might've been a while, but his skill set certainly hadn't suffered.

He moved between her legs, and she parted her thighs for him, her hands on his chest, looking up into his eyes.

She wasn't going to cry. She wasn't going to cry just because this was everything she had ever wanted and it was

finally happening. “Frankie,” he said, his voice rough. “If you’re not ready...”

She clapped her hands on his shoulders and dug her fingernails into his skin. “I’ve never been so ready for anything in my life. But if you’re going to regret this... If you’re going to say that we shouldn’t have... Please don’t do it at all.”

“I promise. I’m not going to do that.”

She welcomed this. A moment to pause. A moment to breathe. A moment for him to decide if this was really something he could own. Because she was not going to be a thing he was ashamed of. Not when it was just so beautiful to her. So open and wonderful and everything she’d ever wanted. She wouldn’t be able to stand that. She couldn’t bear it. Because this was the one thing that felt right. After a whole lot of years of just good enough.

He lowered his head and kissed her, and she felt the blunt head of him testing the entrance to her body. She arched her hips up, and slowly, inch by agonizing inch, Walker sank into her.

She turned her head away and bit her lip, tears gathering in her eyes. She had him. For this moment, she had him. And she didn’t want the moment to pass, because once it did there were going to be conversations and consequences and reckonings. She didn’t want any of those things. She just wanted him.

In this moment, she wanted nothing but him. And she let herself bleed inside. She let herself love him. As he began to move, taking deep strokes inside of her, she just let herself feel it all. Because how many people got to have their absolute fantasy? Probably not many. So she wanted to take in every little bit. She wanted it to be the most. She wanted to be everything. She made that bargain. That bargain that she might be devastated later. She simply let it be. Because it was everything. And so was he. So were they.

Impossibly, she felt another climax building inside of her, one that he effortlessly called from deep within her. It was more all-consuming, more intense, her internal muscles

pulsing around his thick length as everything came crashing down around her. He thrust harder, faster, his own release seeming to hit with the force of a freight train. And he buried his face in the side of her neck, and she pushed her fingers through his hair and held him there. “Walker,” she whispered.

“I’ve got you, Frankie.”

She felt so much relief, hearing her name on his lips. In case he had forgotten. In case he was imagining someone else. But he wasn’t. They were holding each other.

Frankie had never been so happy and so sad all at once. Never in her entire life. And she knew she probably wouldn’t be ever again.

CHAPTER NINE

FRANKIE WAS SLEEPING, curled up against his side. Soft and lovely and the sexiest damn thing he'd ever seen.

He cared about Frankie. A hell of a lot. He'd promised her that he wasn't going to freak out. That he wasn't going to insult either of them with recriminations.

He'd decided to have her.

It had been a *deeply* decisive move on his part. He couldn't pretend that it had been an accident. That he'd gotten away from himself.

They'd paused, right before he thrust inside of her. He looked at her for a long while. He'd made that decision.

It was funny that she'd said that to him, about him saying they shouldn't have. Because it was absolutely the first thing he wanted to do. Roll away from her, put distance between them. Say it was a mistake. Instead he was lying there thinking about that. About *why* he wanted to do that.

Because she was the first woman since Anna. Because she was Frankie. Because sitting in the complication of those two truths was a little bit too intense.

But he stayed with her. Kissed her temple, watched as she stirred sleepily and came back to the land of the living.

"You good, Frankie?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. "Holy hell."

"What?"

"It wasn't a dream." She shifted, then grimaced. "It definitely wasn't a dream."

"What?"

"I'm a little saddle sore. But not in a bad way. You are... Bigger than what I'm used to. Substantially."

It was a hell of a thing that all these years of maturity had done nothing to dampen the immediate effect that had on him. It made him want to climb a damned skyscraper and beat his chest like a giant monkey. Because apparently raising two kids, losing a wife, hadn't done a damn thing to really grow him up.

"What?" she asked.

"What?" he returned.

"You look punch-drunk."

"I am a little bit. And also maybe a little bit overly enthused by your compliments regarding my size. Because I am a man."

"Yeah. You definitely are."

"I hope you know there was never anything wrong with you."

She seemed like she wanted to say something more but swallowed hard instead and said nothing.

"I've been thinking about what I ought to say to you," he said.

"And?"

"I don't have anything good to say. Just something I promised you I *wouldn't* say, and then also something that I think might be selfish."

"Go ahead," she said. "With the selfish thing. Don't say the stuff I told you not to."

He let out a long, slow breath. "Carter isn't coming back for a while. Sky won't be back until August. Sky coming back would make things complicated but... Right now, it's just you and me. You need a place to stay, and I like having you here. I... We have the summer."

The expressions that cycled through her face echoed inside of him. Joy to despair and back again. He felt all those things.

"Really? The whole summer?"

“You can’t live here and realistically expect that nothing is going to happen between us again.” There. He was grown enough to know that.

“I guess not. Unless you want to go out and find other women. Since I kind of broke the seal.”

“I don’t want that,” he said, the words coming out a lot fiercer than he intended. “I can’t imagine wanting anyone else.”

“Well, that’s nice,” she said. “Somehow I don’t think you mean that.”

“I do. Also, yes. The summer. You and me. I want to explore everything I’ve always fantasized about with you. And I want... I think it’s a good way to say goodbye. Because you’re right, the kids are grown. You don’t need me the way that you did. And I need to figure something else out. But the idea of just leaving kills me.”

“I don’t want you to just leave. And I don’t want anything to negatively impact our relationship. Because you’ll always matter to me. Always. You’ll always be family. And I think this is a good... It’s a boundary, right?”

He could see it now. They would have this summer. Hot and intense, because it was going to be. She was like a firecracker in his arms, and he was a man who had been deprived of spark for a hell of a long time. And then he would have to let her go. Let her go on and have the life she hadn’t had yet. Find a man. Marry him. Have his babies.

The image of Frankie, her belly rounded, a big smile on her face, did something so twisted to him that he about threw his damn self out the bedroom window.

The thing about Frankie was she was one of those people. Exceptional. Singular. She had seen a need in his life and she had filled it. She had done it selfishly and joyously, and she had... She had brightened up the darkest days they had ever lived through. And whoever ended up in her ray of light for the rest of their lives was a lucky bastard.

“You and me,” he said. “All summer. On every surface in this damn house.”

She grinned. “Tell me more.”

“Why? Are you not sufficiently satisfied?”

“I need to be sure you’re not just doing me a favor.”

He gripped her hand and put it on his burgeoning erection. “Does this feel like I’m doing you a favor?”

“Not entirely,” she said, stroking his length.

He hardened even further, groaning. “Hell, Frankie.”

“Tell me *more*,” she said, stroking him just featherlight. Torturing him. “About me. About why you want me.”

“Did I not make it clear that you are one of the prettiest things I’ve ever seen? That I have felt like an absolute pervert in your presence for two years? I am not supposed to look at you that way. I’m supposed to protect you. You’re one of my own, Frankie. I am supposed to look after you. I am not supposed to want to bend you over the kitchen counter and make you scream.”

A flash of fire went through her blue eyes. “I would really like you to do that, though. I’ve never had any success with that position. I’m thinking you could make it fun.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Why?”

“Because a man is tempted to take it as a dare.”

She smiled. “Perhaps a man should.”

“You are also one of the most singular people I know. You stepped into this house when it was buried in sadness. And you didn’t have any experience in life. But you just knew. Exactly what we needed.”

“You make me sound like Mary Poppins.”

“Sexy Mary Poppins.”

“That’s kind of redundant, don’t you think?” Frankie asked.

“Maybe. But the truth is, I’ve never been one to share my body with someone who didn’t matter. And I do want you to know that. You matter.”

She snuggled up against him, still stroking him. “Well, I think we have a deal. One summer affair to draw a line under this.”

But he couldn’t respond because she was touching him. Nothing had ever felt so good. Nothing ever felt so sweet.

So he let his head fall back, and let his need for her carry them both away.

CHAPTER TEN

FRANKIE COULDN'T QUITE believe her good fortune. Every night when she went to bed with Walker, she was completely blown away by the fact that this was happening. Every morning when she woke up in his arms she was completely blown away by this happening.

He was the best. Literally the most handsome man she'd ever seen. The absolute best in bed. He was so hot, and he was...

Getting to see this side of him made him different.

Because yes, she had known him for a long time, but there had been a distance there she hadn't fully realized existed.

She decided to make dinner for him that night wearing only an apron. And she was looking forward to his hungry expression when he walked in.

On the phone.

She turned around just a little bit and shimmied, and heard his voice go tight. "Yeah, Steve. It's all going well. Like I said."

She turned around, her eyes wide. Because of course he was on the phone with her dad.

She scowled fiercely, then looked at her phone and saw that she had a missed call from her dad. So that was her bad.

"Yeah. Frankie is doing great. No. Because that guy was a bastard. She doesn't miss him. She didn't need him."

She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. I'll tell her to give you a call." He looked like he was ready to choke. "Yeah. Definitely keeping her busy."

She grinned, and bit her lower lip, treating him to a mischievous look. He gave her a warning stare.

"Yep. Yep. I'll have her call you."

He hung up the phone. “You are a bad girl,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. “Daddy, you’re so mean.”

“Do *not* say that.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

She smiled. “Because you like it?”

He made a helpless, deep sound in the back of his throat.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Francesca.”

And she couldn’t deny she liked that a little bit too. “Don’t call me that.”

Because it seemed different and special, and she was trying to avoid that. It was one thing to tease. It was another to let things get too deep.

She had successfully managed to not cry when they had sex, and she really didn’t want to start doing that. Because if she let herself marinate too much in her feelings, then she would.

And it would be a mess. A mess that she simply didn’t need. A mess they didn’t need. Because they were trying to have this thing. Trying to keep it light and easy, trying to keep it fun. And it was. She liked him. That was the thing. She had always liked him.

She wrinkled her nose.

“What?” he asked.

“Well, I am just slightly concerned,” she said.

“About?”

“How it’s going to feel to put my bare butt on these chairs when we sit down to eat.”

“You didn’t think that through, did you?”

“No,” she said crisply. “No. I just wanted to make things a little bit...hard for you.”

“Mission accomplished. And I don’t want you to put clothes on. So what if we take the food to bed?”

Which was how they found themselves in bed with hamburgers. An interesting situation.

“Tell me about your first boyfriend,” he said, when they finished eating, shoving all the plates on to the nightstand and reclining on the bed.

“Why?”

“Because there are things that have been off-limits for us to talk about because we were... Whatever we were. And now I’m curious.”

“Are you *really* asking about my first boyfriend? Or are you asking me about my first sexual partner?”

“Are they not the same?”

She shook her head. “I decided to get it over with. After some bonfire party that I would never normally go to. You’d taken the boys camping and I was sort of...drifting around not knowing what to do. I was...” She grimaced. “I was feeling silly. Because I’d gone through all of high school without ever dating. Because I was hung up on you. And so I decided that I was going to have some fun. So I found a guy that I liked well enough from high school, and I basically dragged him into the back seat of my Camry. It was not fun. I did not enjoy it. Then I met Chad a couple years later and decided to give it another try. I thought maybe I needed a relationship. And I *did* like him. But it still wasn’t great.”

“So Chad was actually your first *boyfriend*.”

“Yes. I really wanted it to work. I guess I didn’t realize how much of myself I was holding back.”

Silence lapsed between them. “Can I ask you... Can I ask you some things about Anna? Only... I lived through you losing her. I remember it obviously really well. But we never talked about it. For the same reasons we never talked about this. My stuff. But I want to think now that we are more on the same level than we were. And...”

He nodded. “Yeah. I can talk about her. I talk about her with the boys all the time. I guess I probably don’t talk about her much in front of you. But I tried. I tried really hard from the

beginning to make sure her name never turned into some kind of sacred taboo. Because I know that once you start doing that you can't come back from it."

"Oh," she said. "Why do you know that?"

"I was raised by my grandparents," he said.

She blinked. She'd had no idea. All these years and they hadn't talked about that. "What happened to your parents?"

"They...had issues. Drug problems. It was never really a huge feature in my life, because I had a stable environment. But my grandpa died. When I was seventeen. And my grandma just could never talk about him again. And *we* never could. I missed him so much and there was never a place to discuss that. I never wanted that for Carter and Sky. I wanted to be able to talk about her easily. That was a hard one. But Anna was wonderful. She was sweet and funny, and she wouldn't want every mention of her name to be this somber funeral. She would want to know that her boys could talk about her. Think about her. It took a long time for them to be able to do it."

"They do, though," she said. "Casually. They mention that their mom loved a certain movie or a song. And considering how old they were when she died, I imagine that some of that is you telling them those things so that they don't lose them."

"I don't talk a lot about when she died, though," he said. "I try to talk about when she lived. How she lived."

"I get that."

"But the truth is, part of it is that I haven't had anyone to share with. My life is pretty small, Frankie. It's this house. Those boys. You. I don't have a whole host of friends. I have cows. And..."

"It's not a small life," she said. "It's... It's everything."

He closed his eyes. "I know it is. I would've died that night. I swear to God I would have. If not for those kids. If you hadn't shown up, I don't know what would've happened. I actually can't remember those days right after. I don't know how I got up. I don't know how they got fed."

Emotion expanded in her chest. She just loved him so much. It didn't hurt her to hear him talk about the love he'd had with someone else, the grief he'd had after. She'd fallen in love with him without expectation. She'd fallen in love with him through all of this.

She hadn't known Anna well—she had babysat for them a few times for two years while Anna was alive and had talked to her but hadn't been friends with her or anything. But Anna was in many ways a foundation in Frankie's life.

When she was sixteen, in the weeks following Anna's death, she'd whispered a promise to her, sitting on the couch holding onto Carter and Sky. She'd promised she'd care for Anna's boys, and she had.

Anna wasn't here to do it, so Frankie did. Not in the same way, but with everything she had, just like she knew Anna would have done if she'd lived.

She had more than an acceptance of Anna's place in their lives. She had mattered. Frankie didn't need Anna to not matter. She didn't resent her.

Frankie had her own place in Walker's life. Because she'd come into it fully when everything had been devastated. Destroyed. She'd been part of rebuilding, and that might not have made the original foundation, but she'd made sure the walls had stayed up. That the house stayed safe, and cozy and full of love.

It had been a lot, but she never thought of it that way. Because for her, it had been as natural as loving them. As easy as that.

She kissed his cheek. "I remember them. You don't have to. I'll keep them for you."

She put her hand on his. He looked at her, and a wave of profound connection washed through her.

"The boys were all right," she said softly. "I don't think they understood. And I think by the time they did, by the time it really sank in, you were good. You were able to be there. And in that gap, I was."

“I don’t know how you were. You were a kid.”

“I loved you,” she said. She hadn’t meant it like that, so she rushed on. “I loved all of you, like family. I couldn’t imagine not being there.”

“I’ve never done anything half so profound for you as you have for me. I don’t think I ever did anything half so profound for another person.”

“That just isn’t true. I had great parents. They’re still great. I still never see anybody love their kids quite the way that you do. Through everything. You’re honest with them, and you talk to them about everything. You’re there for them. You’re an extraordinary father. And it isn’t just what you did for Carter and Sky. It’s what you did for Anna too.”

“That means a lot.”

His voice had gone rough. “I really don’t know what to do. With them grown up. What I said to you, that was wrong. Saying we didn’t need you. And honestly, I think it has more to do with my fear that they don’t need me.”

“They do,” she said. “And they always will. They love you. You’re their father.”

“But I haven’t left much life for myself, have I? I have this ranch. I have them. But when they don’t need me all day every day, what is there? Just grief, I guess. Though it’s not the way that it used to be. It’s not a thousand sharp knives every time I take a breath. I’ve accepted that I’m not spending my life with her. That she’s not here. That she wasn’t my forever. But I have never been able to accept her dying so young. I’ve never been able to accept my boys losing their mother. Not really.”

“I don’t know why you would. It’s not fair.”

Her chest felt tender. Aching.

“We’re in kind of the same boat, Walker. Because I don’t really know what to do without your boys either. Only they’re not mine.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she knew this was when she lost the battle. “And I know that. They’re not mine.”

“Frankie.” He caught her chin and held her face steady, looking into her eyes. So deep it hurt. “They’re as much yours as they are anybody’s. You were there through the hardest thing.”

That did it. *Now* she was crying. Real tears. Leaking from her eyes and spilling down her cheeks.

“I know this wasn’t just a job for you. And that’s why it works. Because you did help raise those kids. I know that,” he said.

“I am very aware that they are not my boys, Walker. They’re your boys and Anna’s boys. I was lucky enough to get to see what kind of mother she was, and I knew that I could never be her.”

“But that’s why you matter so much. You never tried to be her. You were *you*. I think in some ways, I probably felt a little bit distant to them. A little too damaged by what happened. But you were someone younger. Closer to them, farther away from the tragedy. You are just so good to us.”

They had never talked about these things. Because it laid so many things bare. She was glad they were now, but it was painful. It was all so painful.

But maybe the only way to get untangled from this kind of codependent situation they were in was to acknowledge it. Of course, she was always trying to rationalize these things and it hadn’t worked for her yet. Witness her attempts at sex and relationships with other men. She had enough insight to know that she shouldn’t actually trust her feelings for Walker. That she needed to acknowledge that it was entirely possible they were so strong because she had such profound exposure to him from the time she was young.

But it hadn’t worked. Trying to have a relationship with someone else just hadn’t work. So it seemed like no matter how rational she tried to be, no matter how much she tried to be an adult about all this stuff, everything with Walker was just more complicated than that.

“We started dating when we were seventeen,” he said. “She was my first. I was damn sure ready for her to be my last.”

“That... That makes this kind of hard, doesn't it?”

He shook his head. “Like I said. I accepted that peace a long time ago. I don't wish that you were her.”

It was a shock to her system. A bolt of relief she hadn't known she needed.

Because she had been part of the boys' lives, and on that level, part of her had wondered if he had ever looked at her and wished that she was Anna. And then... This only made that worse. But he'd said it. Definitely. And she had needed it so very, very much.

The problem was, he was perfect. So much more than a man had a right to be. She was grateful, actually, that she knew that. That as much as this was compounding her pain, she couldn't write it off as an experience.

She'd tried.

She had tried to love someone else. She'd tried to make sure that it wasn't a trick related to being with him all the time, related to having known him, to having imprinted on him when she was a teenager.

The truth was, he was just a good man. A beautiful man. One who made her feel better about herself instead of worse. One who understood just the right things to say to her. One who exemplified everything she could have ever wanted in a partner. A father for her own children.

That made her feel hollow, because honestly, Carter and Sky might as well have been her own children. She loved them like they were. She was glad that Walker didn't wish she was someone else. She was also glad that he had trusted her with his grief. She was glad that they'd taken the step. The more adult relationship wasn't just sex. It was this. It was him trusting her to actually bear the weight of his loss. It was him listening to her talk about her past experiences.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“About what?”

“That I couldn’t be there for you like this until now. You were my fantasy man for all that time, but it wasn’t this. We didn’t know each other this way.”

“We couldn’t have,” he said. “It needed to wait for its time.”

“That is true. But I’m still sorry. I’m glad that now I get to know you. The way that you feel. The way that this has been for you. I saw the way that you were with the boys, but I don’t think I realized how little support you had.”

“I had so much support. You don’t think your parents just let you come over here and watch the kids, do you? They were with me. By that point, my grandma was gone, and I didn’t have my own family. Your mom, your dad, they were there for me. Just like your dad was there for me when Anna and I were first married. Just starting out. He’s a good man.”

“Do you feel guilty?”

His head jerked up. “About this?” He scrunched up one side of his face. “I think guilty is the wrong word. I think it’s more that I’m not sure he would understand.”

“And what is that? That he wouldn’t understand?”

“That it’s...sexual, sure, because you’re beautiful, and I want you. But that you matter to me. And of course... I don’t think dads can recognize that middle ground.”

“The one between banging my brains out for fun and marriage?”

He huffed a laugh, one that sounded reluctant. “Yeah. That one. I’m not sure how good I would be about that either. Because the problem is, and I know it’s a little bit sexist, I have sons, and I worry about them getting too serious too soon. In that I think I grew up a little bit too fast. And I don’t just mean losing my wife, I mean having one in the first place. I never went and saw the world on my own terms. I didn’t regret it. I’ve never regretted it. How can I? I love Sky and Carter. I loved Anna. If we hadn’t have gotten married when we did, we would’ve had less time together. Or maybe we

wouldn't have, because she wouldn't have been on that road that night."

He sighed before he continued on. "Listen, the road of what-ifs is a pointless one. So I don't really regret what I did. But I do know that here I am, thirty-eight years old with two kids that are basically grown. And I never went out and did much of anything. You're right. I didn't have a huge support system of friends because I got serious about a girl in high school and I didn't care anymore for my friends. Then I didn't go to college. Then I was a dad, and then I was a single dad. So I worry about them in that sense. I never really wanted them to fall in love when I did, like I did, even though it was good for me in a lot of ways. I just want them to stay kids."

"I understand that."

"But if I had a daughter, I think that would be harder for me even. Because I'm a man, and I know how we look at women sometimes. And I think I would want to protect her from that."

"You would want to protect her from *this*. From hot sex and naked dinners in bed."

"I know that it doesn't fully make sense. But I think the thing is mostly wanting to protect her from the heartbreak you're afraid might be on the other side of that."

She let out a breath and did her best to dig deep and find something that she wished were true. It wasn't strictly true. It wasn't strictly a lie. It was something she kind of wanted. Something she didn't think she could want. But she was going to tell it to Walker all the same.

"I'm twenty-four. I'm not that young. But I'm in a little bit of the same position you are. I started a kind of serious life when I was sixteen. Taking care of the boys was more important to me than anything. It has been. And as a side effect taking care of you. It has mattered to me a whole lot. And I think for the both of us, the question of what's on the other side of this is a big one. I need to be able to go figure that out. So you don't need to worry about me. My dad doesn't either. He also doesn't need to know, about you know." She smiled. "It's okay, Walker. I don't want you to worry about

me. You spent your whole life worrying about everybody. Just let me be there for you. You're being there for me. I would be out on my ass if it weren't for you. Without orgasms. And I have a place to stay and... Well, I'm appreciative."

"You're an amazing woman. I hope whatever's on the other side of this is the best."

"It will be. Because my foundation was the best. I have amazing parents. I have you. I have Sky and Carter. It's a lot of love."

She felt something prickle in the back of her nose, and she wrinkled it to try and hold it at bay. Because it was the closest she was going to get to telling him that she loved him. It was real. And it was profound.

She wanted him. That was the problem. But she knew that it was impossible. She couldn't ask that of him. Because he was on the cusp of getting his new life. His different thing. She couldn't say that she loved him. That she wanted to get married and have kids. He was just now done with that. And it had held up his entire life.

So instead she kissed him.

And when he was inside of her, she had to bite her tongue to keep the *I love you* from escaping. She would find the strength. She would. Because she loved him, and she would go on carrying that love. Like Walker had done for Anna. He had been strong enough to do that for the woman he loved.

And she would be strong enough to do it for him.

One thing she would not do was cause that man more pain and regret.

She loved him too much for that.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVERYTHING WITH FRANKIE was great. Walker felt like he was living a different life. A different experience than he ever had before. It was passionate and frantic, because the feeling that it might end at any moment hung over them. It changed everything with a little bit of sadness. But sadness was something he understood.

And the desperation was something that he craved.

She was just so beautiful. So sweet.

And they had conversations like he never had with anybody. She wasn't afraid to talk about Anna. She didn't shy away from hearing about the sharper parts of his grief. About his darker moments.

But it wasn't all that. It wasn't all intensity and darkness.

His favorite thing had been when he and Frankie had gone out to the barn and she'd ambushed him with water balloons. And he'd gotten to live the end of that moment that had tortured him forever. He got to turn that fantasy into reality.

He'd grabbed her and pulled her into his arms while she laughed and stripped that wet white T-shirt from her body. He had her in the barn.

One thing he really valued about her was that she just understood certain things about him. She knew how he liked his coffee, she knew that in the morning he wanted to sit and not talk. He had done that alone for years. And now he did it with her beside him, usually touching him. Holding his hand, brushing her fingertips over his thigh, but she gave him the silence that he'd come to count on at the start of his day, while also giving him companionship. When he'd been lonely a lot of the time for a lot of years.

She knew everything about Sky and Carter, and could slip into easy conversations about them. He could use shorthand

with her, which was a damned blessed thing considering he was out of practice when it came to having a social life.

It was funny, because he supposed that maybe eventually his social life would be going out to bars. That was what people did, he was pretty sure. They did that, and they were on dating apps. They went out to dinner. They...

It was so hard for him to imagine that life. He never had it. It was normal.

A lot of the people having that life... They were his age. Never been married. Had not kids yet. And he was on the subset of that piece of his life.

It was also weird. He didn't know how to process it. He didn't know whether he was looking forward to it or not. So he didn't think about it when he could help it. He just enjoyed his quiet mornings with Frankie and the simple touch of her hand against his.

She had stocked wine in his kitchen, and he would sometimes share a glass with her at the end of the day. As the evenings got warm, they would sit on the porch swing.

He was used to having beers at the end of the day, but Frankie liked to have her wine and sit there with her feet bare and her hair loose, the wind moving through her curls.

And he loved that.

That was the other time of day he was used to solitude. When the boys were little, they'd be in bed, but now that they were teenagers, they were just in their rooms ignoring him. He had another person to sit and really share the day with. Of course, they were with each other for a lot of the day, so it wasn't so much a rundown of the steps of things as it was just a satisfied companionship.

As they got into bed that night, he realized with a jolt that this was a window into what a long-term relationship would have been like at this point. While there were pieces of a new relationship with Frankie, because the sex was exciting and different, she was also embedded in his life. So there were notes of long-term and what they were.

This was what it might've been like.

But there was no might have. Because he could never know that. He had known enough people from high school who had eventually blown their marriages up, shattered their ideal on purpose because it felt uncomfortable. Because they wondered about that bar life that lurked somewhere beyond the edges of domesticity, he figured.

You were supposed to want that. Or miss it. Regret what you didn't have.

As he watched Frankie sleep, he wasn't sure what he thought about anything. His chest was a tangle of emotion. It was all unfamiliar. There was something deep and needy inside of him that he recognized, the desire to cling to someone else.

All these other feelings that didn't make sense. He was all those things he'd just thought. Thirty-eight and nearly done raising two boys, completely at his wit's end about what to do with this twenty-four-year-old woman in his bed.

He was familiar with loving a woman. He'd felt it before.

But not with the heart he had now.

A heart that had been shattered and put back together. A heart that beat even after tragedy. A heart that would always be in pieces, because those boys he loved so much were out there in the world and he could never forget it, or not feel it.

Frankie was old and new, all at once.

He didn't know what to do with it.

He loved the companionship, that feeling of a lived-in life he got with her. But she was young. He was young enough, it was true, but his experiences put him in a whole different place in his life. The quiet nights and mornings were the privilege of a man who had already raised his kids.

Sleepless nights and toddler feet pounding on hard floors at five a.m. and sippy cups and screaming instead of glasses of wine on a porch swing...she hadn't done it yet. He had.

They were passing by each other. Him on the way to an early retirement, so to speak. Her on the way to beginning her own version of this life, and they'd met at this summer along the way.

He had to just be glad of that.

The next day was hot. And Frankie was wandering around the house wearing a pair of shorts that she absolutely couldn't have worn in public and a bikini top. And he couldn't quite bring himself to go back to work after lunch. He was lingering. Watching her move around the house. How she knew like she lived in it, because she basically did. And had for a long time.

They'd had two whole months of this, and he still couldn't quite get used to it. Wrap his head around it.

But Sky would be back next week. He was on the last leg of his camping excursion, and he and Frankie had planned on her staying until Carter came back, but of course they'd both known they couldn't keep sleeping in Walker's room when Sky returned so it just...threw everything into uncertainty.

He stood up, making the decision that he was going to go ahead and grab her and drag her to bed because she was driving him crazy and he wasn't going to be able to finish his chores until he got a little bit of satisfaction, when his phone buzzed. He answered it. "Is this Walker Cole?"

"Yes," he said.

"This is Marcie calling from Goldstar Accident Services dispatch. Your vehicle was involved in an accident. I asked the driver if he wanted me to contact law enforcement, medical and family."

"What?"

His stomach turned to ice, his whole body going cold. "What car? Which driver?"

"It's the 2021—"

Carter had a newer car. That meant that it was Sky. "Did he speak to you? Was the driver talking to you?"

Frankie was staring at him, her mouth slightly open.

“He was conscious. I can give you the accident location.”

“Yes. Give it to me.”

He was conscious. That mattered.

“One moment while I gather that information.”

And he tried not to think about all the times that somebody was okay, only to find out that they had a horrible injury, but shock had kept them talking and alert until it couldn't anymore.

He tried not to catastrophize everything.

“*Fuck,*” he said.

“Sir,” she said, “you may want to wait until emergency personnel—”

“No. I need to get there now. I need to get there.”

“I'll drive you,” said Frankie. She disappeared from the room without even waiting for details and returned a moment later with a T-shirt on and keys in her hand.

“Wherever you need to go. Is he okay?” She knew. Without him saying what was happening, without hearing that half of the phone call, she knew.

“She said he was conscious.”

Marcie from dispatch gave him the location for the accident. It was about forty-five minutes away. They'd been planning on camping close, at a campground just near the coast.

If anything happened to that kid...

If he was okay, but the other boys...

The world was just so dangerous. It was so damned dangerous.

He got off the phone with the dispatcher after she conferred with him to get his number to law enforcement. Then he pulled up the tracking app and tried to get a location on Sky. It wasn't showing up.

He called, and it didn't ring. It went straight to voice mail.

What he needed to know was if they were going to be taking his boy to a hospital.

They were mostly silent the whole way to the scene, Frankie driving, and him sitting there, feeling ineffective. He wished that he could be the one driving so he could control how fast they got there. That was exactly why Frankie was driving. She was probably keeping them alive.

“This is a nightmare,” he said.

It could never be simple for him. Things like this.

Until he got there. Until he saw him.

He felt like vomiting. But if he vomited, they were going to have to stop.

“He’s okay, Walker,” Frankie said.

“Maybe. Maybe. But he hasn’t called me.”

“His phone might be broken.”

Yeah. His phone might be broken. If his phone was broken, was something on him broken?

He took a deep breath that he knew sounded halfway to a sob.

“It’s different,” he said. Trying to tell himself more than anyone else. “It’s different when they die. Because somebody just shows up at your door.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. He’s going to be okay. He has to be.”

“I wish I had any optimism in me, Frankie. But everything is just so... It’s dark for me.”

“Then I’ll hope for both of us.”

When they arrived at the scene, there were flashing lights everywhere. Yellow fire trucks from rural first responders and an ambulance, along with two state police cars.

The car was the first thing he saw.

It was mangled, crunched on the side where the front had come into contact with the tree.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, a prayer or a curse he didn’t know. Not in that moment.

And that was when he saw him. Sitting in the back of the ambulance. His head was bleeding, and someone was checking underneath the gauze. His arm was taped to his body.

One of the other boys was standing outside the ambulance. He didn’t see the other. He knew a moment of panic. It was the passenger side that hit that tree.

As soon as Frankie pulled up and stopped, he tumbled out of the car, running toward the ambulance. “Sky. Are you okay?”

“I’m all right.”

“Where’s Armie?”

“They took him in the ambulance already. He was pretty messed up. I don’t know...”

His son started to cry. And right then Walker felt like a failure. He sent his son out into the world trusting things, trusting he would be safe. And he wouldn’t have gone out if he didn’t think he could be safe.

“What the hell happened?”

“I don’t remember,” he said. “I can’t remember anything until after. I hit my head...”

“There was a truck in our lane,” Colton said. “Sky had to swerve. If he didn’t, he would’ve hit the truck head-on. We never would have survived that. It was a fucking *log truck*, Mr. Cole.”

“You did the best you could,” said Walker. “And you’re okay.”

“But Armie’s not. I don’t know... I don’t know if he will be.”

“We need to get you both to a hospital to have you looked over. Colton, did you call your mom and dad?”

Colton shook his head. “No. Everything happened so fast. And we were trying to stop the bleeding on Armie’s head until

everybody got here. The accident dispatch came on over the loudspeaker and we just let her call everyone she had info for.”

Both boys looked like children then. Not the teenagers that had seemed close to being men when they’d left. Walker looked at them and saw them as they’d been in second grade. And his heart went tight thinking of Armie, who he imagined that way too.

“Okay. We’re going to drive you over to the hospital. Let me just find out which one.”

Frankie was already talking to a paramedic and had the information at the ready. They had permission to drive both boys, since neither of them were in emergent need of medical care at that point. But they did agree they all needed a thorough checking over.

Frankie put her hand over his. “Walker,” she said. “Why don’t you let me call their parents? You drive. I’ll handle that.”

She got the info and started making calls, and he had to tune it all out while they drove on.

Because his own past trauma was rising up to meet the present trauma pretty violently, and he was trying to keep them all safe.

By the time they got to the hospital, Armie was in surgery.

They waited in the ER lobby for a while until they could take Colton and Sky into their own rooms to get checked out.

Sky had a minor concussion, and the laceration on his head needed a butterfly bandage, but his arm was probably only sprained, which given the state of the car seemed like a miracle.

They decided to keep Sky overnight for observation, and when he was admitted to his room, Walker stood at the foot of his bed with Frankie beside him.

Sky was dozing, and Frankie put her hand on Sky’s foot. “I’m so glad he’s okay.”

He nodded. “Me too.”

Frankie wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his chest, and Walker just let her hold him. Because he needed her.

“I’m going to stay here tonight,” he said.

She nodded and turned to kiss him on the lips. “I’ll talk to Armie’s parents. I saw them outside. I’ll let you know what they say. Just... I’ll see you at home okay?”

He sat on the hard bench he would be sleeping on tonight. The last time he’d done an overnight hospital stay was when Sky had appendicitis. He had been terrified then too. It had been right after Anna had died and everything felt precarious and terrible.

His son was okay. He was exhausted. But he had no serious injuries. Walker knew that, but he couldn’t shake the what-if inside of him.

And as he sat there, the crushing realization hit him. He was never going to have that bar phase. Because he was never going to not be Sky and Carter’s dad. This was his life, and it was who he was.

There was no retirement.

It wasn’t going to change for him, or rather, he wasn’t going to become an entirely different person. These weights, these concerns, would always be there. There was no carefree party life awaiting him. And he didn’t think he wanted it anyway. He wanted his family.

He tried to imagine more of this. More of this hideous, painful love.

Frankie with a wedding ring. Frankie having his babies. They’d have dark hair like she did. He swallowed hard, trying to ease the heaviness in his chest.

Love could be so damned painful.

But he would rather have the pain than lose it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE NEXT MORNING, Frankie got up and drove straight to the hospital, where Sky was thankfully already being discharged.

She'd spent the night awake, dry-eyed. Her mind had been spinning, her heart beating too fast. But she'd made some decisions. Hard decisions, but ones that had needed making.

"How's Armie?" Walker asked when they got into the car.

"He's fine," she said. "I mean, he's going to be fine. They had to do some surgery to get the bleeding to stop. But he's stable now. He's probably gonna be here a little while."

"Colton?"

"He went home. He was fine. Not injured at all."

"Thanks, Frankie," said Sky.

Frankie felt an intense tugging at her chest.

She felt... She was still so scared from yesterday. But she needed to be calm for Walker.

Because Sky wasn't her son.

But she felt... The idea of losing him had filled her with so much terror. And then... There was just the weight of it all.

This was the enormity of what Walker still had in his life. The fear.

She wanted him. She wanted to be in his life. She couldn't ask him to take on more of that. If she told him how she felt he'd...he was such a good man. He would want to care for her the way she wanted it. She wanted a future. Marriage, kids. She could see how much the love he already carried cost him. How heavy it was. How could she ask him to give her babies? To start all this, all over again? To risk even more of his heart, of himself. She blinked hard.

They pulled up to the house, and Sky got out of the car and went inside. Walker got out and stood at the side of the car,

leaning against it. The front door closed behind Sky, and instinctively, Frankie moved toward Walker. She wrapped her arms around his waist and he put his head against her neck.

And then his body shook.

As if everything that had been holding him together was gone now. She held him. And let her own tears fall while she let him give in to the intense wave of emotion she knew that he couldn't show Sky.

For a hundred reasons.

Because this was years' worth of grief crashing in on him. Grief that he would always carry with him. The knowledge that life could be cruel and unfair.

Of course it could be.

And when the storm subsided, she clung to him still.

Sky was home now.

He needed to be home. And Walker needed to be with him.

"Frankie," Walker said slowly, his voice gruff, "Carter's room is still available."

"I know," she said. "I think I'm going to go stay with Carly. It's okay."

Because she couldn't stay in Carter's bedroom. She couldn't be there and not be with him. She'd gone through all this last night.

She'd been overwhelmed by the enormity of the day. Of seeing Walker in such a dark place. Of realizing how much he would always carry. He'd said he was going to go to the bars, have lovers, have the life he didn't have.

And it would always be weighted with this, she'd realized.

Any part of her that had thought she could add to his weight, just maybe, had withered. She couldn't ask him to love her, not when he would want to. Not when it would only hurt him to hurt her.

Walker was never going to say anything cruel. He was never going to be Chad. He wasn't going to break her into pieces to get her to leave. He would never do that.

In some ways, her love for him felt old. Like the mountains around them. Something that had formed over time, layer after layer, and was now part of her. As if it had always been. And in other ways it felt brand-new. Like a spring bud. Fragile and fresh.

But the part that was old, the part that was the mountains, the part that made up the landscape of her soul, could bear this.

The new part felt crushed. And that was too bad.

But as for the rest... Mountains were patient. Because they had seen so much.

Because they had endured so much. A storm didn't knock a mountain over. Sure, there might be landslides and shifts in that vast wilderness, but they didn't crumble.

And she wouldn't crumble now.

"Frankie, let's talk and..."

"We already did. It's okay. You and Sky have a lot of catching up to do."

"Stay for dinner. Please. Sky's going to want to see you."

It hurt. But he was right.

"Okay."

"Don't cook though. I'll order a pizza."

"Okay. Sounds good."

And while Sky was showering, she packed up all of her things, and took them out to her car so that Carter wouldn't know that she'd stayed there ever. Maybe it was a little bit mean, but she made sure to leave a pair of underwear in Walker's room. Just for him.

Because she wasn't going to *say* anything, due to her mature and mountainous love. But she didn't want him to forget her

either.

She smiled all through dinner while Sky told them about the adventure they'd had—apart from the accident.

And at the end of dinner, they were able to FaceTime with Armie in his hospital bed.

“I'll see you around,” said Frankie.

Sky stood up and gave her a hug. It was long and fierce, and Frankie was afraid that it would dissolve her.

“Bye, Frankie,” he said. “Are you going to be here tomorrow?”

“No,” she said, patting his shoulder. “It's summer. You don't need me.”

“I guess not,” said Sky. “Doesn't mean I don't want you.”

And that was it. She felt like she'd been stabbed clean through the chest.

“I want you too, kid. I'll see you around.”

She stepped outside onto the porch. Where she and Walker should have been having their wine for the evening. Where they should have been holding hands.

But they weren't.

And they wouldn't be.

She tried to force a smile as she walked down the steps and got in her car. When she got halfway to town, she called Carly. “Can I come stay with you?”

“Sure,” she said. “I thought... I didn't think Sky was coming back yet.”

“It's a long story. I'll explain. And then I just probably need to... I think I might be moving to Montana.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HE DIDN'T HEAR from Frankie for two days. And when she did text him, it was to let him know that she was halfway to Montana.

He stared at the phone, feeling dumbfounded. But of course she was leaving. She would come back to visit, she said. And she apologized for not saying a real goodbye, especially to Sky. She just felt like it would be too difficult.

And for the second time in the space of a week, he felt like he'd been beaten with the trauma of gut-wrenching loss.

Frankie was alive. He had hurt her. She wasn't gone.

This was what they had always known would happen. Of course, he figured she would stay in Mapleton. He figured that she would stay in Oregon. He hadn't thought she would... He hadn't thought she would actually go move in with her parents.

He heard a door slam, and he looked up. Sky was standing there, the bandage still on his forehead, reminding Walker just how close they'd come only a couple of days ago. His expression was furious.

"What the fuck did you do, Dad?"

"What?"

"Frankie is moving to Montana."

"Did she text you?"

"Yeah. She texted me and said she was sorry. She said saying goodbye would be too hard. Why is she leaving?"

"Frankie was always going to leave," said Walker. "She needs her own life. She was your nanny. Your brother is at college and you're sixteen. You don't need a nanny anymore."

"Frankie is not just my nanny. She's..."

Sky looked embarrassed. Because there were tears in his eyes. And maybe there was another reason too. But he seemed to not want to say it.

“What?”

“I feel guilty about it.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t really remember Mom that well, Dad. I remember some things. But it’s... Little things. Little clips of things. Sometimes not even with sound. Frankie is like a mom to me. I didn’t ever think she would just leave. And she seemed *happy*. I saw her kiss you. At the hospital.”

Walker felt like he’d been punched in the stomach.

“Is that what happened?” Sky asked. “You started sleeping with her and now she has to leave?”

“Hold on,” said Walker. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I was pretending.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew you were going to bother me about getting rest. Whatever. The thing is, I saw her with you. So I know you were... Doing stuff while I was gone. She’s important to me. She’s too important to me for you to send her away because...”

“I didn’t send her away. And none of what happened between Frankie and I has anything to do with her leaving.”

Liar. It does.

He was just too old for this game, and he was playing it anyway. He sighed heavily and looked at his son. “It’s nothing I said. It’s something I didn’t say.”

Because if he’d said it, he knew it would have made a difference. Whatever was going on with her, if he’d put his cards on the table, it would have been different. They could have at least talked.

“And what’s that?” Sky asked, arms crossed, his obvious anger palpable.

“I didn’t tell her that I loved her. I got kinda tangled up in you, kid. Because obviously... You can believe me or not. I don’t want to give you more information than you want. But I’ve never... This whole time, nothing was going on with Frankie. Not until you both left. And then she needed a place to stay...”

“She’s always been in love with you.”

“No, she hasn’t.”

“Dad. Come on.”

And he felt like an idiot. His sixteen-year-old son was making him feel like an idiot. Because he’d seen something that Walker had not.

“Regardless. I’m in love with her. There hasn’t been anyone else since your mom. Not until Frankie.”

“Wow. That’s intense.” He could tell Sky sort of hated knowing anything about Walker’s sex life, but oh well.

“Thanks. Being in love is kind of intense. I don’t know what to tell you. Raising kids is intense. I figured when you all got your asses out of here, I would have a different life.” He laughed. “I don’t want that life. I loved this one. The one with you and Carter and Frankie. It just took me a hell of a long time to realize that. Because as long as you were kids, as long as you needed Frankie, I got to have her. And now I don’t.”

He’d been on the edge of this yesterday, but there had been so much fear packed into his chest. There still was. But he’d had this idea that he couldn’t start over again. Get married again. Have kids again.

But there was no *again*.

He and Frankie both had been stuck on this idea that they were in different places in their lives, because she’d never been married and he had. Because she hadn’t had kids, and he had.

But he hadn’t married her.

He hadn't had kids with her.

It wouldn't be a retread of what he'd done already. It would be the first time for him too.

Just like sleeping with her had been a first. The first time with Frankie.

"We've got to go get her," said Sky.

"I could just text her."

"*Dad,*" said Sky. "Haven't you ever seen a romantic movie? How did you get one woman to marry you, much less get Frankie to fall in love with you? You have to do a grand gesture. We have to drive there."

"I'm not feeling that up for cars right now."

"Come on, Dad. It's a metaphor. We've got to do it."

Walker sat there. Feeling dumbfounded. By the feelings in his heart, by the simple wisdom of his son. "Yeah. All right. Let's do it."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FRANKIE WAS MOONING about in her parents' beautiful kitchen. The Montana home was gorgeous. Great views of the mountains and all that. Really, it was lovely. It was just her heart was broken.

"Are we going to talk about this, Francesca Jane?"

She looked at her dad and tried to smile. "About what, Dad?"

"About the fact that you came all the way to Montana without a real explanation, and looking sadder than a skunked dog?"

"Lovely."

"Frankie," said her dad. "I love you. And you know I've always worried about how much you were involved with Walker. But I've always trusted him to treat you well. Because I know he's a good man. So I need to know. Is there a reason I need to go kill him?"

She shook her head. "No. Why would you think it's him?"

"Because you're in love with him, Frankie. I know. I've always known that. But I trusted him to be appropriate about it in—"

"He was. Always. Always. But I'm twenty-four, Dad. I'm not a teenager."

"Meaning something happened between you."

She closed her eyes. "Yes. It's me. I... I instigated it, okay? He never would have. Because he is that good. But he's also... What am I going to do, Dad? Am I going to ask him to start over? To marry me and have kids with me? I want kids. I want that life that I haven't had. That one that I've gotten a taste of."

Her dad looked at her, his gaze uncompromising. "Did you ask him?"

“No. I don’t feel like I can.”

“If you don’t ask the man, he can’t tell you yes or no.”

Well. Exactly. Didn’t her dad realize that was the point?

“He could tell me what he wants. He could maybe lead this instead of me.”

“He’s been hurt. Bad.”

“Sure. But as you pointed out, he’s the one that’s older.” She was annoyed that her dad was arguing this, and so sensibly. She should have just told him Walker needed to be shot.

“Yeah, but I’ll be honest. I never really worried about him taking advantage of you. But I did worry about you grabbing hold of him with both hands and making it undeniable.”

Her cheeks went hot. “Well, I did. I did that. Because I wanted him.”

“But not badly enough to fight for him? Come on. I thought I raised you better than that. If you’re going to do a foolhardy thing like fling yourself at the widowed man you’ve been in love with for half your life, then don’t you think you want to stay and punch up a few rounds?”

“What if he tries? And he can’t. And...”

She stood there, feeling bruised.

“It’s an excuse, isn’t it? To give it up.” She felt something crumble inside of her. Felt those mountains begin to break a little bit. “Because of Sky and Carter. Because of him. You’re right. I used it as an excuse. But Sky and Carter *are* my boys. They just are. And if I never get to have kids, then I could be happy with that. Because so few people have been loved to the degree that I am. So few people. And it’s easy for me to say it won’t work for all those reasons, but you’re right. What I’m really not doing is putting it all on the line. It was one thing to hit on him. It’s another thing to tell him that I’m in love with him. That I have been in love with him. Because it’s embarrassing. I’m embarrassed that you knew it.”

The sympathy on her father’s face threatened to be her undoing. “I’m your dad. I love you. I worry about you. Of

course I knew. Of course I did.” Her dad looked past her out the window. “Well, son of a gun.”

“What?” She turned and saw Walker’s truck coming up the drive.

She could see Walker driving, Sky in the front seat.

He’d come for her. He had really come for her.

Without having any chill at all, she raced out of the kitchen and out to the driveway.

He put the car in Park and got out, moving as quickly to her as she did to him.

She threw her arms around his neck, and just held him.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and held her back. “Frankie, please don’t leave me again,” he said.

“I won’t,” she whispered. “I promise. Walker, I don’t need to do the whole thing. I don’t need to get married. I don’t need to have babies. I just need you. And I would rather have you than a dream. I would rather have you than a fantasy. Because you have been better than everything I’ve ever imagined. I want quiet mornings. I want our evenings on the porch swing. I want you.”

He moved away from her and looked down at her. “Frankie, I don’t want to go out to bars. I don’t want other women. I don’t want that life.”

“But it’s all you’ve ever had. This...domestic thing. It’s... I don’t want you to feel trapped in that.”

“I’m not. If I know one thing it’s that... I’m always good to be Sky and Carter’s dad. I’m never going to not feel like my heart is out there walking around outside my chest. But I would rather love them every day and risk my soul than go through life without connection. I know how important they are. I know damn well how much they cost. I want to share a life with you. I want to marry you. I want to have babies with you, Frankie.”

“Oh *God*,” said Sky.

They both turned to look at their teenage audience. And then toward the house, where they had a paternal audience.

“I didn’t realize this was going to be so well attended,” said Frankie.

“Go on then,” said Steve. “Make it a good declaration, Walker, so that I don’t feel like I have to grab my shotgun.”

“Frankie, I realized something a couple weeks ago. That I was happy. Sharing the house with you makes me happy. I was really alone, and I didn’t ever dwell on that. I had you during the day. I had you there to keep me company. So it was easy to pretend. But when I had you really sharing my life, I realized I missed that. I missed *you* when you weren’t there. You.”

“I understand that this isn’t your ideal life. I loved you forever. You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

He cupped her chin in his hand and looked at her, his eyes blazing. “Don’t ever say that. Don’t ever say you’re not what I wanted. Life is complicated. And I don’t know what it would’ve had in store for me if Anna had lived. I just know that she didn’t. I loved her. I will always love the time I had with her. But *this* is my life. My life is not a series of what might’ve been. I can’t imagine my life being different because it’s not. My life is what it is. With Sky and Carter, my amazing sons who make me proud every day, why? Because you helped raise them. Because you are their mom. The one they have now. Because you are the love of my life, Frankie. The life that I have. This isn’t a do-over. This is my first time living with you. Loving you. That’s the only thing that matters. Not the life we planned, or the one we thought we might have. But the one that we get up and live every damned day. It’s the doing. The living. The loving we get to do now. That’s what fucking matters, Frankie. And that’s what’s real. You’re what’s real. You’re everything to me.”

She kissed him. Until Sky made an uncomfortable noise.

“We have to get married,” said Walker.

“No argument from me,” said Frankie.

“We can’t be living in sin with kids under our roof.”

Sky blanched. “Ew. And I’m not a kid.”

“You’ll always be my kid,” said Walker.

Then he moved forward and shook Steve’s hand.

“You might as well stay for supper,” said Steve. “Since we are family now.”

Family.

Frankie knew they always had been.

But now it was real. Hell, it always had been. And love was like mountains. It could wait.

Until just the perfect time.

She knew her love for him would always be both.

The flower, and the rocks. Steady, old, and forever. New and full of hope.

And she looked forward to living every day with him. With everything.

EPILOGUE

WALKER HAD NEVER imagined getting married again. And he sure as hell hadn't imagined that his two sons would be his best men. But here he was. Wearing a damned tuxedo. In a church. With his kids in matching suits beside him.

"I can't believe you snagged Frankie," said Carter, clapping him on the back. "You're just so old."

"Wow."

Carter slung his arm over Walker's shoulder. "Thanks for making her our stepmom. Because it's kind of nice to have it be official."

"And always having her to cook for us is a bonus too!"

Walker shot Sky a glare.

"Just let us know when you plan on having the half sibling show up," said Carter. "Because Sky and I are going to move across the country."

And Walker couldn't help himself. Overcome with emotion, he hugged his sons tight. "I love you little assholes so much."

"We love you too, Dad," said Sky.

And he stood up at the head of the altar and waited. The doors opened, and Frankie started walking toward him, wearing a white gown.

And Walker felt a piece of his heart returned to him.

Maybe because they were all here. Everything he loved. All that he really needed.

And in Frankie, he had something he'd never really imagined.

A brand-new future.

One that didn't take away from the past, but just added more love. Not living the same thing again but *living*.

He knew how fragile life could be.
But he knew how brilliant it could be too.
He saw it every day when Frankie smiled at him.
And he couldn't wait to see all the ways that love would
increase. Day after day, year after year, happily-ever-after.

* * * * *



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